

AT A SPECIAL MEETING
- of the
**REGENERATION, ENVIRONMENT,
HOUSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY
SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**
held at The Council House, Walsall on
Thursday 19 May 2005 at 4.30 p.m.

IN ATTENDANCE

Councillor I Shires (Chairman)
Councillor Arif
Councillor Aslam
Councillor Longhi
Councillor Robinson
Councillor Tweddle
Councillor Zahid

SUBSTITUTIONS

The panel noted the following substitution for the duration of the meeting: -

Delete: Councillor Harrison
Substitute: Councillor Arif

APOLOGIES

Apologies were submitted on behalf of Councillor Harris.

RECEIPT OF DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest. Members of party political groups represented on the panels indicated there were no whipping arrangements for any of the political parties in respect of the item on the agenda.

THE STRATEGIC RAIL AUTHORITY'S WEST MIDLANDS ROUTE
UTILISATION STRATEGY CONSULTATION

Keith Stone and Sandy Urquhart were in attendance to give a presentation and outline the contents of the report of the executive director relating to the Strategic Rail Authority's West Midlands Route Utilisation Strategy. Keith Stone advised that the consultation is on the draft West Midlands Rail Utilisation Strategy and set out the implications for Walsall Borough in order that the council may make a response to the Strategic Rail Authority. In outlining the presentation he said that the accessibility of Walsall by rail was an important factor in influencing perceptions of Walsall as a place to visit or

do business and, as such, the proposals were significant to the Borough. He further stated this was a missed opportunity to develop Walsall to the overall benefit of the Borough's residents and the rail network. Councillor Longhi, Portfolio holder for the environment said that the views of cabinet were along the lines of the presentation; cabinet welcomes the Birmingham International link which would take cars off the road and also the increase of frequency of travel between Walsall and Rugeley. He said that Walsall was turning the corner in terms of regeneration. He welcomed the proposed improvements but pointed to the bad news about proposed cuts in services. Councillor Longhi stated from the wider regeneration issue increased services was clearly the way to go. Councillor Shires asked officers what their response was to the wider regeneration issues in the borough. Tim Johnson advised that when looking at the wider view the proposals of the rail authority seem to fly in the face of the current development and regeneration in Walsall. He said that the URC providing funding for regeneration in this area did seem contradictory to have regeneration via the URC on one hand and cuts in the transport services from the Strategic Rail Authority on the other.

Members discussed drawing together partners to discuss the wider regeneration issues and suggested that a strategic response from all partners in the Black Country would have a greater impact. Councillor Longhi indicated that the consultation meeting for the Black Country Consortium would take place on 27 May 2005. Members agreed to co-ordinate a response from partners and stakeholders as follows: -

- Urban Regeneration Company (URC).
- Chamber of Commerce.
- Rail Users Organisation.
- Centro.
- Wolverhampton Council.
- AWM.
- Black Country Consortium.

Members discussed the consultation document and the fact that the Strategic Rail Authority was due to be disbanded later this year. Members felt it important to find out which organisation would carry on the dialogue regarding the future rail utility plans.

Members agreed that the proposed extension of direct services from Walsall to Birmingham International the increase in frequency of trains to Rugeley were welcome. Members also discussed the issue of who would manage the rail network once the Strategic Rail Authority had been abolished. Members agreed that there was a need to take guidance from the Strategic Rail Authority and to take into account how that would have effect on local train services as opposed to main line routes. Tim Johnson said that the Department of Transport would have a more central role. Members agreed that a sub-regional lobby or regional lobby would have more power and effect on the decision making body. In addition to which members felt it important to involve local members of parliament to support the Council's efforts in this regard.

Sandy Urquhart advised that the Strategic Rail Authority document is essentially an operational document and that later in 2005 a consultation document will be circulated on strategic matters. Members and officers discussed the difficulty of differentiating operational matters from strategic ones. The portfolio holder felt it important to note that strategy and operational matters were integral.

Councillor Shires felt it important to stress that the rail network needed to be more effective in serving areas of deprivation and also those with regeneration potential. Members felt it important to stress to the Strategic Rail Authority that Walsall should not be taken for granted, and agreed that the Council should be more proactive in developing its response both to the RUS consultation document and the forthcoming Regional Planning Assessment. Members discussed a number of other issues: -

- Walsall town centre needs to be served by inter-city trains as a necessary step to bring office development to the Borough,
- Walsall has the potential to function as a sub-regional rail hub that could help take pressure off Birmingham New Street
- The freight link from Stourbridge to Walsall and Lichfield should be operational, both to help route freight around the Birmingham area and as a stepping stone to passenger services.
- Merry Hill office space - there being potential for Walsall to attract similar development and shoppers with the necessary rail links.
- The Walsall to Wolverhampton rail link – members felt it important to stress that the rail link would be enhanced with one or two stations along the line and gave examples of Willenhall and James Bridge at Darlaston.
- Additional train station at Aldridge to create a park and ride facility for travellers.
- Members discussed the replacement coach service from Walsall to Wolverhampton that has been operational since Christmas 2004 and stressed that this further reduced the attractiveness, and thus the patronage of the service.
- Suggested link to Sutton Coldfield – this would be an attractive commute and would link in with cross city lines.
- Members voiced concerns that the lack of investment over a number of years had led to the future of the Walsall to Wolverhampton service being in question.
- The proposal to connect the Walsall - Sutton Coldfield line with the Walsall - Rugeley line at Ryecroft to ease freight movements by crossing the Walsall - Brownhills rail formation. Members were advised that the Council would strenuously oppose any proposal which would have the effect of severing the formation. It was suggested that the response letter be phased to support the link subject to the formation not being prejudiced.

After a further period of consideration it was moved by Councillor Shires, duly seconded that: -

- 1a) The Regeneration, Environment, Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny and Performance Panel agreed the proposed response, as set out in the annex of the report;
- 1b) That the comments of the panel be recommended to cabinet for inclusion in the full response to the Strategic Rail Authority Consultation document;
- 1c) That the scrutiny panel request that cabinet and the portfolio holder work with officers to enter into discussion with partners to promote Walsall's case and to co-ordinate matters on behalf of the partners across the borough.
- 2a) That the leader of the council and the portfolio holder be requested to highlight Walsall's response at the meeting of the Black Country Consortium Visioning Event on 27 May 2005 to gain the support of the Black Country Partners relating to wider implications of the SRA consultation;
- 2b) Make appropriate representations on the rail implications as part of the Black Country study.
- 3a) That the scrutiny and performance panel agree to invite representatives of the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) and other interested parties from as wide a range of stakeholders as possible (including local MPs), to a meeting to discuss the consultation document and clarify matters within the report;
- 3b) In acknowledging that the SRA is to be disbanded later this year, to request confirmation which body will be the successor for future consultation.

Members discussed the proposal; the chairman invited comments of the public forum.

Mr Richard Worrall – Public Forum

Mr Worrall thanked the scrutiny panel for allowing him to contribute to the discussion. He voiced concerns about the Snow Hill diversion and suggested that Members may wish to stress in the response that there needs to be an ongoing assurance that existing services will not be diverted from New Street Station to Snow Hill. However, if the appropriate infrastructure were to be put in place, Mr Worrall further suggested that Chiltern Trains might consider running through trains from Walsall to London via Birmingham Snow Hill. He said that in his experience it may be unlikely that Virgin Trains would be interested in running trains from Walsall to London Euston. He voiced further concerns about the heavily congested lines to Birmingham Airport and suggested that these issues be raised in the consultation strategy response. Mr Worrall once again thanked members for inviting him to join in the discussion.

After a further period of consideration members voted on the motion and it was:

RESOLVED

- 1a) That the Regeneration, Environment, Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny and Performance Panel agree the proposed response, as set out in the annex to the report;
- 1b) That the comments of the panel be recommended to cabinet for inclusion in the full response to the Strategic Rail Authority's Consultation document;
- 1c) That the scrutiny panel request that cabinet and the portfolio holder work with officers to enter into discussion with partners to promote Walsall's case and to co-ordinate matters on behalf of the partners across the borough.
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- 2b) Make that appropriate representations on the rail implications as part of the Black Country study.
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- 3b) In acknowledging that the SRA is to be disbanded later this year, to request confirmation which body will be the successor for future consultation.

TERMINATION OF THE MEETING

The meeting terminated at 5.55 p.m.