



Friends of WALKDEN station

**Response to Network Rail Consultation
Northern Route Utilisation Strategy**

January 2011

Foreword

This is a response from Friends of Walkden Station (FOWS) to the draft Northern Route Utilisation Strategy published in October 2010. It sets out our thinking with regard to how improvements can be made to services and infrastructure on the Atherton line in general and at Walkden Station in particular, in the context of the Strategy, its aims and timescale. This is in the context of likely constraints on available funding against a background of rapidly rising demand for rail travel.

FOWS supports the development of a reliable, affordable and sustainable local rail network using better rolling stock, with increased passenger capacity and frequency of services. Stations need to provide good quality facilities in order to encourage greater usage and promote modal shift with its consequential benefits for the local and regional economy and for the environment.

In November 2009 FOWS submitted a detailed response to the Northern Hub consultation. The Northern Hub project is an integral part of the development of rail services and infrastructure and a key investment for the next Control Period. It is therefore essential that every opportunity is taken to make the most of the improvements that this project will make possible. This response reiterates many of the themes of our Northern Hub submission as they relate to the RUS.

Service Patterns and Capacity

FOWS welcome the proposals to lengthen peak services along the Atherton corridor. This has been identified in the draft RUS (Gap 1) and certainly our experience is of increasingly overcrowded peak hour trains, often leaving passengers unable to board at Walkden. Longer trains offering more capacity is a practical solution to resolve current overcrowding issues and to accommodate future growth. However at Walkden there are also overcrowding problems outside the weekday peaks, for example at weekends passengers have been unable to board trains at certain times, particularly in the run up to Christmas, and also late evening trains out of Manchester can be very crowded. It is very important therefore that additional resources provided to increase peak time capacity are also available for use at other times to strengthen services where required, this makes better use of the assets and investment. Improvements in service frequency in the evening, and extended operating hours on Sundays, are needed.

In order to accommodate longer trains, the platform at Walkden (and also at Swinton) will need extending by way of the reinstatement of a length of currently disused platform. On page 48 of the draft RUS it is stated that platforms are long enough to accommodate four car DMUs but currently that is not the case (except for a four car class 142 formation and these are due to be withdrawn in the next few years). It may be that plans are already in place to increase the usable length of Walkden's platform in the very near future (which would indeed then mean that the assertion in the draft RUS will be correct at the time it comes into force) but FOWS are still seeking assurances about this.

It is noted on page 13 of the draft RUS that a timetable recast will be required once the electrification of other lines in the area is complete, in order to make best use of rolling stock. In fact the timetable in its present form is very poor, with poor connectivity at Salford Crescent into services to the Airport in particular, and at Manchester Victoria to and from services towards Yorkshire, especially in the evenings. A recast is needed as soon as possible to correct this.

FOWS remain of the opinion that the best solution for the Atherton corridor in terms of connectivity to Manchester Oxford Road, Piccadilly and Manchester Airport is to re-route the current Southport to Manchester Airport service via Atherton and Walkden instead of its current route via Bolton. There are other direct services from Bolton to Piccadilly and the Airport, while stations on the Atherton line have no direct services and poor connections, especially outside weekday daytime hours. It is an aim of the Greater Manchester Local Transport Plan and also the Greater Manchester Strategy to provide better links to healthcare and educational facilities (many of which are located close to Oxford Road) and to the Airport. Post electrification, Bolton will receive much improved services in any case. According to ORR statistics for 2008-09 the combined usage of the principal stations (Daisy Hill, Atherton, Walkden and Swinton) that this service would potentially serve was close to half a million and is rising quickly. The potential of services on the corridor to attract passengers to onward destinations is huge, as long as good connections are provided. The line should be viewed as more than just a commuter route to Victoria, although this will remain a key market.

Lengthening just two services (0800 and 0813 from Wigan) to four car DMUs would only solve a small part of the problem. We would expect given recent experience that most other peak services will become far too busy for two car DMUs during control period 5.

Infrastructure and Electrification

Currently much of the Atherton line is controlled by mechanical signalling which limits headways and requires the operation of a number of signalboxes. Conversion of the route to modern signalling systems could improve headways and increase operational flexibility as well as reducing costs in the long term.

With other local lines being approved for electrification in the next few years, FOWS are concerned that the Atherton line will suffer from inferior rolling stock and slower services. Although resources can only allow a certain number of routes to be electrified in a given period, it is hoped that a rolling programme of electrification will be put in place and that this will include the Atherton corridor along with the route from Lostock Junction to Crow Nest Junction. The line is important as a diversionary route and failure to electrify it will limit diversionary options both for the Bolton-Preston and Chat Moss lines in the event of planned or unplanned closures.

It is acknowledged that most services serving Walkden at present would still operate for part of their journeys on non-electrified lines even if the Atherton corridor was electrified throughout from Salford Crescent to Wigan Wallgate. In the longer term it would make sense for Kirkby to Wigan Wallgate to be electrified using the third rail system as part of Merseyrail Electrics, while the Wigan Wallgate to Southport line is not likely to be considered a priority for electrification, certainly not in control period 5. Even without these projects taking place, the current service pattern would allow peak services between Wigan and Manchester via the Atherton line to be converted to 4 car EMU operation, as well as evening and Sunday services to be EMU operated. Electrification would also allow the route to be used for diversions and would open up the possibility in the event of a major timetable recast of new destinations being considered such as services to Preston and/or Blackpool via Wigan North Western which could compliment services operating on the Bolton line. The likely electrification of routes eastwards from Manchester Victoria could also open up new service opportunities in future years. The improved performance of EMUs and their superior environmental credentials would mark a major improvement for the busy urban services on the Atherton corridor. It is a concern that with new train procurement only likely to include the bare minimum of DMUs in the future, our line could become home to old, unreliable stock approaching withdrawal as other lines benefit from new or heavily refurbished EMU stock.

FOWS would like to reiterate our opposition to any proposals to convert existing services to tram train or Metrolink operation. It is noted that this option is not mentioned in the RUS but we certainly do not see these modes as the way forward for the Atherton corridor.

Walkden Station

As route utilisation strategies concern the efficient use of network capacity consistent with available funding, our response to the draft RUS concentrates on issues relating to services and infrastructure which relate to the Atherton corridor generally, and hence directly affect service provision and capacity at Walkden. Improvements to the fabric of the station itself would not be of direct relevance to the RUS and hence we will not repeat them here. However the platform length has been mentioned, and is mentioned in the draft RUS, and also we would strongly recommend that the current problem at Walkden with a large gap between platform and trains is resolved by increasing the platform height at the same time as lengthening the usable platform.

Improved stations lead to greater rail usage, therefore improvements to station facilities (such as waiting areas, information provision and accessibility) will increase usage which then improves the business case for capacity increases in this and future RUS timescales.

Summary

FOWS welcomes the opportunity to submit our response to the draft Northern RUS and we request that our suggestions are given serious consideration. We commend Network Rail's work to improve services at Walkden, such as the lengthening of peak hour trains, and we hope that this will be the beginning of a programme of improvements which will herald a very bright future for Walkden Station and the Atherton corridor as part of a modern, efficient and sustainable rail network.

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