

CABINET

24 MARCH 2022

WORCESTERSHIRE RAIL INVESTMENT STRATEGY

Relevant Cabinet Member

Councillor Alan Amos, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport

Relevant Chief Officer

John Hobbs, Strategic Director for Economy and Infrastructure

Local Member(s)

All members

Recommendation

1. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport recommends that Cabinet:

- (a) notes the details of the changes to the updated and revised Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy;**
- (b) authorises the publication of the updated and revised Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy including key changes for public engagement;**
- (c) authorises the Strategic Director for Economy and Infrastructure to formally approve the updated revised Strategy for adoption after representations subject to, in his opinion, there being no major or significant objections to delete, amend or alter the proposals as submitted;**
- (d) authorises the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport to consider any major or significant objections to delete, amend or alter the proposals as submitted made during the public engagement, to make revisions to the revised Strategy in the light of these and formally approve it for adoption.**

Why are these decisions important?

2. In 2016 Worcestershire County Council commissioned the development of the first Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy (WRIS). The strategy was intended to set the economic context for rail investment, inform the development of Local Transport Plan 4 and underpin the future pipeline of rail projects.

3. Investing in rail infrastructure is important to sustained economic growth, increasing rail capacity, connectivity and transport choice across Worcestershire and beyond. The outputs from WRIS provided clarity of intent and clear priorities for discussions with the rail industry.

4. The 2016 WRIS has been updated to reflect the rail schemes which have been delivered, the review of Local Plans and Government changes, including the emerging concept of Great British Railways and the impact of Covid 19 on patterns of movement.

5. The updated and revised Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy (WRIS2) utilises the 2016 strategy, updating the baseline of the current rail situation in the County, scale of growth expected, and identifies gaps and solutions to achieve economic benefits and prioritise the investment to achieve maximum value for money.

Background

6. Worcestershire is an attractive, thriving County of 605,437 people, set to grow by 2,219 new homes per year, and 25,000 new jobs by 2025 which will result in a £2.9bn growth in Gross Value Added (GVA) from £9bn to £11.9bn per annum.

7. Following the adoption of the 2016 WRIS, there has been significant investment in rail infrastructure in the county including the opening of Worcestershire Parkway Rail Station in February 2020, a new Kidderminster Rail station which opened in June 2020 and the submission of the Strategic Outline Business Case for the North Cotswold Line dualling to the Department for Transport. Cabinet have also approved the investment in additional parking at Blakedown station with a planning application to be submitted in 2022. Work is underway on further station access and improvement projects and to develop the business case for a new station at Rushwick.

8. Despite these successes, challenges remain, and further work is required through WRIS2 to address key challenges. Some of the challenges are as follows.

9. Connectivity to London and Oxford has been improved by the opening of Worcestershire Parkway rail station which reduces travelling time to London to below two hours. However, the limited frequency and irregular timetable remain. Proposals to enhance capacity on the North Cotswold Line, through the dualling proposed by the North Cotswold Line Task Force, would enable two trains per hour from Worcester to London and Oxford from Worcester and direct connectivity from Kidderminster and Droitwich.

10. Worcester city suffers poor connectivity due to restricted rail infrastructure, outdated signalling and limited historic investment in its two stations. Covid19 restrictions have further reduced connectivity from Worcester Shrub Hill to Birmingham outside of the peak times. Proposals have been developed for investment in Worcester Shrub Hill, including the reintroduction of services to and from the station outside of the peak hours. Network Rail has developed proposals to deliver new signalling in Worcester replacing the current semaphore signalling although further investment is required to support capacity enhancements.

11. Kidderminster, Redditch and Bromsgrove are well served by local services to Birmingham, but north Worcestershire has limited connectivity to London or southwards except through Birmingham. Covid19 has seen services reduced with these becoming longer term service reductions in response to improvements elsewhere in the rail network. Ongoing engagement is needed with the industry and sub regional transport bodies to reinstate these services as soon as possible.

12. Connectivity enhancements across Great Britain to link to regional economies including the South West and North West and the major areas of economic growth including the Oxford and Cambridge arc, East Midlands and South Wales through additional Cross-Country trains stopping in Worcestershire.

13. Station car parking remains an issue in the county, with a requirement for further car parking. WCC is leading on the provision of additional parking at Blakedown rail station, and is working on further schemes including at Alvechurch, Droitwich and Kidderminster.

14. Poor station experience for the passenger, with limited facilities, signage and connectivity. Joint working has commenced with the Train Operating Companies and Wychavon District Council on quick wins at Droitwich station.

15. New connectivity related to local plan growth and regeneration proposals including a new station at Rushwick as part of the South Worcestershire Development Plan review, Shrub Hill station regeneration as part of the Shrub Hill Quarter proposals and Redditch station regeneration as part of the town proposals.

16. Covid19 resulted in a 70% plus drop in passengers on the rail network. Some uncertainty remains over passenger growth post Covid19 and the impact of new working patterns, but as of week commencing February 13, 2022, National Rail passenger volumes were at 73% of pre-pandemic demand. Passenger numbers are particularly strong for the leisure sector whilst commuting has shown slower growth as longer-term working patterns emerge. The rail industry has undertaken longer term forecasts of the likely impact of the pandemic and currently expects 93% of demand to return by 2026 allowing for commuting patterns and business activity to stabilise post pandemic.

17. The proposals put forward for the future of the rail industry put forward in the Shapps – Williams plan and the emergence of Great British Railways, although welcomed by the industry, do create significant uncertainty and risk of paralysis whilst these proposals are fully developed and implemented. This could slow the further works identified without significant support from third parties including local authorities.

18. The updated and revised WRIS2 takes account of these challenges and proposes further work to achieve the goals for Worcestershire including increased services and connectivity and sets out a series of workstreams to support this.

19. The draft document, as detailed at **Appendix 1**, will be subject to public engagement in spring 2022 and will be adopted in late 2022 following any revisions arising from the public engagement.

Legal, Financial and HR Implications

20. There are no Legal or HR implications.

21. There are no financial implications relevant to the specific recommendations within this report, however, individual projects identified in the WRIS2 will require specific funding linked to the County Council's capital programme. A full range of funding options will be explored for project implementation including Government funds such as Levelling Up, developer contributions and partnership with train operating companies, Network Rail and the Department for Transport.

22. Alongside capital funding allocated for previously approved specific schemes, e.g., Shrub Hill station and Kidderminster Rail Station, a further £11 million has been included in the 2022/23 and 2023/24 capital programme for Rail Investment and associated parking requirements from council funding. Allocations have also been secured from the Council's Open for Business fund for preliminary work including feasibility studies and project development works. Further individual project reports will be considered in future Cabinet papers as part of the investment strategy for Rail Improvement developed from the WRIS2.

Risk Implications

23. No additional risk implications have been identified for this project

Joint Equality, Public Health, Data Protection and Sustainability Impact Assessments

24. A **joint impact assessment (JIA)** screening has been completed for this report. The JIA screening did not identify any potential considerations requiring further assessment during implementation of the WRIS (2).

Further detailed Joint Impact Assessments will be required as the individual projects are developed.

Supporting Information

Appendix 1: Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy 2022-2050

Contact Points

Specific Contact Points for this report

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Strategic Director for Economy and Infrastructure) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy 2017-2021