

The Impact of Proposed Strategic Rail Investment on Walsall Borough

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr A Andrew – Deputy Leader and Regeneration

Executive Summary:

To provide the Panel with an overview of planned strategic rail investment in the 2014-19 period and the implications for Walsall Borough. This focuses on the electrification of the Chase Line (Walsall – Rugeley Trent Valley section) which has been included in Network Rail's Strategic Business Plan for this period (expected delivery in 2017/18). Associated with this (and the signalling and line speed improvements currently being implemented on the line) is the possible closure of the level crossing at Reeves Street, Bloxwich.

Reason for scrutiny:

To inform the panel of the anticipated impact of Chase Line electrification on local residents and businesses, and the overall economic benefits for Walsall Borough. This includes the associated impact of possible closure of Bloxwich Level Crossing, especially the impact of traffic re-routing in the local area.

Recommendations:

That Scrutiny Panel members: -

- 1. Note the Network Rail commitment to electrify the Walsall – Rugeley Trent Valley section of the Chase Line Railway;**
- 2. Note the Network Rail proposal to close the level crossing at Bloxwich on safety grounds associated with line speed improvements and planned electrification works;**
- 3. Note the progress of joint work between Network Rail and Walsall Council to identify and agree a package of highway works to mitigate the impacts of possible level crossing closure; and**
- 4. Request that a further report be presented to the Scrutiny Panel prior to any final Council decision on the proposal to close the level crossing.**

Background papers:

- Network Rail Strategic Business Plan for England and Wales, January 2013
- Walsall Unitary Development Plan (UDP) 2005 'Saved Policies'
- Black Country Core Strategy
- West Midlands Local Transport Plan 2011

Resource and legal considerations:

Chase Line railway electrification will be funded by the rail industry and there is no direct resource implication for Walsall Council. The proposal to close the level crossing at Bloxwich would require a package of highway mitigation works. Whilst Network Rail would fund the principal highway works associated with the proposed closure, the Council would have to complement these works with smaller-scale works funded from the Local Transport Plan Capital Programme – this is an annual grant from the West Midlands Integrated Transport Authority (ITA) to implement the West Midlands Local Transport Plan (LTP).

The legal instrument to close the level crossing has not yet been determined – this could be highways, town planning or railways legislation. The justification for closure is safety of the facility once the line speed rises and the number of train paths increase, which will be further exacerbated by the electrification of the line and the possible future routing of some inter-city services.

Given that the Council (as the Highway Authority) will have to formally support (or otherwise) the proposal to close the level crossing on safety grounds, this will require a resolution of Cabinet and will provide an opportunity for the Scrutiny Panel to consider a further report on this issue at an appropriate time.

Citizen impact:

Signalling and line speed improvements are currently underway on the Chase Line that will ultimately see the line speed increase to 75 mph (current speeds are up to 50 mph) and create more capacity i.e. the ability to accommodate more train paths. A component of these works involves converting the Bloxwich Level Crossing to remotely controlled CCTV monitored type, which will be controlled from the West Midlands Signalling Centre; and demolition of the signal box. All of these improvements are due to be commissioned in September 2013.

The electrification of the Chase Line is expected to encourage London Midland (or its successor) to invest in a more frequent passenger service between Rugeley – Walsall – Birmingham. It will also help facilitate Liverpool – Walsall – London direct services, providing new opportunities for local residents to access the capital city.

Analysis commissioned by ITA/Centro has demonstrated that the scheme will generate an additional £113 million of Gross Value Added (GVA) benefit per annum to the West Midlands economy, equivalent to 1,370 additional jobs. It also supports Black Country Core Strategy Regeneration Corridor 7 (Bloxwich-Birchills-Bescot), which includes proposals for 1,645 new dwellings and 156ha of gross employment land by 2026.

The committed electrification scheme also improves the business case for investing in a new station at Aldridge; electrification of the Sutton Park Line (Aldridge to Walsall section); and a new passenger service from Aldridge to Birmingham via Walsall Station.

The proposed closure of Bloxwich Level Crossing will regrettably be detrimental to local vehicular access and will force some traffic to re-route in the area. However,

the alternative is that, with increased train paths and a higher line speed on the electrified route, the level crossing barriers will be down for a significantly larger amount of time – typically 40 minutes per hour at peak times, as opposed to 20 minutes per hour currently. Consequently, supporting the closure of the level crossing and securing a package of principal mitigation works from Network Rail at a cost of circa £2 million may therefore be in the best interests of the Borough.

Negotiations between Network Rail and Walsall Council regarding the principal mitigation works have initially identified the need for the following: -

- Fully accessible ‘footbridge’ (pedestrian, wheelchair, pushchair and cycle-friendly) across the railway at the current level crossing location;
- Reconstruction of Central Drive rail bridge to remove the weight restriction and introduce an integral footway on both sides of the bridge;
- Changed highway priority at Central Drive/Croxstalls Road junction to encourage traffic away from the Dudley Fields Estate; and
- Signalisation of the Croxdene Avenue/Elmore Green Road junction.

This would be supplemented by a locally-funded package of measures to further discourage re-routing traffic away from residential areas and encourage use of ‘main road’ routes. This could include: traffic regulation orders (TROs); better signage; speed humps; and better enforcement of environmental weight limits and speed limits.

Businesses located close to the level crossing are likely to be affected. In particular businesses located on the Reeves Street side of the crossing that rely to some extent on ‘passing trade’ and those businesses that have close links with other local companies on the other side of the crossing. The Council will need to offer business support services to these companies should closure go ahead in an attempt to retain business activities and employment in the local area.

Environmental impact:

The Chase Line is a mixed-use route of electric and diesel trains, which includes a passenger service operated by London Midland. Electrification would see an improved and faster passenger service offered with cleaner (less-polluting) rolling stock.

Performance management:

None identified at this stage.

Equality Implications:

It is anticipated that the electrification of the Chase Line will have benefits for all groups based on improved access to employment, training, shopping and leisure opportunities.

The package of highway mitigation measures associated with the proposed level crossing closure will include features that address the needs of a wide range of client groups, for example:-

- Safety of pedestrians and cyclists;
- Facilities designed for people with mobility needs and elderly people – footways of sufficient width, tactile paving, dropped kerbs, refuges, controlled and uncontrolled crossing points.

Consultation:

Walsall Council consulted local residents, schools, businesses and other key stakeholders in summer 2012 regarding the proposal to close Bloxwich Level Crossing.

It was recognised by most respondees that with the announcement of electrification and introduction of more passenger and freight services, highway congestion levels will be become unacceptable if the crossing is left as it is. Therefore, whilst not desirable, most recognised that closing the crossing and taking advantage of funding for mitigation measures provided by Network Rail is a sensible option.

The mitigation measures are essential to the scheme being a success. The provision of a fully accessible ‘footbridge’ and improvements to the Central Drive alternative route along with enforcement of speed limits and weight limits are the schemes mentioned most often in consultation responses.

Further consultation, to include more comprehensive coverage of local residential areas, will be conducted and inform any decisions made by the Council and Network Rail.

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