

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

PLANNING COMMITTEE

5th November 2012

**REPORT TITLE : THE REDDITCH BRANCH ENHANCEMENT SCHEME
LOCATED BETWEEN BARNT GREEN AND REDDITCH STATIONS -
CONSULTATION REPORT**

Relevant Portfolio Holder	Councillor C. B. Taylor
Portfolio Holder Consulted	Yes
Relevant Head of Service	Head of Planning and Regeneration Services
Wards Affected:	Alvechurch Hillside Tardebigge
Non-Key Decision	

Purpose of Report

To advise Members of an application by Network Rail Infrastructure Limited to the Secretary of State under the Planning Act 2008 which would grant powers to construct and maintain a widened railway between Barnt Green and Redditch and to recommend a response to the Examining Authority outlining the view of the Council on the proposals.

The scheme is deemed to form a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) as defined by the Planning Act 2008.

Any developer wishing to construct a NSIP must first apply for development consent. For such projects, the relevant Secretary of State will appoint an Examining Authority to examine the application. The Examining Authority will be from the Planning Inspectorate and will be either a single Inspector or a panel of three or more Inspectors.

Once the examination has been concluded, the Examining Authority will make a recommendation to the Secretary of State who will make a decision on whether to grant or refuse consent.

As the Project is located within Bromsgrove District, the Council is automatically an Interested Party. The Examining Authority encourages the submission of a representation from the District Council as this provides the Examining Authority with the views of the District Council from the outset.

The relevant representation period closes on 15 November 2012. After this date, the Planning Inspectorate will advise all organisations and individuals who are Interested Parties of the date, time and place of the Preliminary Meeting. This is a procedural meeting in which the Examining authority will set out how it intends

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to examine the application and will listen to attendees' views on this. At the end of the examination of an application, which will be completed within a maximum of six months, the Examining Authority will have three months to make a recommendation to the Secretary of State who will then have a further three months to reach a decision.

This report sets out the location of the Project, background, the elements forming the Project and the main planning issues arising from the scheme in order to inform Members.

Site and Surroundings

The nearest settlement to the proposed development is Alvechurch. There are two minor roads which pass over the branch line subject to these proposals at Station Road and Grange Lane. By rail, access is from Birmingham New Street on the Redditch Branch line with the nearest stations at Barnt Green, Alvechurch and Redditch. To the west of the proposal site is the Alvechurch marina which is part of the Worcester and Birmingham Canal network. A number of PROW cross the landscape.

The area is generally flat and low lying within the valley of the River Arrow which runs from Alvechurch towards Redditch in the south. There are few long distant views as the area is broken up by numerous hedgerows, trees and woodlands. The largest areas of woodland are at Butlers Hill Wood and Brockhill Wood both located to the west of the railway. There is some linear development at Bordesley to the east. The area is primarily agricultural in nature with some isolated dwellings and farmsteads in the area with the exception of a small industrial area at Weights Farm at the southern end of the site.

The branch line runs at or about ground level. It does not form a significant feature but is integrated into the landscape in this location.

Background

The objective of the project is to deliver the capacity improvements necessary to enable the extension of the Cross City Services between Longbridge and Redditch to increase from two trains per hour to three trains per hour by a target date of the timetable changeover scheduled for December 2014. The benefits delivered by the Project will augment the redevelopment of Birmingham New Street Station which is currently underway, with works anticipated to be completed in 2015.

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The Cross City line is the busiest route into Birmingham City Centre. Figures published by Network Rail show that by 2020 the Cross City line will be operating at around 115% capacity during the rush hour. This figure represents the number of passengers compared to the number of available seats during peak hours of travel.

The first station on the Redditch branch line is Barnt Green. At this point the line is twin tracked to allow one train to wait at the station until the branch line becomes clear. The remainder of the route is single track to Redditch. There is one intermediate station at Alvechurch.

To deliver the additional train per hour in each direction, the Project requires the provision of a new loop of track (approximately 3 kilometres long) starting to the north of Alvechurch station and progressing south to Redditch. The final approach to Redditch will remain single track. The Project also requires the introduction of a second platform at Alvechurch Station, together with facilities for crossing the railway at the Station.

Project Details

The project works in detail will comprise:

Work No. 1: the construction of a new permanent railway. This being a point 420 metres north of the over bridge of the highway of Station Road, Alvechurch, over the Barnt Green to Redditch Railway and running southwards parallel to the existing Barnt Green to Redditch Railway for 3470 metres. It terminates at a point 10 metres north of the under bridge carrying the Barnt Green to Redditch Railway over the highway of Weights Lane.

This includes widening the existing embankment carrying the Barnt Green to Redditch Railway on its eastern and western sides supported in part by gabion basket retaining walls; extensions to culverts under the Barnt Green to Redditch Railway; the widening of existing cuttings, in part, with retaining walls; and the reconstruction of culverts

Work No. 2: construction of a new station platform (and including fencing, lighting columns and shelters) to the west of the existing station platform at Alvechurch Railway station and immediately to the south of the over bridge of the highway of Station Road, Alvechurch, over the Barnt Green to Redditch Railway. This includes the construction of fences, lighting columns and shelters.

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Work No. 3: construction of a new footbridge to connect from the existing platform at Alvechurch Railway station to Work No.2, including stairs and lift accesses to the bridge from both the existing platform and from Work No 2.

Work No. 4: construction of a diverted route for public footpath 579(C), being a point on the existing alignment of footpath 579(C), approximately 14 metres to the south west of the southern end of the existing Alvechurch railway station platform. This proceeds northwards and then eastwards towards the railway for a length of 88 metres, being a point providing access to Work No. 3.

Work No. 5: construction of a diverted route for public footpath 579(C)

Work No.5a: construction of a temporary footpath being a point to the south of the existing Alvechurch Railway station platform, and proceeding southwards for 15 metres to join the existing alignment of footpath 520(C).

Work No. 6: A signal equipment building to be used to house signalling and telecommunications equipment together with its hardstanding, access and compound, to the west of the existing Barnt Green to Redditch Railway, to the north of Alvechurch Railway station.

Work No. 7: A signal equipment building to be used to house signalling and telecommunications equipment together with its hardstanding, access and compound, to the west of the existing Barnt Green to Redditch Railway at Butler's Wood.

Work No. 8: a permanent access road commencing adjacent to and west of the Barnt Green to Redditch Railway at a point to the north east of Weights Lane. This proceeds parallel to the railway on its western side for 127 metres north-west, before then turning south-west for 135 metres to join the existing track north of Weights Lane. The construction of a permanent access road continues, on the western side of Weights Farm Business Park and proceeds southwards to join the highway of Weights Lane.

In connection with the works set out above, further associated development within the Order limits comprises:

- (a) Electrical equipment, power supply cubicles, cables, telecommunications cables and equipment and signalling works
- (b) Ramps, means of access (including temporary haul roads) and construction compounds;
- (c) Embankment, aprons, abutments, shafts, foundations, retaining walls, drainage, wing walls, fences and culverts

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- (d) Works to alter the position of apparatus, including mains, sewers, drains and cables
- (e) Works to interfere with a water course other than a navigable water course shown on the design drawings
- (f) Landscaping and other works (including the creation of ponds) to mitigate any adverse effects of the construction, maintenance or operation of the authorised development as are described in the visual impacts report and landscape plans/strategy;
- (g) Works for the benefit or protection of land affected by the authorised development;
- (h) Works required for the strengthening, improvement, maintenance or reconstruction of any streets;
- (i) Temporary diversion of public footpaths shown in the footpath stopping up and diversion plan; and
- (j) Such other works, including working sites and works compounds as may be necessary or expedient for the purposes of or in connection with the construction of the authorised development as are provided for in the environmental reports.

The new loop, approximately 3.2 kilometres in length, will join the existing Redditch Branch north of Alvechurch Station, and will run to the western side of the Redditch Branch to Weights Lane, where it will rejoin the existing single track to the terminal station at Redditch. To accommodate the new loop, the existing Redditch Branch will be realigned. The site of the project lies between Alvechurch and Weights Lane within the boundary of Bromsgrove District. Weights Lane (which crosses the railway by the means of an underbridge) forms the boundary with Redditch Borough.

Where possible, the two tracks proposed to form a loop will be accommodated within the existing Network Rail boundary. The second track bed will be parallel with and at the same level as the current branch line. This will involve re-grading of existing embankments and cuttings, and also construction of a retaining wall. Where widening cannot be accommodated in the existing boundaries, permanent landtake will be required. There will also be a requirement for temporary landtake, which will be used to facilitate construction, provide temporary access and accommodate construction compounds. The existing hedgerow/ planting on the western boundary of the existing railway will be removed as part of the construction process.

The entire length of the loop will be served by Overhead Line Electrification (OLE), with single track cantilevers (STC) predominantly being installed to support the new electric lines for both tracks to a similar design to the existing, with the exception of the station environs where portal type structures will be

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required. Cable troughing will be installed along the edge of the tracks in which to run new telecommunications and signal wiring associated with the Project. A number of signals will be required to control train movements on the loop as well as the installation of two equipment cabins with supporting signalling equipment (one at Alvechurch Station and a second at Butlers Wood).

Temporary haul roads, to serve construction traffic, will be constructed at various points alongside of the existing Redditch Branch between Redditch, Alvechurch and Weights Lane. These will be approximately 10 metres in width, but this will vary depending on the location. Four construction compounds will be used for offices, and to store plant and construction materials. All temporary haul roads and compounds will be removed on completion of the scheme and the land reinstated to its current condition. On completion of engineering works and as mitigation for the removal of existing planting, a comprehensive landscaping scheme will be implemented including new hedgerows to replace those removed during implementation.

Whilst the majority of the works provide development to facilitate a widened two track railway loop, at Alvechurch Station the existing cutting on the west side of the track will be widened to accommodate both the loop and an additional platform. The majority of works that are over and above the creation of additional permanent way and the associated embankment or cutting works are therefore at Alvechurch Station. Usual infrastructure, including station signage, new waiting shelter, fencing at the back of the platform and lighting are proposed.

The new platform will be constructed with concrete block walls with concrete and granular backfill, the erection of a toughened glass and steel shelter, 1.5m high steel straight top fence painted black and black lighting columns to match the existing.

The existing pedestrian crossing (level crossing) that forms part of the public rights of way (PROW) network (definitive footpath 579) within Alvechurch station will be removed and replaced with a new footbridge within the station. The new footbridge will be dual purpose, in providing both a passenger facility to access the new platform and secondly as a safer diverted route of the PROW.

The footbridge will be constructed with two principal materials of steel and brick. The span and steps of the bridge will be provided in steel painted green to a functional railway design. As well as providing steps the footbridge will incorporate lifts housing constructed with a steel frame with a blue engineering brick clad with a flat steel coated roof. The lift provided at each platform will be utilised by both rail passengers and diverted users of the PROW.

Material Planning Considerations

The whole of the Project lies within designated Green Belt.

Paragraph 87 of the NPPF states that as with previous Green Belt policy, inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. Policy D.39 of the adopted Worcestershire County Structure Plan states that there will be a presumption against allowing inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Policy D.12 and D.38 of the Worcestershire County Structure Plan and Policy DS2 of the Bromsgrove District Local Plan are in general accordance with the NPPF in resisting development in the Green Belt unless the proposals fall within a defined list of appropriate development.

Members will be aware that the advice in Chapter 9 of the NPPF sets out the fundamental aims of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. Paragraph 88 requires that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt and the need to still demonstrate very special circumstances to override the inappropriateness in Green Belt. Paragraph 90 then refers that although new buildings in the Green Belt are inappropriate there are other forms of development which are not inappropriate providing they preserve the openness and do not conflict with the general purposes of the Green Belt. Paragraph 90 goes onto suggest one of the appropriate uses in the Green Belt relates to local transport infrastructure which can demonstrate a requirement for a Green Belt location. However, such development must preserve the openness of the Green Belt and should not conflict with the purpose of including land in Green Belt.

The construction of the new railway line and new station platform with associated facilities together with cuttings, embankments and retaining structures will in some places go beyond the existing railway boundary and into open countryside, therefore conflicting with one of the purposes of the Green Belt which is to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.

Having considered the scheme in totality, it is the view of the Council that the proposals constitute inappropriate development and thus consideration must be given to the existence of very special circumstances that clearly outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and any other harm caused.

In considering whether very special circumstances exist, the harm caused to the Green Belt, its aims and purposes as set out in the NPPF need to be considered with any other harm and assessed against any advantages to the proposed development.

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The words “very special” to be given their ordinary, natural meaning. The meaning of the word “special” include those which exceed or excel those which are common. The test in relation to Green Belt policy qualifies that meaning to the extent that the circumstances have to be “very” special.

Members will also now be aware that establishing very special circumstances involves a balancing exercise. On the one side is the extent of the harm to the Green Belt by virtue of inappropriateness and any other factors. On the other side are the positive advantages of the proposal. Very special circumstances exist where the advantages outweigh the harm. Members will also be aware that it is for the applicant to show why permission should be granted.

The applicant has put forward the following justification for the scheme:

- (i) The Project is essential railway infrastructure that is supported by and supports Government policy on sustainable transport, the improvement of rail services and to the promotion of a modal shift from private car to rail
- (ii) The new NPPF states that there is a presumption in favour of sustainable development of which a project proposed to improve capacity on the railway will go some way in helping the government in delivering its goals
- (iii) The Project will make a significant contribution to increasing capacity and reliability on both the Redditch Branch Line and the Birmingham and Gloucester Mainline
- (iv) The capacity improvement created by the Redditch Branch Enhancement provides for both additional passenger services commuting into Birmingham or Redditch
- (v) In the absence of a NPS, the Development Plan and in particular the RSS policies support the strategic improvement of the railway and rail facilities
- (vi) The alignment of the Order route minimises loss of openness of the Green Belt by following the alignment of the existing railway corridor and it is the least intrusive of the options considered reducing the length and extent of the loop whilst still delivering the desired capacity improvement outcome
- (vii) The railway corridor with improved landscaping will form a better area for informal nature conservation within the Green Belt that will, to some extent, mitigate its impact by making a positive contribution to one of the purposes of the Green Belt.

Members will be aware that the policy of a presumption in favour of sustainable development is at the heart of in the NPPF, it emphasises that it should be seen

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as a golden thread running through plan making and decision-making. It suggests that patterns of growth should make the best use of public transport and focus development which are or can be made sustainable. The objective is to reduce the need for travel and, secondly, to encourage a modal shift towards more sustainable forms of transport. Sustainability also relates to the need to create an environment for economic growth. The railway is generally recognised as being a more sustainable transport system than the private car. To achieve a modal shift primarily from the private car to trains, the railway system needs to be made more attractive to users in terms of both reliability and capacity.

Other Development Plan Considerations

The Redditch Branch Enhancement contributes to achieving the policies of the RSS in that Policy RR1 recognises the role of better transport links both within rural areas and between urban and rural areas and that improved public transport should be a main priority. Policy T1 on developing accessibility and mobility encourages more sustainable means of travel and measures to improve the rail networks, Policy T5 on public transport encourages an integrated public transport network including improved rail services on key routes and capacity enhancements and Policy T6 on rail facilities that encourages the improvement in the attractiveness of rail transport including improved rail station facilities.

Policy T.9 of the WCSP states that support will be given to measures to encourage the use of alternatives to private transport in rural areas and to assist in reducing congestion in towns. This project clearly encourages existing car users to seek an alternative on the railway with the improved services that will be delivered.

Land to the west of the railway is designated as a Landscape Protection Area. Policy C4 and C16 of the BDLP outline the requirements for design in an area of sensitive landscape. The landscape impact and proposal mitigation are fully considered in the submitted Visual Impacts Report and the Landscape Plan/Strategy accompanying the application. This report concludes that the scheme will have a slight adverse effect on the local landscape character of the area whereas due to the intervening topography and large woodland blocks, the scheme will result in a neutral to slight adverse effect on more distant visual amenity receptors.

Whilst the development is entirely in the administrative area of Bromsgrove, the increased demand for increased rail passenger movements will primarily come from Redditch and residents travelling to Birmingham. The Redditch Core Strategy and emerging development plan documents are therefore of relevance

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to this scheme which currently in their draft format suggest some additional 3200 households in the period to 2026. Within Bromsgrove, the Core Strategy to 2021 suggests an additional 42 in Alvechurch and 98 in Barnt Green.

Requirements (Conditions)

A number of requirements (conditions) have been put forward by the applicant to the Examining Authority. These measures relate to:

- (i) Five year timescale
- (ii) Development in accordance with design details to be approved
- (iii) Construction Environmental Management Plan
- (iv) Landscaping
- (v) Re-use of excavated materials
- (vi) Details of necessary temporary and permanent highway improvements, access points and haul roads to be consulted with and approved by highway and planning authority.
- (vii) Written scheme of archaeological investigation
- (viii) Ecological Management Plan
- (ix) Mitigation measures for protected species
- (x) Noise and vibration monitoring during construction
- (xi) Fencing of trees and retention of identified species
- (xii) Removal of tree crowns
- (xiii) Scheme for temporary fencing
- (xiv) Detailed drainage design requirements
- (xv) Contaminated land and groundwater
- (xvi) An implementation plan dealing with the specification of and timetable for stopping up suspension and diversion of PROW affected by the works to be submitted to the Local Highway Authority

Conclusions

The proposal, whilst of a local impact, provides a key element in improving railway passenger capacity in the cross Birmingham services increasing capacity from 2 to 3 services per hour. In addition to the actual improved passenger movements, it will also reduce delays on the Birmingham to Gloucester Mainline. It will provide for additional commuter passenger services in line with the governments requirements for the delivery of improved capacity during Control Period 4 2009-2014 as approved by the Office of Rail Regulation.

The proposals constitute inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Very special circumstances which outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and any other harm caused have been demonstrated. These include that the proposal is a key

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improvement to the railway infrastructure that will provide extra capacity on the Redditch Branch Line and cross Birmingham passenger services, as well as improved reliability on the Birmingham and Gloucester Mainline. It is supported by Government policy in the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the promotion of modal shift from private car to rail. The design has been carefully considered to minimise impact on the landscape outside the existing railway corridor. As such, any harm to the Green Belt and other interests is outweighed by the benefit the Redditch Branch Enhancement brings.

RECOMMENDATION

- (a) That the District Council raises no objection to the proposed development on the grounds that very special circumstances exist to outweigh harm to the Green Belt by virtue of inappropriateness and any other harm. The Council endorses the benefit of the scheme in terms of sustainability and the connectivity enhancements for the District the works will deliver.

- (b) That the recommendation made by Members forms the relevant representation from the District Council to the Examining Authority.

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