

BRIEFING NOTE

TO: Regeneration Scrutiny and Performance Panel
DATE: 2 October 2008

RE: Walsall to Wolverhampton Rail Service

Purpose

From 13 December 2008, Mr Tom Harris MP, the Minister for Transport, is to withdraw funding from the Walsall/Wolverhampton rail link. This note is to provide background details to inform discussion.

Background

- May 1998: an hourly Walsall to Wolverhampton service was introduced, following a gap since 1965. The service was provided by Central Trains and gained a reputation for being unreliable. This was a “Cinderella” service for some time, with rolling stock and staff being used to bolster other services. Not helped by having no intermediate stations.
- 2000: Centro funded a study into putting a station at Willenhall (not including the recent proposals for 3000 new houses), it was estimated that there would be 104,522 one way passenger trips a year from Willenhall if a Wolverhampton–Willenhall–Walsall –Birmingham route was introduced.
- October 2005: Patronage remained low due to unreliability. Centro paid for an advertising campaign of full-page adverts in all the local papers.
- The Strategic Rail Authority recommended its replacement by 'express bus' from Jan 2006. However, it received a reprieve when the Central Trains franchise was extended until November 2007.
- When the new draft Rail Franchise was out for consultation the Department for Transport (DfT) indicated the intention to withdraw the service. When the franchise was being decided, the rail service between Walsall and Wolverhampton was of variable reliability, leading to typical usage of less than 7 passengers per train. There is no train from Wolverhampton to Walsall at peak commuting time between 06:56am and 08:23am, and services from Walsall arrive in Wolverhampton at 08:00 and 09:00 – too early for some and too late for others.
- Following substantial lobbying from various local partners and stakeholders the newly awarded West Midlands Rail Franchise included provision for services along the Wolverhampton - Walsall rail corridor until at least December 2008. This was to allow the DfT, London Midland, Centro-WMPTA and the West Midlands local authorities' time to consider and evaluate the options for the best long term use of the corridor.
- November 2007: Walsall Rail Service and Facilities Improvement Plan unanimously endorsed by Walsall Council and received strong support from Centro, Network Rail, neighbouring authorities and local partners. This identified the need to secure funding for station at Willenhall.
- Centro estimated that a sum of £700k revenue funding per year would be needed to subsidise the hourly service

- February 2008: Willenhall Regeneration Framework highlighted how crucial a railway station and train service was to unlock the housing potential. Potential for developer contributions in the future.
- March 2008: unsuccessful bid for Sustainable Urban Development revenue funding to continue the rail service.
- April 2008: letter sent by Gary Clarke, as Chair of the PTA, to Tom Harris, Minister for Transport asking about continuation of funding. Cited much improved performance from 70% in 2005 to 92% in the most recent period, leading to passenger numbers growing to 60,000 per year with growth of over 30% from the previous year. Evidence is that the busiest trains in each direction tend to load to around 20-30 passengers.
- June 2008: reply received from Tom Harris saying that funding would cease from December 2008 because it did not contribute to franchise. Also highlighted that rolling stock was not available.
- August 2008: letter signed by Portfolio Holders sent to Tom Harris giving reasons to continue the service, i.e:
 - Regeneration, social inclusion, pollution and congestion (especially at J10).
 - One in five (20.2%) of all people who commute to work in Walsall originate from Wolverhampton and one in six (16.8%) are going the other way. The train service takes 15 minutes yet the journey by bus is at least 45 minutes.
 - Connectivity with the wider regional and national rail network - an essential element of the growth agenda being established through the Black Country Joint Core Strategy.
 - Willenhall - additional 3000 houses with 8000 new residents.
 - Darlaston Strategic Development Area - projected 3,000 employment opportunities.
 - Walsall Office Corridor and Gigaport
- August/September 2008: Substantial number of letters written by members of the public in support of service
- September 2008: Notice of Motion from Councillor Clarke to Council on 8th September, 2008 was Resolved (unanimously):

“This Council notes with concern the decision made by Mr. Tom Harris MP, the Minister for Transport, to withdraw funding from the Walsall/Wolverhampton rail link which presently caters for some 60,000 passenger trips per year.

“This Council therefore calls upon Mr. Liam Byrne MP, Minister for the West Midlands, and the Members of Parliament representing Walsall to join us and exert their influence in asking Mr. Harris to review the decision and uphold the policy of encouraging the use of public transport throughout the West Midlands.”
- September 2008: Notice of Motion at Wolverhampton Council
- September 2008: Letter drafted to Liam Byrne MP, Minister for the West Midlands and three Walsall borough MPs asking for support.
- September 2008: £9m bid for a station at Willenhall submitted through Community Infrastructure Fund (funding for transport schemes which unlock housing potential). This would be a high risk scheme since the service is due to be withdrawn.

- September 2008: Bid for a station at Willenhall through Black Country Housing Growth point – Program of Development (POD)
- Autumn 2008: Centro are very supportive of continuing the service and progressing a station at Willenhall. We are currently in discussions with them to look into the wider mass transit system for Walsall which will include and prioritise this line. A Walsall area rail study will start soon and will last for approximately 6 months and will investigate various options for this line.

Recommendation

That, following consideration of the relevant information the Panel considers what course of action, if any, it would like to take.

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