

Metro extension to the Digbeth moves closer as utility diversions well-underway

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A West Midlands Metro extension linking Digbeth with the city centre has moved a step forward with the much-anticipated light rail route now in the preliminary construction stage following approval by the Department of Transport earlier this year.

The £227m Birmingham Eastside extension will help transform and support the regeneration of Digbeth through improving connectivity and making the most out of HS2. The 1.7km extension will run from Bull Street, in the city centre, to Digbeth, adding four new tram stops to the Metro network.

More than half of the route is planned to be free of overhead wires, similar to the recently opened extension from Grand Central to Centenary Square, and construction for the project includes urban realm upgrades for Digbeth High Street ahead of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

The extension was made possible following confirmation of funding from the Department for Transport, which has been topped up with prudential borrowing and a £15 million grant from the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP) to fund improvements to Digbeth High Street.

Today, Mayor of the West Midlands Andy Street joined representatives from Birmingham City Council, Midland Metro Alliance and the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP) at New Bartholomew Street in Digbeth to witness the work taking place first hand as an existing water main beneath the city's streets is upgraded and future-proofed ahead, benefiting both Metro and HS2 main works.

Mayor of the West Midlands Andy Street said: "Major transport infrastructure projects are critical to helping our economy bounce back from the coronavirus pandemic. Guaranteeing significant work for the construction sector helps to both create and protect local jobs for local people, and I am therefore delighted that we've been able to press ahead with the Eastside extension with residents now starting to see work become more visible around the route.

"This scheme would not have been possible without significant funding coming from the Government earlier this year, and I want to thank both the Department for Transport and the Treasury for backing the West Midlands and our plans to make major changes to our public transport network after decades of under investment.

"This extension will not only connect the east and west of Birmingham by tram, but also provide a direct route for many across the Black Country to travel directly to the new Curzon Station for HS2. This is just one of three metro extensions that are currently underway, along with the re-opening of old railway lines and stations, a re-design of our cycling network, and the introduction of electric buses."

Beginning earlier in the autumn, the Midland Metro Alliance, working on behalf of Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) have been busy assessing, upgrading and diverting existing utilities along Lower Bull Street, Digbeth High Street and High Street Deritend. The activities, most of which have been taking place overnight to limit disruption to pedestrians and the travelling public, are underway alongside detailed design work for the landmark light rail scheme.

Councillor Ian Ward, West Midlands Combined Authority portfolio holder for transport and leader of Birmingham City Council, said: "It's exciting to see this work become more noticeable in recent weeks. Those working and living in the city have benefited from the extension of the West Midlands Metro to the west of Birmingham and now those who travel to and from Digbeth will be delighted to see that this massive project is well underway bringing these same benefits to the east."

Matthew Rhodes, board director for GBSLEP said: "GBSLEP has committed funds to help Birmingham City Council develop the business cases for Digbeth High Street public realm. Realigning the Metro on the High Street and investing in the public realm is vital to ensure we not only create a space that focuses on pedestrians but also provide a world class corridor for public transport, including buses and new Sprint vehicles.

"As a key development catalyst, it's important we look at every aspect of growth in Digbeth to ensure the area is better connected to the city and to the HS2 and Curzon Street development. All this work will help increase investment alongside the Birmingham Eastside Metro extension. GBSLEP is committed to enabling inclusive economic growth and we see this area as a great opportunity to create jobs as well as a sense of place as we strive to make our city region the best to live in and work in."

The Midland Metro Alliance, the organisation planning, designing and constructing the tramway, has been keeping those in the local area informed of these recent activities via their dedicated Engagement Team. Further information for stakeholders and the travelling public will be shared in coming weeks as these key preliminary works ramp-up across the city centre and the east of Birmingham.

Martin Gallacher, project director for the Birmingham Eastside Metro extension, said: “Although many colleagues have been working remotely in recent months, activities for this extension project have continued on schedule along with important discussions with Transport for West Midlands and our construction team regarding scheduling further preliminary activities. Ultimately our aim is to develop the best tramway, in the most efficient way, for the city and people of Birmingham.”

Due to the complexity of the parallel work at the HS2 Curzon Street Station, discussions are currently underway to determine a suitable opening date that would benefit all parties. Transport for West Midlands will continue to work with HS2 and partners to complete the line as soon as possible.

The project forms the first part of the proposed East Birmingham to Solihull extension which will take the line further east through Bordesley Green and Chelmsley Wood to Birmingham Airport, the NEC and the HS2 interchange station. More information on the project can be found by visiting www.metroalliance.co.uk

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