

Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body

Board Meeting

Paper C

Date **10th July 2024**

Title of report: **Rail Update**

Purpose of report: **To update the Board on progress on the Heart of Wessex Line Strategic Outline Business Case and set out the rail programme for 2024/25**

Recommendations:

The members of the Board are recommended to:

- I. Approve the rail programme for 2024/25 as set out in Table One.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Western Gateway Rail Strategy approved in 2020 provides the basis for the rail programme. Working closely with Network Rail and Great Western Railway the Western Gateway has contributed funding towards several proposals as set out below. Without this contribution it is likely that development work on these proposals would have stalled. The aim is to have business cases ready for when new funding streams become available.

2. Heart of Wessex Line

- 2.1 Heart of Wessex Line services run from Bristol to Weymouth via Bath Spa, Trowbridge, Westbury, Castle Cary, Yeovil Pen Mill and Dorchester. With some services starting at Gloucester the Heart of Wessex Line provides the Western Gateway with its north south rail connectivity. Historically the service level on the line has been infrequent and erratic although from May 2023 Great Western Railway are operating one train every two hours throughout the day. The Dorset Strategic Connectivity Study in 2022 identified the need to improve the Heart of Wessex Line route.
- 2.2 The Western Gateway has funded the Strategic Outline Business Case for an enhanced one train an hour service. The draft report presents a proposal for targeted investment to deliver a transformational change in rail travel across the corridor. The report finds that implementing a one train per hour service will significantly enhance local and regional connectivity, productivity, social

mobility and economic growth. It will provide greater public transport flexibility, reduce overall journey times and promote a modal shift to rail.

- 2.3 The preferred option is for an hourly skip stop service between Weymouth and Westbury. A new loop to allow trains to cross will be required between Castle Cary and Yeovil Pen Mill. Track signalling upgrades are needed alongside some bridge works. The preferred option, however, represents the minimum amount of new infrastructure required to deliver a new one train per hour service. Hourly services will not call at the less well used stations of Chetnole and Thornford. They will retain a one train every two hours service.
- 2.4 The preferred option has a strong strategic case and a Benefit Cost Ratio of between 0.69 and 1.83 depending on the demand forecasts used. A Benefit Cost Ratio of 1.83 is very good for a scheme of this nature. Capital costs are between £26.7m and £31.2m. There is the potential for the option to be seen as 'Phase 1' of service changes on the Heart of Wessex Line.
- 2.5 Other options including running services via Yeovil Junction and a new south chord were considered but the higher infrastructure costs, up to £63.48m, and disbenefits of longer journey times meant they performed less well. These options could be included in a future 'Phase 2' with further analysis of the benefits and impact required.
- 2.6 The work is supported by Network Rail, the Western Gateway, Great Western Railway, South Western Railway and the local authorities along the route. In terms of next steps, discussions will be undertaken with Network Rail on going forward to the Outline Business Case stage and reported back to the Board.

3. Programme for 2024/25

- 3.1 The proposed programme for 2024/25 is shown in Table One below. The Western Gateway Business Plan for 2024/25 allocates £150,000 towards rail.

Table One: Programme for 2024/25

Scheme	Details	Budget
Heart of Wessex Line	Continue to develop the business case for hourly services with Network Rail	To be determined
Dorset Metro	Develop the strategic outline business case for an extra train per hour Dorset Metro shuttle service between Wareham and Brockenhurst with possible extension to Swanage and the provision of a clock-face service between Weymouth and London Waterloo	£47,000*
West of England Line	Develop the strategic outline business case for a half hourly service between Salisbury and Yeovil Junction. Examining the case for four potential options; two trains per hour to all stations via infrastructure enhancements, Skip-stop (omit station calls	£53,000

	at Tisbury, Templecombe, and Sherborne), and focus on performance benefits of a Tisbury Loop extension without the associated service level increase.	
Electrification	Contribution towards the Outline Business Case for electrifying the Filton Bank between between Bristol Temple Meads and Bristol Parkway. Great Western Railway and West of England Combined Authority are providing £400,000 of funding.	£15,000
Wiltshire Strategic Rail Study	Potential to take forward interventions from the Study which is expected July 2024	To be confirmed
MetroWest to the South	Possible contribution to the West of England Combined Authority business case development for extending services to Weston-super-Mare and beyond.	To be confirmed
Total		£115,000

* £63,000 Dorset Council contribution towards the Dorset Metro work

3.2 Of the £150,000 budget £115,000 is currently allocated. The remaining £45,000 is likely to be required to support the continuation of the Heart of Wessex Line work.

3.3 Funding for the Wiltshire Strategic Rail Study and MetroWest to the South is dependent on spend on the other elements of the programme. Proposals will be brought back to the Board for approval. It is likely that both will need to be deferred to the 2025/26 programme.

4. Other rail updates

4.1 England's Economic Heartland Sub-national Transport Body and the Western Gateway have funded business case work to support the introduction of an hourly train service between Bristol and Oxford. This will provide improved regional and national connectivity and links onwards via East West Rail to Milton Keynes and Cambridge and potentially to Norwich and Ipswich. Emerging findings are showing the scheme will deliver very high and financially positive value for money. As no infrastructure is required there are no capital costs. Rolling stock for the service is dependent on Great Western Railway's Medium Term Fleet Strategy. When confirmed Network Rail and Great Western Railway will submit the Strategic Outline Business Case for Bristol to Oxford to the Department for Transport for funding. Timescales are to be confirmed. In the meantime the two Sub-national Transport Bodies, Network Rail and Great Western Railway will continue to advocate the case for the Bristol to Oxford service.

4.2 As previously reported to the Board feasibility work on a new south facing platform at Cheltenham Spa station has concluded. Whilst there is a good case for the platform providing additional capacity, wider network issues particularly at Gloucester mean the scheme will need to be taken forward as part of a broader programme beyond the remit of the study.

4.3 The Western Gateway holds regular meetings with the six Community Rail Partnerships across its area. Updates on the Western Gateway's rail work

are provided with the Partnerships doing likewise on their activities. The Western Gateway is the only Sub-national Transport Body to actively engage with its Community Rail Partnerships.

- 4.4 The Western Gateway's Rail Officer Group meets monthly to report on progress with the rail programme and wider rail issues. The continued input from officers from the nine authorities is greatly appreciated.

5. Consultation, communication and engagement

- 5.1 The Senior Officers Group, with officers from all the Western Gateway's constituent authorities, has been consulted on the rail programme for 2024/25.

6. Equalities Implications

- 6.1 Delivering the Western Gateway's rail programme will open up new travel opportunities, improve accessibility for everyone and contribute to decarbonising transport. No adverse impact on any protected groups is expected.

7. Legal Considerations

- 7.1 The Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body remains an informal non-statutory partnership.

8. Financial considerations

- 8.1 Department for Transport funding for 2024/25 is confirmed at £816,000. The Western Gateway's constituent authorities' contribution will be £180,000 making a total budget for 2024/25 of £996,000. The proposed rail programme spend of £150,000 will be met from this budget.
- 8.2 The West of England Combined Authority following Board approval in March 2020 remains the accountable body.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 The Board is asked to agree the recommendations set out at the beginning of this report.

Contact Officer

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