

Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body

Board Meeting

Paper E

Date **6th April 2022**

Title of report: **Rail Strategy Investment**

Purpose of report: **To update the Board on work on the Rail Strategy and revised programme.**

Recommendations:

The members of the Board are recommended to:

- I. Note progress on the Cheltenham Spa station bay platform scheme.
- II. Approve opening discussions with Network Rail on developing the Strategic Outline Business Case for Cheltenham Spa.
- III. Approve opening discussions with Network Rail, the Peninsula Sub-national Transport Body and the East West Main Line Partnership on taking forward rail corridor proposals.
- IV. Reduce the number of Rail Strategy task forces and use the Rail Officer Group as the main task force with ad hoc sub-groups to pick up other rail issues.

Introduction

- 1.1 The Western Gateway Sub-National Transport Body (STB) Board meeting of 19 June 2019 agreed to produce an area wide rail strategy. WSP consultants were commissioned to undertake the work. The final Rail Strategy was adopted by the Board on 16 September 2020.
- 1.2 Initially it was agreed at the Board on 17 March 2021 to allocate £65,000 in 2021/22 for a Station Audit study as part of implementing the Rail Strategy. The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail announced in May 2021 included a National Accessibility Strategy duplicating the work of the Western Gateway Station Audit. So at the Board on 21 July 2021 it was agreed to reallocate the £65,000 for 2021/22 to taking forward the outputs from Network Rail's strategic corridor studies with delegation to the Senior Officers Group to confirm the programme. As the funding for 2021/22 is limited it is intended that a rolling programme of work is set up with funding sought for later years.

Revised rail investment programme

- 2.1 Following discussions with Network Rail three priority schemes from the recently completed Bristol to Exeter and Bristol to Birmingham Strategic Corridor Studies emerged for potential Western Gateway funding. They are:
- Cheltenham Spa station bay platform
 - Gloucester station bay platform
 - Four tracking between Bristol Temple Meads and Parson Street stations
- 2.2 In all cases the extra capacity these scheme provide are the first steps to enabling more frequent services on the Bristol to Birmingham and Exeter corridors.
- 2.3 Given the limited amount of Western Gateway funding available for 2021/22 and the risk of spreading this too thinly agreement was reached with Network Rail for the Western Gateway funding to focus on Cheltenham Spa. Network Rail will fund development work on Gloucester station and four tracking between Bristol Temple Meads and Parson Street. As the schemes are interlinked and central to the Rail Strategy the Western Gateway has been kept informed of progress on the other two schemes.

Progress on schemes

- 3.1 Progress to date on the prioritised schemes is described below.

Cheltenham Spa

- 3.2 Cheltenham Spa is a scheme for a new southward facing bay platform. It came out of Network Rail's Bristol to Birmingham Strategic Corridor Study. The study identifies service enhancements and the infrastructure interventions needed to deliver them but with no timescales or funding.
- 3.3 The Western Gateway funding has enabled designs to be investigated and early development of the business case for the bay platform. The extra capacity it will provide will improve the performance and reliability of the station as well as being the first steps to enabling more frequent services between Cheltenham, Bristol and Swindon and to South Wales.
- 3.4 Two main design options have emerged – one for a 10 car (carriage) platform adjacent to the existing Platform and the other at an angle to and some distance from the main station on part of the former Honeybourne Line route. The option adjacent option is preferred as this minimises the interchange required and will not require additional gatelines and other station infrastructure. Work is about to start on a cycle/pedestrian link from the station south to the A40. This continues on the alignment of the Honeybourne Line trackbed which is an important existing link into the town centre (north) and in the future, south of the town. The alternative option potentially conflicts with this.

- 3.5 The station is not listed and is outside the conservation area within Cheltenham so based on the initial designs it appears that the platform may be able to be delivered under permitted development. It will also require further liaison with GWR due to station change procedures and potential loss of car parking as well as their buy-in for providing any new services. GWR were part of the steering group which endorsed the findings of the Bristol to Birmingham Strategic Corridor Study including the benefits of a new bay platform at Cheltenham
- 3.6 The draft report is expected on 31 March 2022. A verbal update will be provided at the Board.
- 3.7 In terms of next steps there is the option for the Western Gateway to carry on funding development of the Cheltenham Spa scheme to Strategic Outline Business Case. Approval from the Board is sought to open discussions with Network Rail.

Gloucester Station

- 3.8 Design work has looked at options for a new bay platform to the south and north of the existing station. There are issues with both options and especially for the impact on the nearby Horton Road level crossing. On the south side the disused side of Platform 1 would be brought into use providing capacity for up to 10 car IET trains. The platform would also be well located for the four trains per hour service between Bristol and Gloucester proposed in the Bristol to Birmingham Strategic Corridor Study. There are issues around the need to provide an incursion barrier due to the close proximity to the A4302 road.
- 3.9 Space is constrained on the north side due to existing sidings and land in external ownership although a short three car (carriage) platform may be possible as a lower cost alternative. Trains to and from Bristol would have to cross all the lines with an impact on other train services into and out of the station.

Bristol Temple Meads to Parson Street four tracking

- 3.10 Designs for the four tracking of the line between Bristol Temple Meads and Parson Street are at the drawing board stage. Four tracking will provide part of the additional capacity required to deliver the service enhancements proposed in the Bristol to Exeter Strategic Corridor study.

Westerleigh Junction and loops

- 3.11 Westerleigh Junction is a major capacity constraint for enhancing services on the Bristol to Birmingham corridor. Network Rail are currently exploring a range of potential interventions at and around the junction area which would address these capacity issues. These include smaller schemes, such as three or four tracking short section around the junction to large schemes involving grade separation or utilising the nearby freight line to the oil terminal

at Westerleigh. The designs being developed are at very early concept stage. This would be a major scheme of national significance and impact so this is for the industry and the Government to lead on. New loops to allow trains to pass each other are being looked at for Haresfield south of Gloucester.

Future Strategic Corridor Studies work

- 4.1 As well as the potential to continue the development of Cheltenham Spa and subject to overall Western Gateway funding for 2022/23 and the Board's agreement there is the potential to invest in taking forward the outputs from other and emerging Strategic Corridor Studies. They are:
- West of England Main Line (Salisbury to Exeter) - completed in 2020 with various proposals to provide additional capacity including Tisbury. With many benefits for the Peninsula STB it would make sense to undertake work jointly.
 - Dorset – published December 2021. Outputs include enhancing services on the Heart of Wessex Line (Weymouth to Bristol), a south chord at Yeovil Junction to connect with the West of England Main Line and a Dorset Metro.
 - Greater Bristol – draft study expected May 2022. Considering a range of options for the Train Service Specification (TSS) development based on how these best meet study objectives and stakeholder aspirations.
 - South West Main Line – includes routes from Woking to Salisbury and Bournemouth. This is at an early stage, final report expected in late 2022.
 - Bristol to Oxford and Oxford to Southampton via Swindon in partnership with East West Main Line Partnership.
- 4.2 The Board's approval is sought to open discussions with Network Rail, the Peninsula STB and the East West Main Line Partnership on taking forward these studies.

East West Mainline Partnership update

- 5.1 At the 21 July 2021 Board meeting it was agreed the Western Gateway STB would join the East West Main Line Partnership which covers local authorities and STBs from Swindon to Norwich. There are no fees for joining.
- 5.2 A presentation was given to the Partnership's Board meeting on 9 March 2022 stressing the importance of rail connectivity between Bristol and the South Coast to Oxford. From the Western Gateway's Rail Strategy and top of the list in Category A1 (new direct services that connect at least one national hub) are Bristol-Chippenham-Swindon-Oxford and Southampton-Salisbury-Westbury-Swindon-Oxford. Feedback received from the meeting indicate the presentation helped to raise awareness and interest in looking westwards from Oxford.
- 5.3 England's Economic Heartland who provide the administrative and technical support for the East West Main Line Partnership are currently undertaking a corridor capacity study for Oxford to Swindon. It is due to report in late

autumn 2022. Sensibly any work from the Western Gateway perspective on services to Oxford should wait until the outcome of this work is known. The Western Gateway is invited to take part in the study. It is proposed therefore that Western Gateway funding for development work is deferred until 2022/23. Discussions will continue in the meantime with officers from England's Economic Heartland.

Other Rail Strategy updates

MetroWest delayed introduction of services

- 6.1 Half hourly MetroWest services between Bristol and Gloucester were due to start for the May 2022 timetable changes and half hourly Bristol to Westbury via Bath Spa in December 2022. The introduction of both is delayed by the delay of Class 769s train into service on the Thames Valley. This is due to performance and reliability issues. In turn this has led to a delay in the cascade of the Class 165/6s trains which provide the rolling stock for the expanded MetroWest services. Train paths for the Gloucester service are in place for the December 2022 timetable. Westbury is less certain as a more complex timetable recast is required so the May 2023 timetable looks more likely.

Western Gateway Partnership strategic rail mapping

- 6.2 The Western Gateway Partnership has commissioned consultants to undertake a strategic mapping of rail aspirations to 2050. This will bring in aspirations from Transport for Wales, Cardiff City Region, Midlands Connect, the West of England Combined Authority and the Western Gateway STB. The STB is part of the working group supporting the mapping work ensuring the Western Gateway's Rail strategy is taken into account.

Rail Strategy Task Forces

- 6.3 The Rail Strategy recommended establishing five cross rail industry task forces to deliver the Strategy's conditional outputs for: Strategic planning, Digital Solutions, Station & Access to Rail, Freight and Future Ready & Resilience. At the 16 December 2020 Partnership Board meeting it was agreed that in taking the Rail Strategy forward the priority should be to focus on the Stations & Access to Rail, Digital Solutions and Strategic Planning task forces
- 6.4 With limited resources and other work commitments both at the STB and within the constituent local authorities it is no longer practical to take forward the three priority task forces. It is proposed to refocus and reduce the number of task forces and use the Rail Officer Group as the Strategic Planning task force with an ad hoc sub-group to pick up stations and access to rail and other rail issues. This will enable the use of officer time to be maximised, supports the strategic role of the STB and the importance of rail to decarbonisation, accessibility and supporting housing and employment growth.

Consultation, communication and engagement

- 7.1 The Rail Officer Group has been re-established with officers drawn from the all the Western Gateway local authorities. It now meets monthly. The Senior Officer Group has been consulted on this report.

Equalities Implications

- 8.1 No adverse impact on any protected groups.

Legal considerations

- 9.1 The Western Gateway STB remains an informal non-statutory partnership.

Financial considerations

- 10.1 For 2021/22 there was a rail budget of £65,000. The Western Gateway's overall budget for 2022/23 to 2024/25 was confirmed on 21 March 2022. A separate report on the agenda sets out the proposed STB programme for 2022/23.

Conclusion

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

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