

13 April 2023

Willenhall, Darlaston and Aldridge Railway Stations

Ward(s): _Bentley & Darlaston N, Darlaston S, Willenhall N, Willenhall S, Pleck

Portfolios: Regeneration

1. Aim

This report is to provides the Scrutiny Committee with:

- A brief overview of the railway projects planned in Walsall (Willenhall, Darlaston and Aldridge)
- A summary of the business case and benefits for these projects
- An update on progress and activities to date

2. Recommendations

The committee is requested to:

- **note** of the contents of the Report
- **provide feedback** on options around future engagement activities with local communities

3. Willenhall and Darlaston Stations

3.1 Project Overview

The two stations at Willenhall and Darlaston were closed in 1965 as part of the Beeching cuts that looked to rationalise the rail network. Growth in the wider areas around these stations mean that there is a strong case to deliver new stations in these locations, and this was identified as a priority by the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Mayor of the West Midlands.

These stations sat on the line between Wolverhampton and Walsall which is currently mainly used for freight. The previous station sites have been redeveloped over the past sixty years, and therefore reintroducing services to these communities requires the construction of new stations to modern standards.

The project to re-open these stations (known as 'Rail Package 1') is being taken forward through the West Midlands Rail Programme, a partnership that includes Network Rail as infrastructure owner, and West Midlands Trains as the rail operator.

3.2 Project Scope

Willenhall and Darlaston Station will each have two platforms suitable for 4-car trains. The stations will also have:

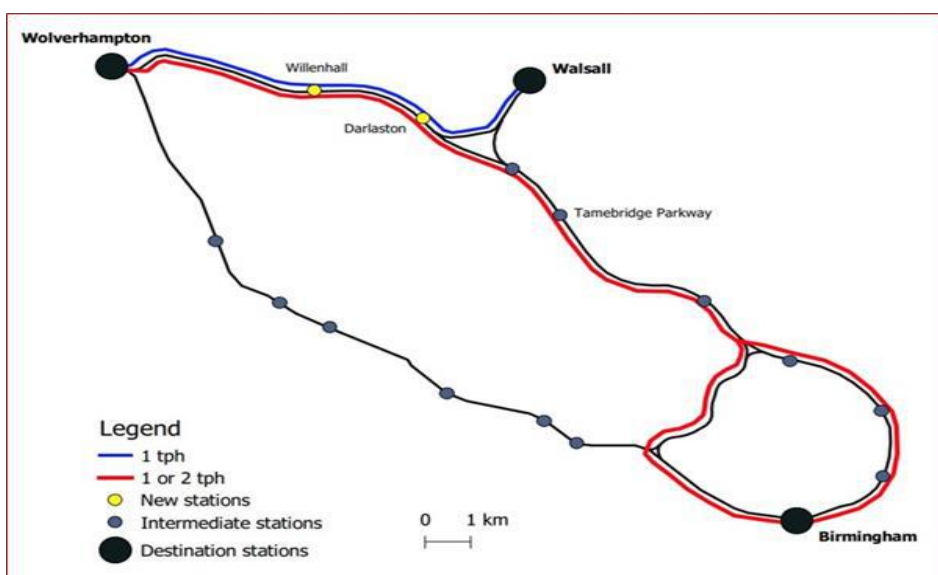
- pedestrian footbridges, stairs and lifts to provide access for passengers with mobility needs
- ticket machines and information systems
- passenger help points on each platform
- secure bike parking
- car parks, accommodating c. 35 cars at Willenhall and c. 300 cars at Darlaston
- flood remediation meadows on previously brownfield land
- a pick-up and drop-off area

No station buildings will be delivered as part of these projects, although there will be space left to futureproof for buildings in future if required.

The two stations are proposed at Willenhall and Darlaston to be served with one hourly service between Wolverhampton and Walsall, delivered by a new shuttle, and one hourly service between Wolverhampton and Birmingham New Street (see figure 1), delivered by diverting the existing Birmingham to Crewe service. This service is already running on the diverted route in anticipation of the stations opening.

The final details of the train service are subject to confirmation as part of on-going timetable development work and wider industry business planning and funding processes.

Figure 1.



3.3 Benefits

We have undertaken analysis of the case for the schemes, including consideration of the impact of COVID-19, and this demonstrates that the investment remains very high value for money, in addition to the wider strategic benefits.

It is estimated that 29,500 residents live within 1.2km of the stations, with car parking at Darlaston providing a wider catchment for the park and ride market. These stations will deliver transformative improvements in connectivity for local communities, dramatically reducing journey times by public transport to key centres of employment, education and leisure.

The estimated journey times to Birmingham New Street compared with existing public transport journey times are:

- 25 minutes from Willenhall, saving 46 minutes
- 22 minutes from Darlaston, saving 53 minutes

The estimated journey times to Wolverhampton are:

- 8 minutes from Willenhall, saving 10 minutes
- 11 minutes from Darlaston, saving 17 minutes

The estimated journey times to Walsall are:

- 8 minutes from Willenhall, saving 10 minutes
- 14 minutes from Darlaston, saving 9 minutes

The impact of these journey time benefits will be further magnified through improved access to HS2 when Curzon Street Station opens.

By providing a viable alternative to travel by road, these stations will also deliver journey time and environmental benefits through reducing congestion on the highway network. This means that benefits will be enjoyed by travellers who do not use the rail network.

As well as the benefits delivered by the scheme on completion, the contractors for the scheme have also made significant social value commitments, including provision of employment and training opportunities for local residents. The scheme is anticipated to generate 120 jobs during construction, aside from the wider economic benefits.

The case for the scheme was underlined during the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) process discussed below. The public interest case for the scheme was a fundamental element of the case for the WMCA CPO, and the planning inspector identified the strong public interest case for these schemes to proceed in his determination.

3.4 Progress to date & risks

Walsall Council granted planning permission with conditions in October 2020, enabling us to move forward with further approvals. WMCA approved the Full Business Case for the project in January 2021, with DfT funding approved in March 2021.

The challenges outlined below meant that further work was required before a contract could be let to our principal contractor, Buckingham Group. To mitigate this impact, we agreed a mechanism to allow for some initial work to take place before the full award. The contracts were signed in Spring 2022, and since then a range of approvals and physical works have taken place, including:

- Diversion of the Birmingham – Crewe West Midlands Trains service to follow the proposed route
- Compound site set up and de-vegetation at Darlaston
- Planning permission (with conditions) granted
- Substantial de-vegetation and Japanese Knotweed Removal in Willenhall
- Survey works including invasive mining surveys/ground investigation works at both sites, required to inform the next stage of designs
- Demolition of buildings at Darlaston

Land

In order to construct the stations, complex and lengthy land negotiations have been required at both Willenhall and Darlaston. We seek to acquire all land through negotiated agreement, and have been successful in doing so in the vast majority of cases, despite challenges including the need for one business owner to secure additional EU permits which delayed completion of a key deal.

Nevertheless, as previously briefed, the project needed to pursue a CPO to secure all the land required. Whilst this introduced some delay, it was essential to ensure that we secured good value for money for the public purse. WMCA agreed to pursue a CPO in November 2021, and we believe this to be the first time a Combined Authority has used its powers in this way. Following an inquiry in July 2022, the CPO was confirmed in September 2022. The rapid confirmation of the CPO underlines the strong case for these schemes.

Further land deals are under negotiation and are dependent on managing the interface between station development and the landowner's development aspirations.

As we develop the designs further, there remains a risk that further land is required. We are mitigating this risk by engaging actively with landowners and Network Rail and assessing a range of design options.

Ground conditions

Ground conditions remain a significant risk to the project. This area of the Black Country was historically highly industrialised with activities including coal mining

and manufacturing. This means ground conditions are challenging because of contamination from industry, and the need to remediate mine workings to address the risk of subsidence and collapse. Although complex this is critical to ensure that the stations can operate safely in the long term.

The main activity required is grouting, a process in which historic mine workings are filled with material to stabilise the ground. The scope had originally been contained to the areas under the new platforms, however re-assessment by Network Rail has led to a significant increase in scope and risk. Now it has been established that we need to grout under the tracks as well as the platforms, and treat deeper mine seams.

The under-track grouting in particular poses further risk as we anticipate it cannot be undertaken during train operations. Currently we are working with Network Rail on a plan for an extended blockade in Spring 2023 which may allow for some of this work to be undertaken.

We are continuing to work on this challenge with our designers and Network Rail to reach a solution which offers the right balance of intervention and benefit.

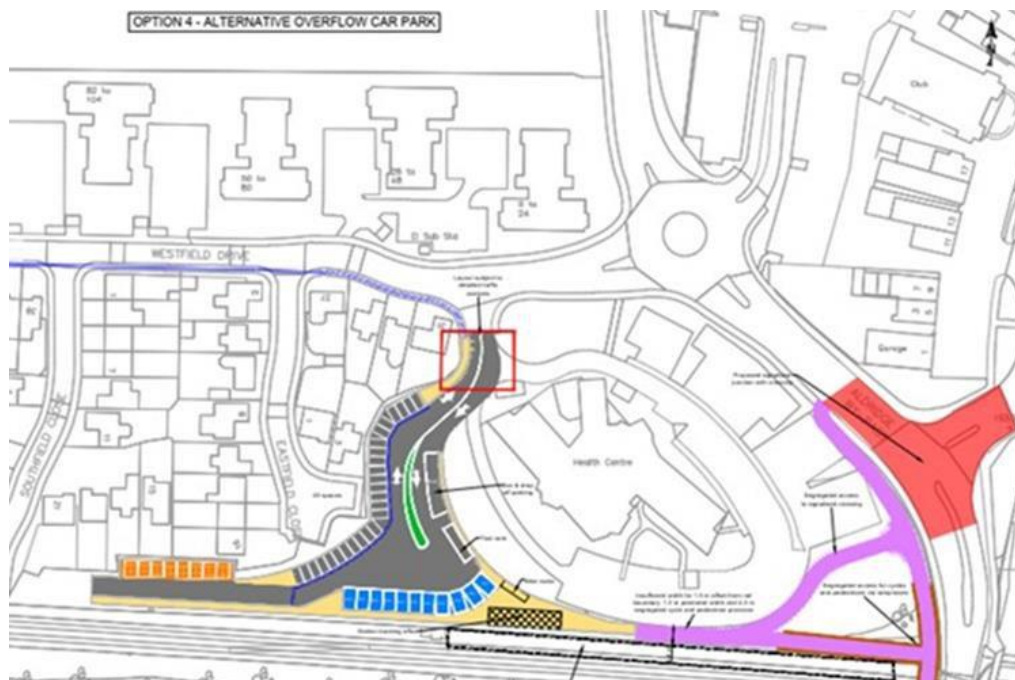
3.5 Next Steps

We have committed previously to target opening dates of early-2024 for Willenhall Station and summer 2024 for Darlaston Station. Work is progressing on these projects with our principal contractors preparing for major works this spring. Like on all projects we are encountering emerging risks and are in the process of working through these.

3.6 Aldridge

The Aldridge project is at a much earlier stage of development than the Package 1 scheme, with a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) currently being revised for approval.

This project will see a new station delivered on the site of the historic Aldridge Station, which was again closed in the 1960s. The proposed scope is for a single platform station with parking and new pedestrian connections into the nearby town centre. Reopening rail services would deliver accessibility improvements for residents who are currently forced to rely on the road network to access key local and regional centres.



Indicative Aldridge Station layout

The line on which Aldridge Station would be located, the Sutton Park Line, is currently not electrified and we have been working with Network Rail to establish how this links with the proposed Aldridge Station project. At the moment any electrification plans would not be complete within the same timescales as the station. We are therefore developing plans to futureproof the station for future electrification.

This also has an impact on the proposed train service. Prior to electrification it is proposed that Aldridge be served by a shuttle to Walsall. This would provide a simple cross-platform interchange at Walsall to allow connections to Birmingham New Street. Following the electrification of the Sutton Park Line, services could run directly between Aldridge and Birmingham New Street.

£30m has been allotted to Aldridge from the DfT City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement. We have prepared a business case to enable us to draw down the first tranche of this funding from DfT to allow the next stage of design to start and we hope to receive approval by Spring.

We aim to complete the project within the lifecycle of the current funding, by March 2027. We are working with DfT and Network Rail to identify lessons learned and opportunities to accelerate project delivery.

4. Financial information

The current estimate for Willenhall and Darlaston Stations is £55.84m.

This is fully funded on the basis set out below:

Funding Source	Rail Package 1 £m
WMCA Investment Programme	16
Walsall MBC	0.2
DfT: Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline	39.7
GRAND TOTAL	55.84

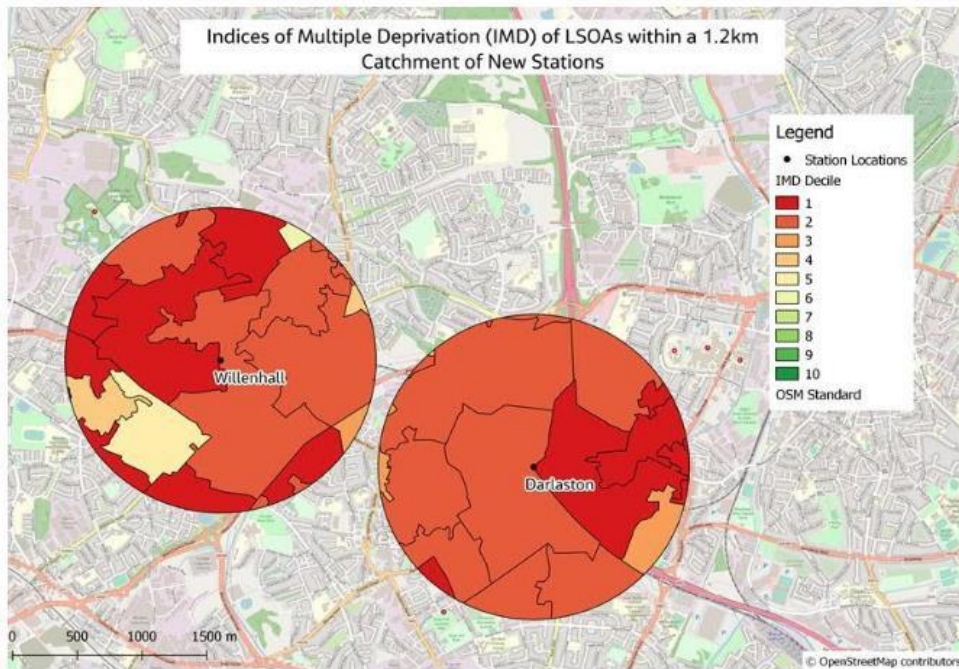
A detailed estimate for Aldridge will be established as part of the next phase of work. However we expect this project to be brought in within the £30m funding envelope identified in CRSTS.

5. Reducing Inequalities

Delivery of the stations at Willenhall and Darlaston delivers strong public benefits to some of the West Midlands' most deprived communities. By delivering a step-change in transport connectivity both in terms of accessibility and connectivity, the scheme will transform people's opportunities to access work, education and leisure, as well as widening about market access for local employers.

The map below shows the high levels of deprivation currently experienced in the areas surrounding the stations. Currently these communities have poor transport connectivity to the West Midlands' major urban centres.

One of West Midlands Combined Authority's priorities is to support inclusive growth, ensuring that economic growth benefits all citizens across the region. By ensuring that the stations we deliver will be accessible to all travellers, meeting stringent requirements for access by people with reduced mobility, the provision of the two new stations will support WMCA's objectives for inclusive growth by enabling more people to travel.



6. Decide

The report is presented primarily for information and noting with no decisions at this juncture.

7. Respond

WMRE are excited by the benefits that these new stations will delivery. WMRE and Walsall Council officers welcome feedback from the Scrutiny Committee about how best to engage with local communities as we take the projects forward.

Background papers

None.

Author

Hayley Bradbury & Liam Brooker
West Midlands Rail Programme

APPENDIX 1: Artist Impressions



Willenhall station



Darlaston station