

Cabinet Member
(Reports to The Cabinet, to be cleared with
appropriate Cabinet Member)

Councillor C N K Browne – supports the
recommendations

Chief Executive

Legal P Endall, I Marriott – comments incorporated

Finance

Other Chief Officers

District Councils

Health Authority

Police

Other Bodies/Individuals

FINAL DECISION YES

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS :

Details to be specified

Further consideration by
this Committee

To Council

To Cabinet

To an O & S Committee

To an Area Committee

Further Consultation

Cabinet – 28th April 2005

**Trent Valley Rail Service Changes and the Proposed Closure
of Polesworth Railway Station**

**Report of the Director of Planning, Transport and
Economic Strategy**

Recommendation

That:-

1. Cabinet opposes (i) the proposed reduction in local train services on the Nuneaton – Stafford route and (ii) the closure of Polesworth Station.
2. Cabinet authorises the Director of Planning, Transport and Economic Strategy and the County Solicitor and Assistant Chief Executive to lodge the County Council's formal objection to the proposals, to carry out further investigations regarding the proposals, and to present a further report to Cabinet as soon as feasible regarding the outcome of such investigations.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 A local two-hourly train service has operated for a number of years along the Trent Valley Line between Stafford and Nuneaton with one train in each direction continuing to/from Coventry at peak times. The service is currently replaced by a bus service operated under contract to the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) whilst the upgrading of the West Coast Main Line route and the training of drivers on new trains takes place.
- 1.2 The rail service between Coventry and Nuneaton only is scheduled to be re-instated from July 2005 with a broadly hourly shuttle rail service.
- 1.3 The SRA is recommending as part of its West Midlands Route Utilisation Strategy (WMRUS) that the remaining section of the service between Nuneaton and Stafford and calling at Atherstone, Polesworth, and all stations to Stafford will be withdrawn and replaced by a very limited Rugby to Stafford service that may call at some local stations. Some of these trains will continue to/from London and the North West.
- 1.4 The WMRUS also recommends the closure of Polesworth Station.

- 1.5 A response to the WMRUS is required by 27th May 2005. The proposed overall response is a separate agenda item at this Cabinet meeting whilst this report deals specifically with the threat to Polesworth Station and the proposed reduction in train services between Nuneaton and Stafford.

2. The Nuneaton to Stafford Service and its Proposed Replacement

- 2.1 The SRA propose to replace local trains between Nuneaton and Stafford with a very limited service operated by new trains. A draft timetable shows three return journeys each day between Rugby and Stafford but there is no commitment by the SRA that these will call at local stations. The proposed timetable shows no services later than mid afternoon thus making the route unattractive to a wide selection of passengers.
- 2.2 Long distance services operated by Virgin Trains from Tamworth, Nuneaton, Coventry and Rugby will not be affected by these proposals.
- 2.3 The process of planning and introducing the twice yearly rail timetables takes approximately twelve months and involves a series of negotiations between the SRA, Network Rail and the train operators.
- 2.4 Whilst the Council is not privy to the details of this process, it appears reasonable to assume that the SRA will have participated on the basis of securing its future service proposals rather than taking into account any possible objections. It is therefore very likely that the SRA's proposals are being implemented and the onus is on the Council and other interested parties to take action to impede plans if this is considered appropriate.
- 2.5 It is understood that at the rail industry timetable conference in respect of the December 2005 timetable, the SRA sought the train paths for the above local stopping service and also an hourly inter-urban service calling at major centres such as Stafford, Nuneaton and Rugby. It is probable that the SRA has secured the appropriate train paths, but no definite information is available. Negotiations in respect of this timetable will continue within the rail industry for some months.
- 2.6 The SRA has offered further consultation but has said that, due to the continuing work on the West Coast Main Line, any improvement in services above three return journeys each day is unlikely before 2008 at the earliest. There are doubts about the SRA's long term commitment to making calls at local stations on what it envisages to be a long distance, inter-urban service.
- 2.7 The Nuneaton – Stafford services calls at a number of important Warwickshire towns that are rail served and should continue to be so. Growth in housing and employment in North Warwickshire and Nuneaton and Bedworth will require an effective rail service to meet local need and encourage further inward investment. Peak hour trains show good passenger numbers and some of these passengers would transfer to road should the proposed limited service be implemented causing extra congestion on local roads.

- 2.8 This report recommends that the Council object to the proposed revisions of the local Trent Valley services. In addition, there is an urgent need to start discussions with the SRA to establish the extent to which it would be willing to give commitments to some additional local station calls by the proposed hourly inter-urban service in the December 2005 timetable. Further, the timetable conference in respect of the June 2006 timetable is to be held in July/August 2005 and there is an equally urgent need to discuss with the SRA the potential for improving the local station service in that timetable and in the future.

3. Polesworth Station Closure

- 3.1 **Appendix A** details the section of the WMRUS that deals with the proposed closure. In view of the immediate concern over this issue, a technical and engineering report on the proposed closure has been undertaken. In addition, Counsel's Opinion has been obtained on the County Council's legal position, and this is discussed in paragraph 3.6 below.
- 3.2 The station has been temporarily closed and the trains calling replaced by a bus service as described in paragraph 1.1. During the temporary closure, extra work on the West Coast Main Line has resulted in the demolition of the footbridge which provides the only access to the southbound platform from the car park and nearby roads. The SRA now proposes to close the station permanently.
- 3.3 The SRA proposes closure on two grounds:-
- (i) The first reason is lack of use by passengers as detailed in **Appendix A**.
 - (ii) The second reason, although not directly referred to in the WMRUS, is the cost of replacing the demolished footbridge. This is estimated to cost approximately £1million and the SRA claims that this investment cannot be justified when considered against the low number of passengers using the station.
- 3.4 There is a risk that if the closure of Polesworth station is allowed to proceed it could set a precedent that assists closure proposals of other stations on the same route, including Atherstone - and possibly elsewhere.
- 3.5 Key to the future of the station is re-instatement of the demolished footbridge. This was removed without apparent consultation with stakeholders, including the County Council. A preliminary Counsel's opinion has been obtained indicating that lack of due process over the removal and non-replacement may be grounds for objecting to the closure under the formal procedure for station closures or through judicial review proceedings.
- 3.6 Further correspondence is taking place with the SRA to obtain sufficient information for the Council to reach an informed conclusion regarding the propriety of the closure proposals. A formal request has been made to the SRA under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 requesting the release of copies of all documentation regarding the matters referred to in this report.

- 3.7 There are, however, potential downsides to launching an objection:-
- (i) There is a small possibility that if an attempt to stop the closure is made, the SRA may seek to provide a nominal train service of one train a day calling at the remaining platform. This would prevent the need for carrying out the statutory closure procedure but leave a highly unsatisfactory service.
 - (ii) The SRA could also correct any procedural irregularities and then press ahead with the closure.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 The reduction in services to stations in northern Warwickshire will impact on a significant area of the County and make local journeys by public transport less attractive. A number of towns will lose the ability to access the wider rail network in any meaningful form. The proposed alternative service suggested is inadequate and it is recommended that the service reductions be opposed.
- 4.2 The closure of Polesworth station will adversely affect North Warwickshire residents. The closure could set a precedent for closing other stations on arbitrary grounds without apparent due process or where passenger numbers are low. As part of its formal closure application, if the SRA were to offer alternative public transport links, such as connecting bus services to other stations, there are no guarantees that these would be maintained in the long term, without the support of the County Council. For these reasons it is recommended that the closure be opposed.
- 4.3 It is also proposed to start informal discussions with the SRA to understand its position and seek to secure the best possible outcome for Warwickshire residents. The second recommendation to this report is specifically designed to address the urgency of situation and to enable a prompt response to the outcome of the discussions with the SRA.

JOHN DEEGAN
Director of Planning, Transport and Economic Strategy
Shire Hall
Warwick

14th April 2005

Cabinet – 28th April 2005

Trent Valley Rail Service Changes and the Proposed Closure of Polesworth Railway Station

L Stafford – Nuneaton

Key Issues

Efficient alignment of demand against capacity on congested routes and reduction of performance risk.

The local rail service between Stafford and Nuneaton was withdrawn around two years ago to facilitate an intensive period of Central Trains driver training, being replaced by a bus service. The SRA West Coast Strategy states that

‘options for small stations on this route will depend on the final availability of track capacity and the viability of through linking to London/Northampton/Rugby services’
see Section B2.4.1

L1 Options for Peak Services

Peak rail services were lightly used in the last full year of operation. As with the Stoke-on-Trent – Stafford peak services, the case for running local Stafford-Nuneaton services diminishes as demand for Birmingham commuter services rises. Unlike Stoke-Stafford, passenger demand at some of the intermediate stations does justify regional services calling in the peaks. Absorbing peak calls at larger stations in a revised pattern of regional services between Rugby and Stafford makes better use of peak route capacity and more efficient use of rolling stock. It improves route performance by removing a slow train during the peak.

Recommended Option.

L2 Options for all day services

The Stafford – Nuneaton service operated a low frequency service at two to four-hourly intervals with four or five local trains on weekdays and Saturdays. The corridor is heavily used by longer distance services and is to be widened to four tracks by December 2008 (see 6.2.1) to cater for future passenger and freight demand. The local service between Stafford and Nuneaton took around 55 minutes for the 36 miles, requiring considerable route capacity. It was largely timed around when reliable train paths were available. Usage was very low, as the table below demonstrates.

Table 7.4 Stafford – Nuneaton Local Passenger Journeys

Station	No of passenger journeys 2002	Total passenger journeys per weekday	No of local journeys to/from Trent Valley stations 2002	Trent Valley passenger journeys per weekday	Trent Valley passengers/ train (total of ten trains daily)
Stafford	1,176,380	3,795*	20,956	68	7
Rugeley Trent Valley	24,723	80	4,833	16	2
Lichfield Trent Valley	531,421	1,714*	3,628	12	1
Tamworth	535,778	1,728*	16,026	52	5
Polesworth	2,537	8	1,710	6	less than 1
Atherstone	7,539	24	3,029	10	1-2
Nuneaton	588,187	1,897	12,456	40	4

A number of the intermediate stations are also junction stations where a suburban line from Birmingham meets the West Coast Main Line. These stations have a moderate level of traffic throughout the day. Polesworth and Atherstone have far lower passenger usage although the latter may hold some potential for medium term growth. The West Coast Strategy considers the integration of the Stafford – Nuneaton local services into a new pattern of long distance semi-fast services. This will provide more frequent long distance services to Tamworth and Lichfield Trent Valley. The option examined is, as in the peaks, to withdraw the local service and provide services to local stations by this revised pattern of regional services between Rugby and Stafford, with the calling pattern reflecting the level of demand. This brings a real benefit. The minimal passenger demand means that no case could be made for calling at Polesworth.

Recommended Option