



Friends of WALKDEN station

MANCHESTER HUB

**Response to Network Rail
Stakeholder Consultation**

November 2009

Foreword

This document has been compiled by the Friends of Walkden Station (FOWS) in response to the consultation process regarding Network Rail's forthcoming Manchester Hub project. We hope that this will prove to be a useful contribution to the debate surrounding the way forward for this vital project 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 the line can continue to prosper and fulfill its potential as a key corridor in the Manchester heavy rail network, and our suggestions as to how this can be achieved.

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 acknowledges that the Manchester Hub affects a very wide area, not just around Manchester but across the North of England. We wish to see the Walkden-Atherton line play a full role in the further development of rail services as part of this overall strategy.

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, and firmly disagree with the conversion of the route to Metrolink or tram-train operation, should this be considered.

Key aspirations and how they could be delivered

Our suggestions follow as to how the development of the Walkden-Atherton line could be carried out in Control Period 5 and beyond. We are taking a medium and longer term view in the main in keeping with likely timescales for the Manchester Hub project.

1. Connectivity

Better connections across the network is a key aspiration. Network Rail state that “keeping changes to a minimum and making them as easy as possible will make peoples journeys easier and more comfortable”. Network Rail also intend to improve links between Victoria and Piccadilly (by installing a new chord at Ordsall). Linked into this is a desire to increase the use of Victoria – possibly by concentrating north trans-pennine services there (as they were in the 1980s). GMPTE in particular want to improve connections between the north and south of Greater Manchester (as southern parts of the conurbation are considered to be more affluent) and they also emphasise how important direct links to the airport are. GMPTE’s aim is that all journeys to the city centre and major town centres will be either direct or via one easy change (to rail, metrolink or bus) and that each rail corridor will have at least an hourly direct service to the Airport (which is easily achievable on our line by diverting the existing Southport service).

This ties in with a key aspiration for FOWS – that we need services not just to Victoria but also to Piccadilly and the Airport. With greater use of Victoria for inter-regional trains to Yorkshire and the North East and faster trains to Liverpool, direct services from our line to Piccadilly and onwards to the airport, and major investment at Salford Crescent, we could have vastly improved access to a whole range of destinations beyond Greater Manchester. Salford Central is already being seen as a key interchange point onto the newly electrified Liverpool line.

2. Service Enhancements

GMPTE estimate a rise of 38% in the use of our line – possibly increasing to as high as 58%. The North West Rail Campaign lists our line as amongst its suggested higher priorities for developing commuter routes into Manchester. The higher growth figures can only

be achieved by achieving substantial modal shift, particularly away from cars and onto the trains, but this needs:-

- More frequent and hopefully faster services
- Much better rolling stock with increased capacity
- Greatly improved stations that are safe and attractive for passengers to use
- Evening and Sunday services to cater for increased demand at these times

Two service enhancements can be implemented immediately – the introduction of a much needed Sunday service, and the rerouting of existing Southport-Airport services via Walkden and Atherton rather than via Bolton and Westhoughton. Bolton already enjoys frequent services to Piccadilly and to Manchester Airport, while passengers who may use Westhoughton can easily use Daisy Hill instead. This would not impact existing paths through the congested Oxford Road two track corridor and would not require any additional resources.

Looking slightly further ahead, services to Stockport and onwards to Buxton are of particular interest, as would be the continuation of Victoria services along the Calder Valley route. At the other end of the line, services currently extend beyond Wigan Wallgate to Southport or Kirkby. If the Wigan-Kirkby line is electrified as part of the Merseyrail Electrics network this could free that capacity to provide extra services to Southport, or ideally a new through service via Walkden and Atherton to Preston and Blackpool opening up new opportunities for off-peak travel in particular and enhanced connections to services operating via the West Coast Main Line and through Preston – it is acknowledged that this would require pathing across the WCML at Wigan and along the WCML itself.

3. Electrification

Now that the ball is rolling with the electrification of the Manchester-Liverpool via Eccles and Chat Moss line, pressure is growing to expand this to eventually provide a fully electrified suburban network in Manchester and other main northern cities. The general consensus is that Manchester to Preston via Bolton will be next. We wish to make our case for the electrification of our line, for several reasons. One is that use of modern electric stock is the best way of replacing existing ageing diesel units – they accelerate more quickly, meaning quicker journey times and of course are much more environmentally friendly. This would deliver greatly improved services on our line. Secondly our

line has been used as an important diversionary route and with the other lines electrified, ours also needs to be energised to allow it to continue to be used in this way. Thirdly, if electrification is done as a package it keeps costs down compared with electrifying lines piecemeal.

We are very concerned that if the Walkden-Atherton line is not electrified when others are we will be left cut off from the electric network. This may reduce our chances of developing services to new destinations, will lead to poorer journeys with old stock, and ultimately leave us vulnerable to tram trains or Metrolink conversion, which we are particularly keen to avoid.

With Government reluctant to invest in new diesel units, either new or refurbished cascaded electric stock will be needed to maintain quality of services in the future. Electrifying the Walkden-Atherton line will maximise operational flexibility and the line's potential. Services which operate partly over routes which may not justify electrification in the foreseeable future (for example Wigan Wallgate to Southport) could remain operated by diesel units.

Manchester Hub – delivering the vision

So how could the Walkden-Atherton line look after the Manchester Hub project is delivered?

To quote the North West Rail Campaign's excellent discussion paper here:-

"A visionary approach is required to create a rail service that addresses increased capacity through future growth and modal shift"

How will that be delivered for Walkden and our line?

- Continued investment in substantial improvements to station infrastructure and environment, including staffing and passenger facilities
- Greatly improved station access for cyclists, bus passengers and motorists and a safer environment for pedestrian access
- Longer, more frequent trains operated by modern, ultimately electric, rolling stock

Suggested service patterns with the Manchester hub development:-

- Weekday peak frequencies at least quarter hourly of which at least one should serve Piccadilly and Manchester Airport
- Off peak services every 20 minutes (including an hourly Piccadilly/Airport service)
- Half hourly services on Sundays and in the evenings – one to be an all stations service from Victoria and one Airport-Southport semi fast (or similar route serving Piccadilly and Oxford Road, for example from Buxton)

Post electrification trains would be three car class 323 or modern equivalent units, with six car units on the busiest peak trains. Diesel trains should be at least three or four cars at busy times, with all Pacers and early Sprinters replaced by more modern stock (for example class 165s cascaded from Great Western).

All trains must be conventional heavy rail units, not tram trains which provide mainly poorer standing accommodation, or Metrolink. The route is of strategic importance as a heavy rail corridor, and investment in light rail should be concentrated on developing services to areas not currently served (such as the Chorlton/Didsbury line currently under construction).

Conclusion

We hope that the issues and possible solutions discussed here will be a useful addition to the debate. We are seeking to highlight the potential of Walkden station and the line as part of the wider issue of rail development in and around Manchester and the North of England, not just improvements to the station itself. Major infrastructure enhancements (for example electrification) are expensive and take time to deliver, and we certainly do not want to be overlooked. The benefits of this investment will be keenly felt throughout the line's catchment area in better connectivity, access to regional centres and employment, and reduced congestion and pollution.

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