

Plans to give Aldridge its own railway station move forward with £400k land deal

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Plans to give Aldridge its own railway station have moved forward after the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) agreed a £400,000 investment to buy the land needed to build it.

Bosses at Transport for West Midlands (TfWM), which is part of the WMCA, want trains to serve Aldridge as part of a wider upgrade of rail services in the Black Country which is already set to get new stations at Darlaston and Willenhall.

Aldridge had its own station for decades but was one of hundreds closed under the controversial Beeching cuts of the 1960s.

It is now hoped that two trains an hour could run from the new station to Birmingham New Street and Walsall, with an estimated 500,000 passengers using the service annually.

But for the scheme to progress, a parcel of NHS-owned land next to the Anchor Meadow Health Centre off Westfield Drive is needed to make the project feasible. The £400,000 funding deal means the purchase of the site can now go ahead within weeks.

The investment comes after West Midlands Mayor Andy Street asked the West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE) to draw up a business case for the station in order to secure the funding needed to take the project to the next stage.

The Mayor, who is also chair of the WMCA, said: "Securing this land means we can press ahead with our plans to give Aldridge its own station for the first time in more than half a century.

"Alongside Aldridge we have Darlaston and Willenhall, which will be the first new stations to be built as the Walsall to Wolverhampton line re-opens to passengers, and we are also exploring the prospect of having a new station at Tettenhall. All of these and more form part of our transport plan for the region, which is so desperately needed after decades of under investment in public transport.

"Alongside new and expanded Metro lines and Very Light Rail in Coventry, both of which are at the heart of our transport plan, new and re-opened stations provide better transport links as well as helping to drive economic growth. This will be crucial as we look to recover from the coronavirus pandemic and recapture the region's previous economic momentum."

The land purchase means a key hurdle in the Aldridge scheme can now be cleared but planning work is already well advanced on Darlaston and Willenhall as well as new stations at Kings Heath, Moseley, and Hazelwell on the Camp Hill line in south Birmingham. All five of these new stations are expected to be open to passengers by 2023.

The Aldridge station plans have received widespread support and the project is being backed by Walsall Council and the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (BCLEP).

Cllr Mike Bird, WMCA portfolio holder for housing and land and leader of Walsall Council, said: "Without this land we would not be able to build the new station so this funding is tremendous news for Aldridge and means the scheme remains viable.

"Having its own station is a major economic boost for any town or suburb and it enables local people to get quickly and easily to jobs or education opportunities further afield.

"That will be important in the coming years as we rebuild from the economic impact of COVID-19 and, of course, it will also make it easier for people to travel in a more environmentally friendly way, helping the region achieve its target of becoming net zero carbon by 2041."

The land being purchased was once used as the approach entrance to the old station and would be needed for similar purposes for the new facility.

Detailed designs are still being worked up but alongside the platforms, initial plans also include a 150-space car park.

As well as drawing up the business case, rail bosses are looking to develop a 'robust timetable' for Aldridge that will fit into the existing rail network.

Cllr Ian Ward, WMCA portfolio holder for transport and leader of Birmingham City Council, said: “Reopening Aldridge station would not only reconnect another town to our local rail network; it can also move forward proposals to get the Sutton Park line reopened to passengers. That would benefit other communities including Walmley and Castle Vale.

“Investing in our transport network is a key part of the region’s COVID-19 recovery plans and we are set to invest hundreds of millions in new stations, Metro tram lines and emission free buses over the next few years, helping to support our economy and our clean air ambitions.”

The original Aldridge Station was opening by the Midland Railway in 1879. In 1923 it became part of the London, Midland and Scottish Railway before passing to the London Midland Region of British Railways on nationalisation in 1948.

The construction phase of a new station is expected to create dozens of local jobs and once open will require additional rail staff including eight drivers and conductors.

Photo credit: D J Norton, Birmingham