

Council – 11 September 2006

Notice of Motion - West Midlands Rail Franchise

Service Area: **Regeneration**

Wards: **All**

Summary of report

In June the Department for Transport (DfT) circulated for consultation draft proposals for a new West Midlands Rail Franchise from 2007 – 2015. The franchise proposals will sever Walsall borough from two of its direct connections to InterCity services and proposed changes to the West Coast Mainline timetables could threaten the third. This will severely segregate the borough from the wider Region and the country as a whole and is totally unacceptable. It will jeopardise our ambition to bring about long term economic success and sustained viability to the districts and communities of Walsall Borough. An officer response was sent to meet the 7 August consultation deadline. Other responses were also issued from our key partners including Walsall Regeneration Company, Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership, Walsall Chamber of Commerce, Walsall College and Wolverhampton University.

To emphasise the gravitas with which Walsall Council views the draft proposals contained within the franchise, a Notice of Motion is being proposed. This report is in support of the Notice of Motion contained within the Summons.

Details of the franchise

Walsall has a larger population than Wolverhampton, Plymouth and Derby, yet it currently has to make do with only local rail services that connect it with InterCity services via Wolverhampton, Stafford and Birmingham. The franchise proposes to terminate two of these, with the third under threat. It would be unacceptable for a borough the size of Walsall to lose these services and hence be unable to share in the benefits gained from the West Coast Main Line Improvement programme. It would also be highly damaging to the authority's growth agenda, which supports the Black Country Study and evolving City Region proposals.

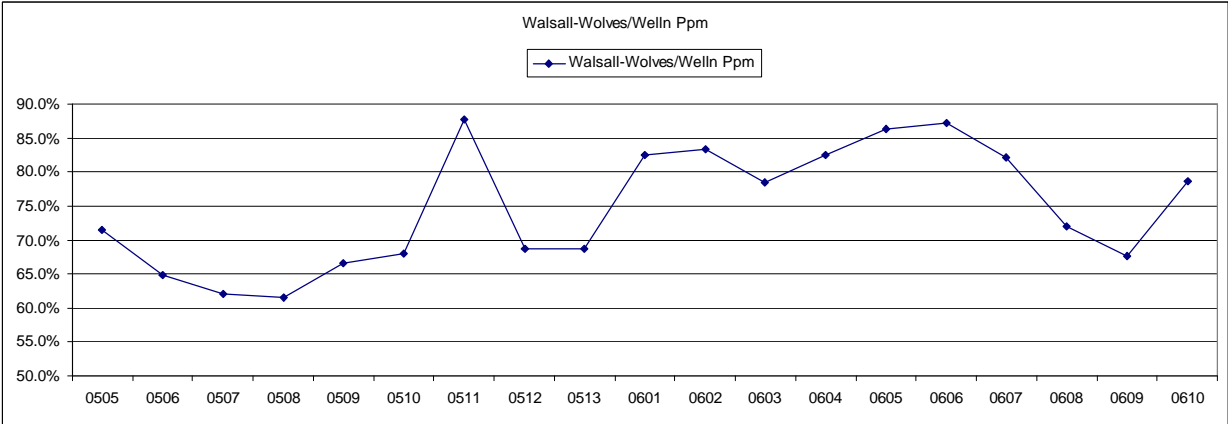
Over the past ten years the West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority (WMPTA) and Centro have actively enhanced, developed and promoted rail services in Walsall and, as a result, Walsall now receives its best ever rail service but this will be totally undermined by the franchise proposals.

WALSALL TO WOLVERHAMPTON SERVICES:

This service is currently specified by WMPTA/Centro through the Central Trains franchise. DfT is proposing to exclude this service from the franchise arrangements, which would end its operation. The main reason given was the service's historic low patronage levels, quoting an average of 200 person journeys a day on 31 services (average of 6.5 people per journey).

Usage on the route has been hampered by historic poor reliability (see chart below) and its low frequency with, on average, only one train an hour throughout the day and no train from Wolverhampton to Walsall at peak commuting time between 06:56 and 08:23.

Reliability performance (% of trains on time) between July 04 and January 06



The WMPTA/Centro has actively promoted this service and there have been recent improvements in performance. However, in order to affect patterns of behaviour and to improve usage of this strategic link, people need to be convinced of a permanent improvement, which this evidence does not currently show. Also, there are no intermediate stations to serve the communities that the service passes through, such as Pleck, Darlaston and Willenhall, however emerging regeneration ambitions for these areas are likely to significantly increase the business case for a new programme of station development on this line.

If DfT decide not to support the service through their franchise proposals, there is the option for the WMPTA to provide local funding through their own budget and levy. This would be additional to existing commitments and may either limit the WMPTA’s ability to contribute to other services, or increase the WMPTA contributions from local authorities.

WALSALL TO STAFFORD SERVICES:

DfT are also planning to curtail the current Walsall to Stafford service at Rugeley Trent Valley, claiming that this would relieve pressure on the West Coast Mainline through Stafford for InterCity services. If these changes were introduced, passengers wishing to connect to InterCity services would have to change at Rugeley Trent Valley onto another local service into Stafford. This, coupled with the potential loss of the service to Wolverhampton, would significantly worsen Walsall’s connections with InterCity service to and from the north.

Centro has responded to the franchise proposals suggesting that curtailment of the services would only be acceptable if the Rugeley Trent Valley to Walsall service was enhanced in the franchise to half-hourly, and the station at Rugeley Trent Valley was upgraded to adequately fulfil its interchange role. WMPTA/Centro is currently pressing Network Rail over the delivery of the line speed improvements which are needed to facilitate these improvements.

WALSALL TO BIRMINGHAM NEW STREET AND BIRMINGHAM INTERNATIONAL SERVICES:

Changes proposed to the 2008 timetable for the West Coast Mainline include increasing the frequency of InterCity services between Birmingham New Street to London.

Investigations are currently being undertaken into the implications of these changes in terms of capacity at New Street Station and the line between New Street and Coventry.

Although not confirmed, there may be a need for the direct services from Walsall to Birmingham International to be terminated short at Birmingham New Street. This would remove Walsall's only direct connection to Birmingham International Airport (BIA), forcing travellers to change at Birmingham New Street.

A more concerning issue is that to relieve pressure at Birmingham New Street, some or all of the services from Walsall to Birmingham may be diverted from Birmingham New Street into Birmingham Snow Hill Station. If this was to happen, Walsall would lose its connectivity to the main interchange station in Birmingham and the InterCity services that pass through New Street. This reduction or even loss of direct connection to InterCity services at New Street, together with the potential losses previously identified, could remove all of Walsall's direct connections to InterCity services.

WMPTA/Centro is currently discussing the implementation of an enhanced evening service on the Walsall-Birmingham line with Central Trains. It is hoped that this service can operate from December 2006 and be funded from the currently unallocated remaining rail fares increase budget. WMPTA/Centro would like these services also included within the base service specification for the franchise.

CENTRO CO-SIGNATORY STATUS

The DfT is proposing to remove WMPTA/Centro co-signatory status from the new West Midlands Franchise, which will make it harder for WMPTA/Centro and Walsall MBC to deliver future improvements. The responsibility for developing plans to improve rail service in Walsall should sit with WMPTA/Centro rather than DfT, and the appropriate level of local control over rail service needs to be devolved by DfT to enable this to happen effectively. The current franchise proposals move away from WMPTS/Centro having appropriate powers.

Issues for Debate

WALSALL TO WOLVERHAMPTON SERVICES:

1. Should Council lobby DfT to recognise the authority's growth agenda, linked with the Black Country and City Region initiatives, encouraging them to invest in the development of the Walsall to Wolverhampton service within the forthcoming WM Rail Franchise Specification?
2. Should Council lobby Centro to investigate the viability of developing intermediate stations to support any retained service, particularly in the context of the emerging regeneration plans for Willenhall?
3. If DfT do not decide to support the service within the franchise, should Council lobby Centro and WMPTA to support the reinstatement and enhancement of this service through local funding?

WALSALL TO STAFFORD SERVICES:

4. Should Council lobby DfT to retain and enhance direct services to Stafford within the franchise specification?
5. Should Council be prepared to follow Centro's proposals for accepting the curtailment of the Stafford service only with enhancements made in the services to Rugeley Trent Valley and provided that the Walsall to Wolverhampton service is retained within the franchise?

WALSALL TO BIRMINGHAM NEW STREET AND BIRMINGHAM INTERNATIONAL SERVICES:

6. Should Council lobby DfT for clarification on the implications for Walsall services to the proposed changes to the West Coast Mainline timetables?
7. Should Council lobby DfT to retain our current level of services from Walsall into Birmingham New Street and challenge any diversion to Birmingham Snow Hill?
8. Should Council lobby DfT for the retention of direct services to Birmingham International and the airport (BIA), or would Council be satisfied with enhanced interchange at Birmingham New Street?

CENTRO CO-SIGNATORY STATUS

9. Should Council lobby DfT for WMPTA/Centro to retain co-signatory status in the new franchise?

Background papers

West Midlands Rail Franchise Consultation document

www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_railways/documents/divisionhomepage/611829.hcsp

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Tim Johnson', is written over a horizontal line. A vertical line is positioned to the right of the signature.

Tim Johnson
Executive Director
1st September 2006