



Friends of WALKDEN station

LOCAL TRANSPORT
PLAN 3

Response to GMITA
Consultation

November 2010

Foreword

This document has been compiled by the Friends of Walkden Station (FOWS) in response to the consultation process regarding the third Greater Manchester Local Transport Plan. We hope that this will prove to be a useful contribution to the debate surrounding the way forward for this important process and how its development may affect the longer term future of services along the Walkden-Atherton line. It sets out to provide a vision of how Walkden Station can continue to prosper and fulfill its potential as an important point in the Manchester heavy rail network, and our suggestions as to how this can be achieved in a sustainable and affordable way, as part of a fully integrated public transport system.

About FOWS

FOWS was founded in February 2007 by volunteers determined to improve services and facilities at Walkden station. Our long term strategy focuses on three main goals:-

- making practical, environmental improvements
- lobbying for infrastructure and service enhancements
- raising the status and profile of the station within the community

We are a proactive and enthusiastic organisation, working in partnership with local stakeholders to work towards these goals.

FOWS continues to lobby for further improvements to the station and its services. We strongly supported the recent launch of Sunday services and have promoted them in the wider community through our station Gala and other projects. We will continue to work towards a better station environment and service improvements through a variety of initiatives, for the benefit of the station and its users.

Our Vision

FOWS wishes to see the development of the Walkden-Atherton line in future years through a series of affordable and sustainable enhancements to services and facilities, providing a more frequent service to a wider range of destinations, seven days a week. This will ensure that strong passenger and revenue growth continues, with the consequential economic and environmental benefits to the community.

We strongly believe that the line should be developed as an important heavy rail corridor, with much improved connectivity to other rail services and other transport modes.

LTP3 Core Objectives

Walkden station serves a large and diverse catchment area. As the local rail network was cut back severely in the 1960s, neighbouring communities which were once rail connected now rely on Walkden as their local railhead. The catchment area includes areas which still suffer from deprivation to differing degrees, exacerbated by the effects of recession, as well as areas of relatively high car ownership and use.

Walkden serves areas of the conurbation which would hugely benefit from greater social inclusion provided by the delivery of initiatives identified by the Greater Manchester Strategy. FOWS response sets out our view as to how improved rail services can contribute to this process, in accordance with the following key priority:-

- developing our transport system, to best support economic growth, social well-being, environmental improvement and better public health across Greater Manchester.

Improving services will promote greater social inclusion to improve standards of living in more deprived areas. Provision of high quality public transport will help attract existing car users to rail services in particular, thus enabling modal shift, reducing vehicle emissions and contributing to the development of a low carbon local economy. The improvement of rail services will therefore have a very positive effect right across the catchment area. This will help the regeneration of Walkden and surrounding areas.

LTP3 Objectives – Issues and Solutions

With reference to the LTP3 Draft Strategy, paragraph 2.1.4, the plan needs to support economic growth in Greater Manchester via a series of strategic priorities. Unfortunately there are significant gaps at present between the service provision at Walkden (not just rail) and those strategic objectives. Taking these in turn:-

- improving access from residential areas, particularly those prioritised for housing growth, to key education and employment

areas: particularly the Regional Centre, town centres, Trafford Park and other strategic employment sites

Access to the regional centre needs to be much improved. The current service from Walkden offers good connections to Victoria and also to Wigan but leaves no direct service to the rest of the regional centre, where many of the education and employment areas are located. A key service improvement required at Walkden is to plug this gap by introducing services serving Piccadilly and Oxford Road, in order to provide access to the Universities, Manchester Royal Infirmary and other healthcare provision such as the Childrens' Hospital and the various employment areas and entertainment venues in this part of Manchester. Victoria is well connected for shopping and to some employment areas, as is Salford Central with its proximity to the Spinningfields development, but access to education and healthcare facilities is more important to promoting social inclusion than easy access to city centre shopping. Many residents will work in town centres but need to access the facilities on the southern side of the city centre, currently they will face an inconvenient and indirect service which is particularly poor outside normal working hours, and those with access to a car are more likely to choose to drive.

- improving surface access to Manchester Airport

Access to Manchester Airport is a major problem for Walkden and surrounding communities as rail links are so poor. More often than not journeys to the Airport from Walkden involve either two changes at Salford Crescent and Piccadilly or long waits of 20 minutes or more at Salford Crescent. The only practical solution for many to access the airport is to drive or take a taxi. A direct service from Walkden to Manchester Airport would not only resolve this but also provide the direct connections to Piccadilly and Oxford Road that are greatly needed. This would transform a journey which can currently take far longer than it should, especially evenings and weekends, into one which people would choose to use over the alternative of a car or taxi journey along the most congested stretch of the M60.

Without these improvements it is quite conceivable that the Walkden corridor would be left with the worst connectivity to the Airport of any part of the conurbation as the Northern Hub project makes provision for direct services from Rochdale and the Calder Valley. Some years ago Walkden had direct bus links (service 500) with the Airport but these have long since been withdrawn.

- improving the efficiency and reliability of transport networks

Improvements to the pinch points on the local rail network are needed to improve punctuality and reliability. In particular lack of capacity at Salford Crescent leads to delays waiting for paths into the station from both directions for Walkden line trains. For services to run more efficiently (trains waiting for several minutes at signals is neither carbon friendly nor attractive to passengers) some major work will be required to increase capacity at Salford Crescent, and also at Victoria. FOWS acknowledge that such improvements are expensive and take time to implement, and we hope that they will be delivered as part of Network Rail's Northern Hub works in the next control period.

- improving road safety and also enhancing the personal safety and security of travellers on the system

FOWS welcome the installation of CCTV at Walkden station and the expected improvements to the system. CCTV also needs to be fitted to trains to enhance passenger safety and this would also encourage revenue collection on late night trains which is often lacking. Longer staffing hours at Walkden will also improve passengers' perception of personal safety, along with safe and comfortable waiting conditions, such as the reopening of the disused waiting room. A combination of fairly minor improvements could deliver a step change in facilities provided to passengers leading to increased use of the station and its associated wider benefits.

Walkden station is located on a busy road and adjacent to a very busy mini roundabout. Pedestrian facilities are not good, with no proper crossing for pedestrians to use, road traffic has priority. Added to this there is very little car parking available in the area, which acts as a deterrent to car users from using the station and adds to congestion and risk in surrounding streets. Provision of car parking is a major priority for the station if it is to develop to its full potential.

- developing an integrated approach to the transport network and travel demand management that helps to support lower carbon travel across Greater Manchester

This approach is sadly lacking at Walkden. Services are designed to be entirely point to point between Wigan and Victoria. FOWS believe that this is fundamentally the wrong approach. Lack of services to the Airport and to Piccadilly and Oxford Road has already been mentioned, but there are many other gaps. Connections at Salford Crescent are

generally awful, some trains are timed to just miss connections to Piccadilly (and where they exist they are generally onto Hazel Grove rather than airport services). In the evenings and on Sundays the connections provided at Salford Crescent are generally so poor as to be practically useless. Therefore those making longer journeys by rail mainly out of Piccadilly are likely to drive there rather than travel by rail for the whole journey, defeating the object of providing a properly integrated low carbon network. Pathing is clearly a major constraint during busy times (hopefully to be eased by Northern Hub work) but there really is no excuse for a lack of reasonable connections at Salford Crescent during the evening and on Sundays where there are no such pathing constraints. This needs urgent work to be done, particularly if Walkden continues to receive services only to Victoria and remains reliant on connections.

Further to this trains from and to Walkden suffer from a general lack of connectivity at Victoria especially evenings and Sundays. As an example trains from Rochdale, Ashton and Yorkshire are currently timed to arrive at Victoria just after the Walkden trains leave, leading to waits of almost an hour at Victoria with its lack of facilities. This is hardly what can be described as an integrated transport system. It will never be possible to provide connections from everywhere to everywhere else, but when working with mainly hourly services it is imperative that connections are maximised.

At Walkden station itself there are few convenient bus links, with most services a ten minute walk away. Frequency on the services that do exist has been generally reduced. Evening services towards Worsley and Eccles are not timed to connect with trains. There is a long way to go before rail users enjoy a truly integrated approach to services.

Solutions

Solutions to at least some of the issues affecting rail services at Walkden can be implemented at low cost. Timetable improvements can be made that improve connectivity without requiring extra resources, particularly at quiet times. In particular, we recommend that services between Southport and Manchester Airport are routed via Walkden and Atherton instead of via Westhoughton and Bolton. The Southport to Victoria service would be changed to via Bolton. This would, at a stroke, provide direct services from Walkden and the other stations on the line, to give access to the Airport and also healthcare and educational facilities along Oxford Road, and employment areas in

this part of the regional centre. Passengers will always prefer direct services and there will always be some reluctance to make changes unless interchange facilities are very reliable and of a good standard, which Salford Crescent in its present form certainly isn't. Bolton already enjoys frequent services to the airport and Piccadilly while Westhoughton is also served by Daisy Hill. Concerns about reductions in frequency from Bolton along the Piccadilly-Oxford Road corridor should be outweighed by the capacity increases that will come with electrification and longer trains on this route, with frequency increases possible with the Northern Hub. In the meantime some passengers can use Salford Crescent as an interchange, as all passengers from Walkden not bound for Victoria are expected to do now.

Improved evening and Sunday services will come at a cost, but they are becoming badly needed with severe overcrowding becoming the norm at busy times such as the run up to Christmas and occasions when events take place at the Arena. As a first step it is recommended that Sunday services are expanded to finish later as soon as budgets allow. Longer trains should be provided to cater for predictable spikes in demand outside traditional weekday peak times.

Network Rail acknowledges in its draft Northern RUS that longer peak trains along the Walkden line are a priority. FOWS welcomes this, and hopes to see this implemented as soon as possible. As the line will not benefit from electrification in the medium term, we are concerned that we will be left with ageing stock in poor condition and hence we are keen to ensure that investment in new and refurbished rolling stock will include a fair share for our line so that the quality of stock provided matches that on the newly electrified lines. We are keen to see electrification introduced on the Walkden line as soon as possible after other lines in the area are completed. Electric trains provide a low carbon solution to transport challenges with their contribution towards better air quality and generally better travelling experience compared with diesel trains. We are concerned that our line is set to become a diesel only oasis in the generally electrified network in North Manchester, with its associated disadvantages. Electrification would be expensive and a longer term solution, but we must set this against a 15 year background for LTP3 in which time we would certainly hope to see work completed. It is acknowledged that most trains to Walkden come from non-electrified lines beyond the city region such as Kirkby and Southport. Kirkby to Wigan has long been aspired to join the third rail electrified Merseyrail network, while the prospects for Wigan to Southport are unknown, but this should not stop the electrification of lines from Salford Crescent and Bolton to Wigan. As an example

currently most services on the entirely electrified Stockport to Hazel Grove line are diesel operated. Electrification of the Walkden line would allow evening and Sunday services and weekday peak trains that do not operate beyond Wigan to be operated by electric units, which have greater capacity than diesels.

Provision of adequate car parking close to the station is desperately needed and we would like to see this delivered quickly to address the problems currently experienced and their associated risks. Bus services which pass by the station need to be improved for better connectivity – for example buses serving Boothstown could be routed closer to the station. Off peak timings of bus services can be changed to allow better connections with trains. Better cycle facilities are also strongly recommended, this very environmentally friendly mode should be encouraged with work carried out to ensure cyclists can access Walkden station safely, with ample cycle storage provided and appropriate provision on trains. Many densely populated parts of the station's catchment area could involve a fairly long walk to the station but a quick and convenient cycle ride.

Facilities at the station itself are improving but much more needs to be done to present an inviting proposition for passengers. The provision of CCTV is a major improvement while the forthcoming installation of passenger information systems is another much needed step. Better waiting areas both on the platform and within the station building need to be provided. Disabled access is a key improvement that is needed and FOWS note that Walkden is high on the priority list which we greatly welcome. Not only will this allow disabled people to use the station, but also families with buggies and cyclists will benefit, leading to greater social inclusion and more station usage. Staffing levels at Walkden need to befit a very busy station that is becoming busier, staff presence reassures passengers and leads to a virtuous circle of greater station usage and revenue growth.

One of the biggest problems with Walkden station at present is the state of the platform itself. There are two fundamental problems, the first being the large gap between train and platform height. Due to the road bridge adjacent to the station the track can't be lowered in order to resolve this, so the only solution is to raise the platform height, either partly by use of humps or preferably wholly as a permanent solution which should be linked in with the accessibility improvement work. Secondly the usable length of the platform needs to be increased to accommodate four 23 metre coach trains. Network Rail's draft Northern RUS states that no platform lengthening is needed, but

this is not the case and it seems to have been overlooked that there is a need to reinstate a length of platform at Walkden (and also at Swinton) for which there will be a modest cost. FOWS would like to see this work carried out as soon as possible as problems are already being experienced with some trains being formed of four coaches but with two locked out of use, ostensibly due to the "short" platforms at Walkden and Swinton. The preferred solution from an FOWS perspective, to reduce costs, is to reinstate a strip of either side of the disused platform, with an area remaining in the middle which our volunteers will turn into a garden area to improve the image of the station (a similar facility exists at Moorside but is not in use).

Tram Trains and Metrolink

Tram trains are suggested in LTP3 as a possible solution for some lines in Greater Manchester. FOWS is strongly opposed to the replacement of any existing services with tram trains or Metrolink, however there may be a role to play for these modes in terms of providing additional services on new routes and alignments. The line through Walkden was originally a four track formation and there is the scope to lay tram lines alongside the two heavy rail tracks. The best option for this would have been to use the old colliery formation between Walkden and Ellenbrook to link with the former line to Leigh but this is now being converted to a guided busway which won't serve Walkden. It is difficult to see how tram trains or Metrolink would complement services in the foreseeable future and it is the opinion of FOWS that investment should be centred on improvements to the heavy rail service, increasing frequencies and the range of destinations, with longer trains, and in due course electrification. The Robin Hood line in Nottingham is a good case study where a tram line has been built alongside an existing heavy rail line but providing new links rather than replacing heavy rail services, with excellent results.

Metrolink has a role to play in terms of connectivity. The existing connection at Victoria provides a link to Piccadilly but this is a poor solution compared with direct trains. In practice the link would be used by passengers to reach the city centre with Salford Crescent being the choice to reach Piccadilly and Oxford Road. The second city crossing will improve the range of connecting options once this is built. As most extensions to Metrolink currently planned will be delivered by 2016, there is scope for innovative thinking in terms of how the network can be extended further. The former loop line through what was once Walkden Low Level is worthy of consideration as a tram or bus rapid transit line to tackle chronic congestion towards Worsley and Eccles.

It is noted that a scheme is being progressed to introduce a cross city bus network including links from Boothstown to Oxford Road, but again this will not serve Walkden so does not detract from the need to provide direct rail services between Walkden and Oxford Road as has been mentioned earlier in this document. The once busy bus links between Walkden and Boothstown and on to Leigh have been reduced to a truncated service operated mainly by minibuses so connectivity with both cross city and busway services leaves much to be desired, and this will not therefore detract passengers outside that immediate area from switching away from heavy rail to the buses.

Wider Area Connectivity

As pointed out in paragraph 3.1 of the LTP3 document, Greater Manchester is polycentric and transport planning needs to take into account not just flows into the regional centre but also through and around it for journeys within the area. Connectivity to Piccadilly has already been covered, which includes connections onward to places such as Stockport. Connections at Victoria onward to Rochdale and beyond, and to Metrolink, needs to be carefully considered, especially at times when frequencies are lower.

Local transport networks are also vital as a feeder to longer distance transport, most of which is centered on Piccadilly, including the all important services to London. Under the Northern Hub proposals some rebalancing of trans-pennine links from Piccadilly back to Victoria is expected but travellers wishing to access services to destinations south of Manchester and to places such as Sheffield will remain reliant on quick and easy connections across the city. As plans develop for longer distance services, and ultimately High Speed Rail, it is vital that connectivity from local services is not overlooked.

Affordability

FOWS recognise that we are in an era of restricted budgets and that this means priorities for spending limited available public funding must be carefully considered. We believe that substantial improvements to Walkden station and its services can be made at modest cost, to allow it to fulfil its required role in promoting a sustainable future for the local transport network in this part of the conurbation. Value for money must be maximised and relatively small improvements can result in significant benefits. Initiatives such as the Local Sustainable

Challenge Fund could help to deliver some of the benefits. Longer term, major improvement schemes such as electrification will be increasingly justified as passenger usage and revenue continues to grow. This then has further benefits in terms of its contribution to carbon reduction.

Conclusion

Walkden Station has the potential to play a greater role in meeting the future travel needs of its catchment area. It has the potential to promote modal shift and sustainable travel, to increase social inclusion and improve access to important facilities. Over a 15 year period the station, its facilities and services, can be transformed in an affordable way to enable these positive developments to be realised.

As a volunteer group, FOWS will continue to do everything we can to play an active part in promoting the station and improving the station environment. With targeted investment and improvements to rolling stock and service patterns the station can present a very attractive solution to the travel needs and play a part in improving the quality of life of local people. We believe the future can and should be very bright indeed.

For further information about FOWS and the work we are doing to help improve and promote Walkden station please visit our website:-

www.walkdenstation.org.uk