



Department
for Transport



Summary of the responses to consultation on the proposed closure of Norton Bridge Station

Introduction

The Department for Transport (“the Department”) has carried out a public consultation on the proposal to close Norton Bridge station. The consultation ran between 19 October 2016 and 3 February 2017 and the proposed date for closure of the station was on or after 15 October 2017.

The responses to the consultation have been considered by the Department. Following this consideration, the Department has decided that the closure of the station should proceed but in light of the representations and issues raised by individuals and Staffordshire County Council on bus funding, the Department proposes to maintain the part funding for the rail replacement bus services until the end of March 2019. This is to allow for the bus service levels to be reviewed by Staffordshire County Council in line with other local services.

Next Steps

The proposed closure of Norton Bridge station is now subject to ratification by the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), which is not automatic. If the closure is ratified by the ORR, the station will close on a date to be confirmed, which will not be before 15 October 2017, or four weeks after ratification by the ORR, whichever is the later. The Department proposes to end its subsidy for the rail replacement bus services by the end of March 2019.

Responses Received

Twenty seven responses to the consultation were received by the Department during the initial consultation period, including from Staffordshire Borough Council, North Staffs

July 2017

Rail Promotion Group, Friends of Norton Bridge, Network Rail, London Midland and the Diocese of Lichfield. The range of issues raised were -

Some responses commented on the accuracy of the background information provided in the consultation document and some of these on the events that led to train services ceasing to stop at Norton Bridge station during 2004.

Some responses commented on how the economic appraisal was set out.

Twenty two representations objected to the closure. A number of these proposed that train services be restored to the station in its current location, others put forward ideas for the station to be relocated. Some representations objected to the closure but with qualifications around the retention of the bus services and/or restoration of train services to Barlaston or Wedgwood stations. Comment was also raised by some respondents that this was 'closure by stealth'.

The Department also received representations expressing support for the closure, some with qualifications around the retention of the bus services and/or restoration of train services to Barlaston or Wedgwood stations.

Some responses raised issue with the fact that the closure process was not followed prior to the temporary cessation of train services in 2004.

Some responses expressed no opinion on the closure itself either way (neutral representation) but sought clarification of matters relating to the retention of the bus services and/or restoration of train services to Barlaston or Wedgwood.

Three responses sought copies of the consultation document, one of these responses included, and one was subsequently followed up by, representations on the closure.

A number of responses commented on Norton Bridge station but also set out views for improving the provision of passenger rail services in the local area. These included proposals for new stations and ideas on altering the train timetable. Although the Department welcomes constructive comments such as these it was considered that they were not relevant to the issues set out in the consultation so will not be commented on further.

Representations on the consultation document background information

Five representations raised issue with the statement in the foreword "The station at Norton Bridge was taken out of use for train services in May 2004 to allow for the rebuilding of the railway as part of the West Coast Route Modernisation project". Of the five, one stated that the station was taken out of use because the footbridge was classed as unsafe and removed, two commented that the train crew were needed on another route and two commented that Central Trains suspended the service after a request from the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA).

Department for Transport's comment:

The key purpose of the consultation is to examine the current situation and review options to either reinstate train services or formally close the station. We recognise that other factors in

addition to the West Coast Route Modernisation project may have influenced the decision to temporarily cease to serve the station by train services in May 2004 but ultimately it is the situation that has existed since then that we want to resolve.

Representations on the economic case presented in the consultation document

Two representations commented on the number of passengers stated to use the rail replacement bus services. Two representations commented that the stated local population number of 600 was inaccurate. It was put forward that Eccleshall and Yarnfield should have been considered in respect of usage at Norton Bridge station.

Department for Transport's comment:

The bus service usage was monitored and measured as best as possible with advice from Staffordshire County Council. We are satisfied that the population of Norton Bridge is a reasonable estimate of the local catchment area for the station given the range of passenger rail services envisaged and current demand for bus services.

One representation disputed whether the proposal complied with the Railways Act 2005 and the Railways Closures Guidance. This was due to the assessment not considering the closure of the station and retention of the current rail replacement bus services as an option.

Department for Transport's comment:

In accordance with the Railways Act 2005 the Department has consulted on the proposal to discontinue the operation of Norton Bridge station. In both scenarios considered in the consultation (closing the station and reinstating train services) it was assumed that the Department's part-funding for the bus services would be discontinued. This is on the basis that if the train service were to be reinstated the funding for the replacement bus services would be unnecessary, and if the station were to be closed permanently the funding and provision of the bus services should be normalised so that it becomes a standard bus service provided by Staffordshire County Council.

Following discussions with the Council, the Department proposes to continue its part-funding of the bus services until 31 March 2019. This is so that the Council has the time to consider the appropriate level of bus service to be provided going forward, including whether there is a need to continue providing bus services to Norton Bridge, Eccleshall and Yarnfield.

Overall objections to the closure and associated comments

Some responses objected on the basis that current demand at Norton Bridge had been stunted by the present position and level of service and that future demand could not be predicted if there is a significant population increase in the future, (for example, new housing etc).

Department for Transport's comment:

We have used data on local bus use at Norton Bridge and rail use at Stone to estimate likely use of train services were to resume at Norton Bridge. However, future demand for train

services at Norton Bridge is uncertain, therefore, we have tested the sensitivity of our analysis to different forecast assumptions. On page 27 of the consultation document we report: “the value for money conclusions are robust to different cost and demand assumptions. For example, if the platform did not have to be rebuilt and the trip rate at Norton Bridge were to be twice that tested, then the NPV is negative at -£4.2m.”

It was also put forward that Norton Bridge should be promoted as a Park and Ride station.

Department for Transport’s comment:

The station, in its current location, does not lend itself to this function as there is no scope for building a car park. Also the adjacent settlement is very small, and there is no housing development proposed in the area. Another factor against this is that Norton Bridge station could only realistically have a very limited train service that would not serve a Park and Ride function well.

In the responses to the consultation there were either direct references, or by association, to the temporary withdrawal of rail services as part of the West Coast Route Modernisation project and permanent removal by Network Rail of the footbridge which provided the access to the platform as being a case of ‘closure by stealth’.

Department for Transport’s comment:

The Department has previously answered questions raised by individuals and MPs on the situation at Norton Bridge. The consultation seeks to finally address the matter in a similar manner with the public being invited to provide their views. As set out in the consultation the station at Norton Bridge was taken out of use for train services in May 2004 to allow for the rebuilding of the railway and the provision of rail replacement bus services was intended as a temporary measure. We have now concluded that there is no case to reinstate train services.

The removal of the station footbridge was undertaken by Network Rail on safety grounds; the structure was suffering severe corrosion and the removal did not, in itself, mean that the station was closed permanently.

Five respondents suggested that the cost of the necessary infrastructure improvements works at Norton Bridge station would have been less if done at the time of the more recent works (as part of the Stafford Area Improvements Programme).

Three respondents suggested that the figures quoted in the consultation assessment for the necessary works were excessive, highlighting the comparison to other new stations (for example Fishguard and Goodwick), so therefore undermined the case for restoring rail services.

Department for Transport’s comment:

The key purpose of the consultation is to examine the current situation and review options to either reinstate train services or formally close the station. We recognise that other factors in addition to the West Coast Route Modernisation project may have influenced the decision to

temporarily cease to serve the station by train services in May 2004 but ultimately it is the situation that has existed since then that we want to resolve.

The Department assessed the scope of capital works at Norton Bridge based on information on the current condition of the station. This confirmed the need for a new footbridge, significant platform works at an isolated site, and disruption of services during construction. Unit costs and other cost parameters were sourced from Network Rail and other recent station schemes and tested the sensitivity of the results to a lower scope of construction works.

Fishguard and Goodwick is a single platform station on a non-electrified part of the network with the platform adjacent to the running line, and not requiring a footbridge and platform works, and so is not a valid comparator with Norton Bridge which is on an electrified part of the network and has a single island platform with a running line on both platform faces and further running lines adjacent to these.

Representations of support and associated issues

Network Rail expressed unqualified support for the closure proposal. Other respondents offered qualified support based around the retention and improvement of the bus services, investment in Barlaston and Wedgwood stations or the provision of a new station in the locality.

Department for Transport's comment:

The Department has engaged with Staffordshire County Council regarding the bus services in the Norton Bridge area. The Council has made a case for an extension to funding from the Department and we have agreed to support this by extending funding for the rail replacement bus service until the end of March 2019. This will ensure that the Council have sufficient time to consider and re-plan local transport provision in the area.

The assessment of options, put forward by bidders for the West Midlands franchise, for restoring rail services to either Barlaston or Wedgwood stations is still taking place so no further comment can be made on that issue.

Neutral representations

The station operator London Midland commented that as any changes to the service specification would take place after their franchise has finished, they were not best placed to comment on the future of services.

Other representations did not express any opinion on the closure but sought to put forward options for improving the local rail service, lengthening the platforms at Stone station or for new stations.

Department for Transport's comment:

The various options put forward, including those for Stone station are not relevant to the proposal.

Improvements to passenger services are normally considered through the re-franchising process or through initiatives put forward by operators. The provision of new stations (or the improvement of existing stations) can also be promoted by operators, local authorities or joint consortia. This may also be supported by the New Stations Fund which is managed by Network Rail.

Conclusion

Taking into account the consultation assessment and the responses received to the consultation, the Department remains confident in the economic appraisal it has carried out and has concluded that the closure proposal for Norton Bridge station should be submitted to the ORR for ratification. However, in light of the responses received to the consultation the Department proposes to maintain the part funding for the bus service until the end of March 2019.

End