

# BRIEFING NOTE

**TO: REGENERATION SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**  
**DATE: 23 April 2009**

**RE: WALSALL RAIL SERVICE AND FACILITIES IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

## **Purpose**

To update the Panel on progress with dealing with issues and achieving the priorities set out in Walsall Rail Service and Facilities Improvement Plan. (See **Appendix 1**). The full Walsall Rail Service and Facilities Improvement Plan can be accessed at:

[http://www.walsall.gov.uk/index/rail\\_service\\_and\\_facilities\\_improvements\\_plan.htm](http://www.walsall.gov.uk/index/rail_service_and_facilities_improvements_plan.htm)

## **Background**

The 2007 the West Midlands Rail Franchise relegated Walsall to a rail backwater. In response, Regeneration Scrutiny Panel were instrumental in developing Walsall's Rail Service and Facilities Improvement Plan which pulled together into a single document the Council's policies and aspirations for rail in Walsall for the next twenty years, together with the proposals of key partners and stakeholders involved in the rail industry. The Plan received unanimous support at full Council on 5 November 2007.

Enhanced rail services and facilities within Walsall will improve the connectivity of the borough, both internally and with neighbouring areas and with the national rail network. This will benefit local citizens, particularly those without access to a car, by opening up new opportunities. It will also improve the attractiveness of Walsall as a retail centre and to commercial businesses, improving the longer term economic prosperity of the borough.

The aspirations within the Plan will require a partnership approach towards delivery, with Walsall Council needing to work closely with Network Rail, train operators, Centro-WMPTA, developers and neighbouring authorities to identify and pool resources.

## **Impact**

The exercise of pulling the Rail Plan together stimulated positive activity in local rail enhancements. It has impacted on Network Rail's business plan, the draft Regional Rail Development Plan and Centro's proposals, stimulating interest and support from surrounding authorities and agencies. Overwhelming endorsement of the Plan has been received from key partners and stakeholders and positive feedback was received through a local public consultation exercise. There have been many commendations from partners for putting everything into one document. The plan was featured in Rail Magazine saying "Walsall wants return to rail Map".

## **Progress to date**

The Plan was circulated to members of the Regional Rail Forum and every opportunity has been taken to inform train operators of Walsall's regeneration proposals. The Plan has acted as a catalyst, garnering support both from Centro and from Network Rail with whom a very good relationship has developed - they have become our ambassadors, promoting Walsall at every opportunity. The following is a résumé of the progress on our Plan so far.

- **Centro**

As predicted by the Rail Franchise in 2007, Walsall lost its direct services to Birmingham International, Wolverhampton and Stafford in the December 2008 timetable change. The poor connectivity of Walsall into the wider rail and transport networks has been identified by Centro as a key issue that needs to be addressed by future plans. Regeneration initiatives in the town are going to be a key factor underpinning the business cases for the planned improvements.

- **Network Rail**

Network Rail is currently working on a West Midlands and Chilterns Route Utilisation strategy (RUS), and this will propose a preferred strategy for developing the routes around Walsall when it is published for consultation in late 2009/early 2010. Centro has required that the RUS look at the overall connectivity of Walsall as a key issue that needs to be addressed by the strategy. This will include consideration of opportunities for longer-distance services to call at Walsall, as well as the reinstatement of key local links, such as to the airport.

Network Rail is planning to resignal the routes around Walsall in 2012/13 and this creates the opportunity to make changes to track layouts that would otherwise be difficult or prohibitively expensive.

- **Walsall Station**

As part of the specification for the resignalling, Network Rail is proposing making a number of changes to the track layout at Walsall station to make it more flexible, including providing more electrification. It has been identified that the creation of a new Platform 4 would be highly advantageous for the ability of the station to handle future traffic growth and Network Rail has persuaded Advantage West Midlands to fund £30k for a feasibility study.

Consideration has been given to developing a railway station at Gigaport, but Network Rail says that they could not support such a proposal so close to the existing station because it would negate the planned line speed improvements.

Working with Walsall Regeneration Company and Centro, the council is exploring various options to increase the visibility and accessibility of Walsall station from the town centre and to create a transport interchange.

- **InterCity services**

Walsall's rail aspirations had a boost when the Wrexham to Marylebone rail service started in April 2008, for which we wrote to the Office of Rail Regulation in support. Meetings with directors of the Wrexham and Shropshire Rail Company clarified that, because of the layout of the rail routes, there was no chance that their trains would come through Walsall. The service comes from Shropshire and stops at Tamebridge Parkway (in Sandwell), where there is a limited park and ride facility. There are now four trains a day on Mondays to Saturdays, to and from London, and three on a Sunday. With only one stop at Banbury, the Tamebridge to London service takes approximately 2 hours 20 minutes and the cost is £32 at anytime. The frequent, ten minute, journey on the 404 bus service connects Walsall to the Tamebridge station.

Walsall Council's bid to improve rail links with the capital gained new ground with the news that Virgin Trains has proposals which it has set before Network Rail for a direct link between Shrewsbury and London Euston from December 2009. The train would stop at Walsall station. The service would use the line through Sutton Park, which is currently freight only, and join the West Coast Main Line at Nuneaton. Intermediate stops would be made at Wellington, Telford Central, Wolverhampton, Walsall, Coleshill Parkway and Nuneaton. Walsall wrote a joint press release with Virgin about the proposed service. Virgin Trains submitted the request to Network Rail on 30 January 2009, the last day to bid for paths in the December 2009 timetable. Subject to approval by the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR), Virgin proposals suggest a twice-daily service on weekdays and Saturdays with one train on Sundays. Shropshire MPs have lobbied Ministers to block the proposal because it threatens the Wrexham to Marylebone service and a briefing note has been sent to Walsall's MPs to counter this action.

- **Birmingham – Walsall – Rugeley Trent Valley**

Centro specification has seen the provision of extra services to Hednesford and Rugeley and the doubling of the evening service between Walsall and Birmingham to two trains per hour. The reliability of rail services on the Birmingham – Walsall – Rugeley route has been amongst the poorest in the West Midlands. While it is still early days in the new timetable, initial indications seem to show that the revised service structure has the potential to be more reliable than the previous timetable.

An overall package of improvements is planned for this route that will improve the stations and the track, delivering line-speed improvements and better headways. This could open up the opportunity for improved services along the route, and potential future electrification. There has already been interest from one train operator in re-directing an hourly Manchester train along this route. The track and signalling improvements would occur in conjunction with the Walsall area re-signalling scheme.

One particular opportunity that the resignalling creates is the relocation of Bloxwich station: the location of the current site has been described as intimidating. Network Rail is keen to close the level crossing at Bloxwich because the prediction is that the gates will be closed for 45 minutes in every hour as rail passenger and freight traffic increases. This makes it highly likely that within five years the Department for Transport will invoke its powers on health and safety grounds and close the crossing permanently. Currently, the line speed at the level crossing is reduced to 20 mph, which makes the route unattractive to longer distance passenger services. By closing the crossing rather than upgrading the signals, Network Rail are prepared to put a significant sum of money into mitigating the impact on the surrounding road network and enabling the construction of a new station south of the existing station, including car parking and a significantly improved station environment. Network Rail, Walsall Council and Centro are currently examining these proposals.

The Draft West Midlands Region Rail Development Plan (which Centro is writing on behalf of the Region) states that in Control Period 5 (2014-19) there will be 6 trains per hour from Walsall to Birmingham, with trains stopping at Bescot where there will be an expanded Park and Ride facility to reduce the pressure on Tame Bridge Parkway. In the same period, the platforms at Bescot will be lengthened and the station will be DDA compliant.

- **Walsall – Wolverhampton**

This route was not in the rail franchise. Government funding was provided for a further year but, unfortunately, this service was withdrawn in December 2008 because rolling stock could not be secured.

The reinstatement of Willenhall station has become an integral part of the Willenhall Area Action Plan. An Expression of Interest was submitted by Walsall Council and Centro for Community Infrastructure Funding (CIF) for a station at Willenhall. This was not successful since it was not recommended as a high priority by WMRA and AWM in their advice to the Government. However they did state that “The team collectively agreed that the scheme in Willenhall would have been a “high priority” if its deliverability had not been influenced by the withdrawal of the rail service in December 2008”.

Centro wrote to AWM, WMRA, CLG and DfT asking them to review the CIF Expression of Interest saying that “Centro remains committed to reinstating a rail service on this corridor from the earliest practical opportunity and believes that it should be possible for a new station at Willenhall to be served by such a service. It is understood that CIF funding is available for schemes deliverable by 2011, Centro is confident that the service on this line will be reintroduced before this time. Centro would hope that any such new service can operate a better than hourly frequency in order to maximise its attractiveness for users..... Centro will also be looking at other station opportunities along the route to support regeneration and transport objectives. Centro had identified revenue funding required to operate the service and fund the operation of the new station at Willenhall.”

Although the CIF bid failed, Centro’s immediate priority is the reinstatement of services on this corridor. Working closely with Walsall and Wolverhampton councils, they have commissioned studies looking at the potential for new stations and better service patterns.

- **Aldridge and Sutton Park Line**

Centro, with partners Walsall Council, Birmingham City Council, Staffordshire County Council and Warwickshire County Council, has commissioned a study into reinstating services along the Sutton Park (and Birmingham–Tamworth) line, which is due to report imminently. Initial results show a potential good level of demand for a station at Aldridge, and further work is likely to be needed to develop a scheme to extend services from Walsall to Aldridge. High demand forecasts would support the case for electrification of the section from Walsall as far as Aldridge. Provision is being made within the Network Rail resignalling scheme to allow for a turn back facility in Aldridge.

There are issues, however, with Streetly station since a housing development has been built on the site of the original station. Finding another site close to the centre of Streetly is problematic because of its proximity to Sutton Park and the sensitivities surrounding that location.

- **Stourbridge – Walsall – Lichfield Line**

Centro is currently working with Network Rail to develop a joint business case for reinstating the Walsall – Stourbridge route as a mixed used freight and tram corridor, with freight trains sharing tracks south of Wednesbury with tram-trains. This corridor is a priority highlighted in the Regional Transport Priorities Action Plan, and Regional Funding Allocation funding and other funding sources are being investigated as ways of delivering the project quickly. This is considered to be the first phase of a longer-term aspiration to re-open the corridor through to Brownhills and Lichfield, which the emerging Network Rail Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) will include in Control Periods 6 and 7 (2019-29).

In the short-term, officers are at the feasibility stage of investigating junction improvements on the A416 in order to introduce improved bus services on the Walsall to Brownhills route.

- **Rail and Rapid Transit**

As noted above, the use of tram-trains is proposed for the Wednesbury-Stourbridge route. Tram-trains, which are in use in many locations in Europe but not yet in the UK, operate either on main-line rail infrastructure (as trains) or on-street (as trams), enabling excellent access to key locations of demand such as settlement centres which rail is less able to do. By using existing rail corridors, capital costs are also significantly reduced whilst retaining the journey time and reliability benefits of dedicated traffic-free infrastructure. A pilot tram-train scheme is shortly to commence in the UK.

Tram-trains could offer a way of delivering an improved service on the Walsall to Wolverhampton rail line but linking into the new development at Wolverhampton Interchange. The existence of a previously 4-track rail corridor through Walsall could also offer opportunities for a wider range of service options without the need for significant sections of on-street running, and this could offer scope for a different approach to the 5Ws route proposal which potentially offers the benefit of reduced costs and complexity in delivery.

Centro is currently reviewing its overall Rapid Transit Strategy which will consider how a rapid transit network can best meet the transport and regeneration needs of the West Midlands in the future. In particular, there is a need to consider whether tram-trains might offer ways of delivering outcomes not previously possible with tram alone. Centro have indicated that Walsall lends itself to a tram-train network and a specific study looking at Rail and Rapid Transit development opportunities in Walsall and the Black Country is likely to be progressed in 2009/10.

In the longer-term, Centro will ensure that the local transport network can effectively feed into any new high-speed line that comes to the West Midlands, to ensure that the whole metropolitan area can benefit from the greater national and international connectivity that such a route would deliver.

### **Recommendations**

The Panel is requested to note the report.

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## **Appendix 1 - Priorities set out in Walsall Rail Service and Facilities Improvement Plan**

### **5. OUR PRIORITIES**

5.1 The proposals set out in this document range from service quality performance to major capital investment in new infrastructure. To achieve the Plan proposals it will be necessary to bring together funding from Walsall Council, Network Rail, train operating companies, Centro/West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority (WMPTA) and other sources. Walsall Council recognises the need to prioritise and focus on those schemes that are most practical and deliver the greatest benefits.

5.2 The Plan aspirations are broken down into three time periods:

- Immediate Priorities: improvements that are a high priority and can be secured within the period of the Local Transport Plan 2006 - 2011;
- Further Goals: improvements which will need more time to develop but could be secured within a 5 - 10 year period;
- Longer Term Aspirations for further development: in the 11- 20 year period. Many of these aspirations will be subject to feasibility and further studies.

#### **Immediate Priorities 2006 – 2011:**

##### **5.3 Walsall Station**

- Walsall Council will work with Govia and Centro to identify services that could be routed through Walsall Station to connect to London and other major towns and cities
- Walsall Council will co-operate with Network Rail in their signal renewal programme in the Walsall area, which will improve performance.

##### **5.4 Corridor: Birmingham – Walsall – Rugeley – Stafford**

- We will write to Office of Rail Regulation in support of the proposal to run five trains per day in each direction between Wrexham and London Marylebone, stopping at Tamebridge Parkway, from March 2008
- In order to improve services:
  - Walsall Council will encourage Govia and Centro/PTA to enhance Cannock Line evening service provision and provide half-hourly off-peak service to Hednesford / Rugeley Trent Valley
  - We would ask Govia and Centro/PTA and bus operators to facilitate four trains per hour stopping at Bescot (to serve a major Park & Ride facility)
- In order to improve facilities:
  - Walsall Council will support Centro/PTA to take forward the Cannock Rail Showcase package to upgrade all six stations on the route between Bloxwich and Rugeley Town and increase all platform lengths to accommodate 6 car train lengths.
  - Centro/PTA will provide induction loops and new “live” easy to read departure information displays on platforms and at station entrances at Bescot Station, Hamstead and Perry Barr

- Walsall Council will encourage the provision of improved facilities for interchange at Rugeley Trent Valley station
- And the extension of Park and Ride at Cannock and Hednesford
- We will work with Centro to investigate the potential for further Park and Ride on the Chase Line in the Walsall area.
- Walsall Council will co-operate fully with Network Rail in their:
  - Investigation into the feasibility of building the Ryecroft Chord, linking the Sutton Park Line with the Chase Line. This must not compromise the future re-opening of the Walsall-Brownhills Line.
  - Resignalling of Walsall area to improve linespeed / capacity / capability / performance
  - Development of a Pleck Junction freight turn-back facility to increase capacity and ease congestion at Bescot Yard

### **5.5 Corridor: Wolverhampton – Walsall – Sutton Coldfield**

- Walsall Council will work with Centro and Govia to secure improvements to the Walsall – Wolverhampton rail route as part of the December 2008 timetable planning process.
  - We will work with Centro/PTA and partners to identify funding and reopen Willenhall Station.
- We will work with Centro, Network Rail and Birmingham CC to determine the cost and viability of reintroducing passenger services on the Sutton Line between Walsall and Sutton, with intermediate stations serving Aldridge and Streetly
- Walsall Council will co-operate fully with Network Rail in their investigation into the feasibility of building the Ryecroft Chord, linking the Sutton Park Line with the Chase Line. This must not compromise the future re-opening of the Walsall-Brownhills Line.

### **5.6 Corridor: Stourbridge – Walsall – Lichfield**

- In order to reinstate freight and passenger services:
  - Walsall Council and neighbouring authorities will ensure that the potential for the Stourbridge – Walsall - Derby route is fully investigated as part of Network Rail's new Route Utilisation Strategy for the region.
  - Walsall Council will work with Centro to determine the viability of short-term public transport use of Walsall-Brownhills corridor and the potential for Park and Ride.
  - We will encourage Network Rail and other stakeholders to seize the opportunity to bid for funding for the Stourbridge – Walsall route from the £200m allocated by Government for the creation of a Strategic Freight Network.
  - We will assist Centro and Network Rail in a study to investigate the feasibility of re-opening Stourbridge-Walsall, and possibly the Lichfield line, to tram-trains.
  - Walsall Council will co-operate fully with Network Rail in their investigation into the feasibility of building the Ryecroft Chord to see if it can also link to the Walsall-Brownhills Line.
  - We will ensure that Network Rail's resignalling scheme can accommodate a reinstated Walsall-Brownhills Line.

## **Further Goals 5 – 10 years:**

### **5.7 Walsall Station**

- Walsall Station will be remodelled to increase capacity and enable greater flexibility
- The station will form part of an “urban interchange” for multi-modal public transport for tram, bus and rail links – maximising the contribution of public transport provision to a vibrant town centre accessible to all of Walsall’s diverse communities.

### **5.8 Corridor: Birmingham – Walsall – Rugeley – Stafford**

- The Ryecroft Chord will be built to link the Chase Line to the Sutton Line to improve operational flexibility and also freight and passenger capacity / capability / performance.
- Walsall Council will work with neighbouring authorities and others to make the case for the electrification of the Sutton Line: Walsall – Nuneaton (- Coventry) and also the Chase Line: Walsall – Rugeley Trent Valley.
- There will be improvement to services by:
  - Establishing new connections to the National Rail Network and InterCity connections to London and other major cities to provide greater connectivity
  - Increasing the number of trains from New Street to Walsall from four to six per hour during the working day
  - There will be increased frequency of passenger services north of Walsall, with additional rolling stock and/or fleet replacement and platform extensions across all stations to Rugeley to increase capacity and capability
  - Bescot Station will have longer platforms and the station will be fully compliant with disabled access requirements.
  - There will be additional Park and Ride provision at Tame Bridge, Rugeley Town and Rugeley Trent Valley. Bescot Station will be a major Park and Ride facility serving Walsall and Birmingham
  - There will be improvements to staffing at Bloxwich, Bloxwich North and Landywood.

### **5.9 Corridor: Wolverhampton – Walsall – Sutton Coldfield**

- There will be a half-hourly services between Walsall and Wolverhampton
- Stations will be built serving Willenhall, Aldridge and Streetly
- The Ryecroft Chord will be built to link the Chase Line to the Sutton Line to improve operational flexibility and also freight and passenger capacity / capability / performance.
- Walsall Council will work with neighbouring authorities and others to make the case for the electrification of the Sutton Line.

### **5.10 Corridor: Stourbridge – Walsall – Lichfield**

- A short-term solution for public transport use will generate patronage along this corridor
- We will work with Centro/PTA to investigate the potential for Park and Ride on the Walsall-Lichfield Line

- Walsall Council will liaise with industry partners and neighbouring authorities to make the case for reinstatement of freight and passenger services on the Stourbridge-Walsall-Lichfield Line.
- We will work with Network Rail to investigate the feasibility of linking the Walsall-Lichfield route into the Ryecroft Chord.

## **Longer term Aspirations 11- 20 years:**

### **5.11 Walsall Station**

- The station will have regular Intercity connections as part of a diverse range of quality public transport options and linkages which will enable the town centre, and the borough as a whole, to develop as a sustainable, 21st century community creating jobs, homes and economic prosperity whilst functioning as a fully integrated element within the wider region.

### **5.12 Corridor: Birmingham – Walsall – Rugeley – Stafford**

- The Chase Line will be electrified and there will be other improvements to track and signalling which will allow the introduction of a faster, more frequent, passenger rail service with an enhanced passenger environment.
- The electrification will be linked to the Coventry – Nuneaton – Water Orton – Ryecroft electrification, including the Ryecroft Chord, to increase the potential of the line to accommodate enhanced local and long distance passenger services.

### **5.13 Corridor: Wolverhampton – Walsall – Sutton Coldfield**

- Tram-Trains will serve the heavily populated catchment areas along the route
- Electrification of the Sutton Park Line through to Nuneaton linked with Walsall-Rugeley electrification, and the construction and electrification of the Ryecroft Chord, will provide a major strategic freight route including scope for passenger services.

### **5.14 Corridor: Stourbridge – Walsall – Lichfield**

- The Stourbridge – Walsall – Lichfield Line will be reinstated for freight and passenger services. Tram-Trains will serve the heavily populated catchment areas along the route
- The Ryecroft Chord will be built to link the Stourbridge-Walsall-Lichfield Line to the Chase Line and Sutton Line to improve operational flexibility and also freight and passenger capacity / capability / performance.