

13 December 2021

Sprint Walsall to Solihull via Birmingham – Update on Phases 1 and 2

Ward(s): St. Matthews and Paddock

Portfolios: Councillor A. Andrew – Deputy Leader of the Council and Regeneration

1. Aim

- 1.1 Sprint is a bus rapid transit project that will improve connectivity between Walsall, Birmingham and Solihull, providing improved quality, quicker and more reliable journeys, supporting regeneration and improved accessibility to economic opportunities for the residents and businesses of Walsall.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Committee is recommended to: -

2.1.1 Note the progress being made on delivery of Sprint Phase 1, including engagement with businesses and residents during periods of disruption.

2.1.2 Consider the approach outlined for the development and delivery of Sprint Phase 2, including delivery timescales, plans for engagement and approvals.

2.1.3 Review the bus service changes noted in this report and comment on the overall impacts for Walsall residents and stakeholders.

3. Infrastructure Development and Delivery

Phase 1 Delivery

- 3.1 The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) approved the Full Business Case for Sprint in February 2020, and allocated sufficient funding to deliver a first phase of full scheme interventions. Work commenced in early-2021 on the delivery of Sprint, and more noticeably in Walsall works commenced in May 2021. Contractors working in Walsall in Phase 1 include: -

- Doocey Group – utility and statutory undertaker diversions
- Colas – civils contractor
- HTM – traffic management
- BSL – bus shelter manufacturer and installer

- 3.2 The current forecast is for physical Phase 1 works to conclude in Walsall by April 2022.

- 3.3 The coordination of the works and management of contractors is the responsibility of Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) as both scheme promoter and sponsor. The scope of the works and the mechanism for works to commence on public highway are agreed under a section 8/278 agreement that both TfWM and Walsall Council have entered into. All works undertaken by TfWM and their contractors can be inspected by Walsall Council officers, where resources allow and will be transferred to the council on full inspection, completion and sign-off of the construction works.
- 3.4 A summary of the interventions in Phase 1 are noted here: -
- Upgraded bus boarding points with high quality Sprint shelters, featuring Real Time Information (RTI) displays, at key stops along the A34 route.
 - Dedicated inbound bus lane on Ablewell Street, giving more direct access to the town centre and signalised improvements to the Lower Rushall / Upper Rushall and Bridge Street junctions.
 - Increased bus priority with the introduction of extended bus lanes on the approach to / from Walstead Road junction and rationalisation of nearby central reserve crossing points.
- 3.5 All of the works undertaken are administered, reviewed and approved through Walsall Council's highway permitting arrangement and Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) consultation process, as is the requirement of any scheme undertaken on the public highway.
- 3.6 As part of delivery, it is TfWM responsibility and duty to communicate with residents and businesses affected by the work on what is to take place, and where, and to minimise the disruption and effect of these works on everyday life. TfWM have public engagement officers and liaison officers within both the contracting and delivery team, as well as a communication manager, who coordinates the overall message of Sprint, liaises with press and produces the regular communications put out into the community. TfWM and the contractors have been regularly visiting local businesses in the vicinity of the construction works to keep them updated on progress and to discuss any issues that the ongoing works may present.
- 3.7 There is a dedicated phone line that is promoted for any Sprint inquiries, and TfWM capture and coordinate all responses through a central customer relations team so that they can quickly pick up any recurring or prominent issues and address them.
- 3.8 TfWM accept that the works in Walsall town centre have been the subject of quite extensive traffic management and these measures have been discussed and agreed with WMBC officers. The primary purpose of the traffic management is to allow for safe methods of efficient working and to minimise any delays to road users, wherever possible.
- 3.9 Detail of traffic management and others matters associated with the effects of the Sprint works are relayed to stakeholders through the following means: -
- Residents and businesses receive timely notifications throughout the construction phase to explain specific work, how long it will last and detailing

how the work will affect them in terms of traffic management, possible noise and other disruptions.

- The Public Liaison Manager works closely with a contractor based Public Liaison Officer to keep residents and business holders routinely informed and to swiftly resolve any queries that may arise in person.
- Key stakeholders along the route (such as schools) are engaged with through the TfWM Travel Choices team.
- All questions, queries or complaints from the public are directed through the TfWM Customer Enquiry Team. All enquiries are logged with a response given within ten working days.
- The Sprint website is regularly updated with the latest information about construction works and the wider project.
- A monthly Sprint email newsletter is sent out to stakeholders giving the latest information about the project.

3.10 All information is sent to officers at Walsall Council in advance of going out to the public, which also enables local elected members in their regular dialogue with Walsall officers to have early sight of all Sprint communications.

3.11 TfWM also have almost daily dialogue with Walsall officers about progress on the ground and any issues as they occur, including the management of communication and engagement related matters.

Phase 2 Development and Delivery

3.12 The intention is that Phase 2 will be included in the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) programme for the West Midlands. This programme is currently being prepared and will be presented to the WMCA Board for approval in January 2022.

3.13 TfWM are currently preparing the detail of the Phase 2 scheme with Walsall officers. The detail of a preferred scheme and options considered will be shared with Walsall Council's portfolio holder for regeneration in due course, at which time a plan for further wider engagement will also be agreed.

3.14 The detail of Phase 2 will require local Cabinet approval, and will also go back to the WMCA board for ratification and approval in due course. These approvals are expected to be sought late-spring/early-summer 2022.

3.15 Phase 2 will conclude the infrastructure provision required to support the delivery of a fully operational Sprint service between Walsall and Solihull via Birmingham.

Vehicles and service changes

3.16 The infrastructure being rolled out in Phase 1 will benefit existing services and help future proof the corridor for the roll out of articulated multidoor buses similar to those used on the popular Glider service in Belfast (**see Figure 1**) on the network. This enables some of the benefits of the full service offer to be provided by existing services as they utilise new bus lanes and traffic signal arrangements.

Phase 1 Operation

- 3.17 The infrastructure delivered as part of Phase 1 is expected to enable new a new service to be provided on the corridor. As revealed in January 2021, National Express plans to operate this direct service between Walsall and Solihull. This will replace the current Route 51 and X2 services providing new journey options from Walsall including direct services to the Bullring and the markets in Birmingham, the Digbeth creative quarter, the Jaguar Land Rover plant and logistics operations centre at Lode Lane and Solihull town centre. National Express and Nbus/Nnetwork tickets will be valid on this service. This new service will be operated by 20 zero emission hydrogen fuel cell buses.
- 3.18 The hydrogen to fuel these vehicles will be produced in the West Midlands and is 'green hydrogen' produced by electrolysis using electricity generated from renewable sources. Some of the new hydrogen double deck vehicles are now on test on the A34.
- 3.19 All other services on the corridor in Walsall, including the X51 are expected to remain operating as at present, although consideration is being given to introducing other cross-Birmingham services as part of the wider Bus Service Improvement Plan. These other services on the A34 / A45 corridor are expected to benefit from reduced journey times and enhanced passenger facilities as they will share the new infrastructure. Feedback received from the 2019 Sprint consultation supports this approach.
- 3.20 The Sprint Programme has also seen the implementation of an Enhanced Partnership Scheme on the corridor. This Scheme commits TfWM to installation of the Sprint infrastructure on the corridor and also mandates minimum vehicle standards for operators to adhere to. All buses operating normal public services on the corridor should now be low or zero emission (minimum Euro VI), with CCTV for passenger safety and security and should provide the opportunity for contactless payment. From May 2022, all double deck vehicles must additionally have next stop announcements on both decks, free Wi-Fi and should show onward connecting service information.

Phase 2 Operation

- 3.21 WMCA are currently seeking DfT funding to support the cost of up to 231 zero emission vehicles from the Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) funding stream. This is made up of 200 hydrogen fuel cell zero emission double deck buses, 24 hydrogen fuel cell zero emission articulated single deck buses for Sprint and 7 battery electric vehicles with opportunity charging capability. National Express West Midlands were the only operator to bring forward firm proposals at Expression of Interest stage and continue to support our submission. If WMCA are successful in the ZEBRA funding request, then WMCA will run an open grant competition to fairly award funding to best deliver on the outcomes required. TfWM currently anticipate a decision from the DfT prior to the end of 2021.
- 3.22 Assuming the Sprint Phase 2 infrastructure is delivered, the intent is for the 24 hydrogen fuel cell articulated vehicles to operate on the Sprint corridor, with any displaced hydrogen double deck vehicles cascaded to other routes operated in the

West Midlands. Other service changes may be considered at this point including the introduction of an additional cross-Birmingham service from Walsall Borough providing further improvements to connections available.



Figure 1 – Glider vehicle on service in Belfast

4. *Financial information*

- 4.1 There are no direct financial implications for Walsall Council as a result of this report.
- 4.2 Phase 1 is being delivered within the budget agreed by the WMCA in February 2020 and financial risk is being managed by WMCA/TfWM. There are COVID associated costs which are being captured as part of the delivery programme reporting.
- 4.3 The budget for phase 2 is a matter to be discussed and agreed at the WMCA board in January 2022 and is captured within the overall ask for allocation within the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement.

5. *Reducing Inequalities*

- 5.1 The objective of Sprint is to support regeneration and inclusivity through the provision of accessible and affordable transport that can be reliably used by all in accessing opportunities across the West Midlands. Inclusivity is at the heart of the scheme, alongside a drive to support the low-carbon economy and attract zero emission alternatives.
- 5.2 SPRINT is being development and implemented in line with the 'Marmot Objectives'. These are: -

- Giving every child the best start in life – access to schools is supported through a high-quality public transport network, and Sprint is a key element of that network within Walsall and the West Midlands.
- Enabling all children, young people and adults to maximize their capabilities and have control over their lives – measures to promote public transport modes help promote healthy and independent travel choices;
- Creating fair employment and good work for all – improved public transport networks help people access employment and training opportunities;
- Ensuring a healthy standard of living for all – access to paid employment is facilitated by improved public transport networks;
- Creating and developing sustainable places and communities – public transport networks help support sustainable places and communities;
- Strengthening the role and impact of ill-health prevention – healthy travel choices, such as combining walking, cycling and public transport, can help prevent ill health.

6. Decide

- 6.1 The committee may wish to provide their views on the performance of Phase 1 project delivery and recommend to officers how lessons learned from this phase of delivery could be applied in future phases of delivery, or on other transport projects.

7. Respond

- 7.1 Walsall Cabinet will be asked to consider the proposed design and delivery of Sprint Phase 2 in 2022, before the works commence, in order to obtain support for the completion of the Walsall elements of the A34/A45 scheme. The timing of this is to be determined, but expected in late-spring/early-summer 2022, at which time the details of the Phase 2 interventions will be better understood and contracting options in place based on the decision of the WMCA to allocate funds to Phase 2.

8. Review

- 8.1 Officers will continue to engage with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as the development of Phase 2 (infrastructure, vehicles and bus service operation) progress.
- 8.2 The committee may wish to review Phase 2 plans ahead of the anticipated Cabinet approval in 2022 and provide input to inform the Cabinet decision.

9. Background papers

- WMCA Board report, *Sprint - A34 Walsall to Birmingham and A45 Birmingham to Airport and Solihull Full Business Case Submission*, February 2020
- Walsall Cabinet report, *A34 Walsall to Birmingham SPRINT (Bus Rapid Transit) Scheme – Phase 1*, February 2021

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