

RAIL MINISTER SEES THAMESLINK PROGRESS AT ST ALBANS AND BLACKFRIARS

- Platform extensions complete at St Albans ready for 50% longer trains
- Construction of the station roof on Blackfriars Bridge has already started

24 August 2010: Rail Minister Theresa Villiers today visited St Albans station to mark the completion of platform extensions which will allow longer trains to call at the station from December 2011.

St Albans is the third station now ready for 50% longer trains as part of the Thameslink Programme, a £5.5bn investment which will significantly increase capacity across the 140-mile Bedford to Brighton route. The programme is funded by the Department for Transport and is being delivered by Network Rail in conjunction with First Capital Connect.

In total 12 stations outside central London will have their platforms extended – that's an additional 4km of extra platform and carriage space (twice the length of Luton Airport runway, or 34 football pitches laid end-to-end). The first of the longer 12-carriage trains will enter service in December 2011, with more to follow from a brand new fleet of trains.

The minister continued her tour of the Thameslink Programme by taking a train to the landmark redevelopment of Blackfriars station, where she was able to walk along the newly completed concourse for the north station and see progress on the new London Underground station and the new station entrance on the South Bank.

Rail Minister Theresa Villiers said: "Longer platforms like these at St Albans will allow longer Thameslink trains to operate, easing congestion and meeting future demand on one of the busiest rail routes in the country. The station being built across the Thames at Blackfriars will allow millions of passengers each year to reach the centre of London's business district. Today I've seen that progress is being made, and I look forward to seeing the future benefits that this significant programme will deliver to passengers."

David Statham, Projects Director at First Capital Connect said: "The Thameslink Programme has achieved much already with 23 brand new air-conditioned Electrostar trains, almost 5,000 extra seats in the rush hour and new routes across central London into Kent. The opening of longer platforms at St Albans is another key milestone as we prepare for the first 50% longer trains from December 2011."

Jim Crawford, Network Rail major programme director for Thameslink, commented: "London relies on rail to get more than three million people to and from work every day, which is why projects like the Thameslink upgrade are so vital to the capital's economic recovery. The Thameslink Programme will give passengers what they want – longer trains, more seats and better journeys. Crucially, it will help take pressure off the Tube network and deliver much-needed extra capacity on this important rail route."

The completion of the north station concourse is a critical milestone for the Blackfriars project, paving the way for the track 'switch' at Christmas which will see the tracks moved from the western side of the bridge to the eastern side. This challenging and complex move will create the new, final track alignment for the redeveloped station and allow deck replacement and widening work on the western side of the bridge, where the new terminating bay platforms will be built.

The station will close to passengers for eight weeks from 20 November until 17 January 2011 so this work can be carried out. Trains will continue to run through the station for the majority of that time, with Blackfriars passengers able to use nearby City Thameslink station.

When complete in spring 2012, the new Blackfriars station will be the first to span the River Thames and will provide passengers with direct access to London's cultural quarter on the South Bank for the first time.

The final phase of the programme is scheduled to start after 2012. Redeveloping London Bridge station will unlock the capacity to run to up 24 trains per hour in each direction through central London.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

Serving more than six million passengers every year, St Albans is First Capital Connect's busiest, connecting customers to London, Brighton, Bedford, Luton and Gatwick airports as well as St Pancras International.

Luton Airport Parkway was the first station to have extended platforms, with the work completed in December 2008. Work at Mill Hill Broadway was completed in May 2009.

Extending platforms is more complex than it appears and requires moving track with knock-on effects for over-head lines, rail bridges and signalling.