

Western Gateway STB Board Meeting: 8 December 2022

Network Rail update

Industry position

Passenger demand has stabilised at around 80-85 % of pre-covid demand nationally, with revenue at a similar level of revenue. On top of the subsidies required since 2020/21 (in which passenger demand fell by 80 % and as a consequence industry subsidy increased by 100 %) and wider government finances this places significant financial pressure on the industry. Rail enhancements are still progressing but we await the Government's publication of the refreshed **Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline** and are working intensively including with operators to identify industry efficiencies.

As reported previously changes to the contractual model necessitated by the impacts of COVID-19 see the DfT owning cost and revenue risks, rather than operators. This development is in line with the Plan for Rail and its recommendation of a greater role in service development and specification for local and regional authorities.

Industrial Action

Industrial action is ongoing with members of the RMT, Aslef, and the TSSA (Transport Salaried Staffs' Association) planning strike action. The run up to Christmas will see disruption including particularly the week beginning Monday 12 December. As in previous cases levels of service across the region will be severely affected, and passengers will be advised not to travel.

Restoring your Railway Ideas Fund

All Ideas Fund SOBCs have now been submitted by their promoters to the DfT for consideration. Since the last Board meeting, we have supported Stroud District Council with the **Stonehouse Bristol Road** station SOBC and Wiltshire Council with the **Corsham** station SOBC. These now await assessment and DfT decision on further funding, alongside **Langport and Somerton** station, **St Anne's Park** station, and restoration of passenger services between **Wareham – Swanage**.

Work continues on the **Devizes Gateway** Interim Feasibility Study, which will be completed in March 2023. Network Rail is leading an industry project to develop the case for funding a new station at Devizes following submission of the SOBC by Wiltshire Council in 2021. Focuses are developing a potential timetable, and understanding the wider system requirements. The work is identifying the interdependencies with other planned improvements, and one outcome may be a case for a **Wiltshire rail improvement programme**.

MetroWest

We are working with partners to deliver the improved services across the Greater Bristol area in May 2023. These significant improvements include additional hourly services between Bristol and both Gloucester and Westbury, delivering improvements in two of the STB strategic corridors.

Work continues at pace on the scheme to restore rail services to Portishead following funding agreement in July. The line is still expected to open in 2026.

Strategic studies

Our *South West Main Line Strategic Study* (phase 2) considers regional hubs along the SWML including **Salisbury and Bournemouth** and makes recommendations for service development. The study analysis is now complete, and we are targeting publication in Spring 2023.

We have now completed the *Greater Bristol Strategic Study (GBSS)* and will publish a summary document early in the new year. The final report was endorsed by Western Gateway and other stakeholders and established the case for passenger and freight service improvements whilst integrating the findings of previous studies. High priority recommendations include further improved connectivity within the Western Gateway geography (between Bristol and south Wiltshire) and to between the Greater Bristol area and key neighbouring centres including Cardiff and Oxford.

Following completion of the study we are now working with partners to identify an incremental investment strategy to deliver the recommended outcomes. In addition to supporting the development work we have undertaken following last year's studies we have identified further improvements between Bristol and Weston-super-Mare as a priority (see below).

Development of strategic recommendations

Following the recommendations of the *West of England Line Study* we are continuing to develop a proposal with Western Gateway for Tisbury/ Gillingham area improvements to allow 2tph between **Yeovil and Salisbury**. Outside of the Western Gateway area we are finalising the SOBC setting out the case for an additional Axminster Exeter service, funded by Devon County Council.

The *Dorset Connectivity Study* recommended service improvements on the **Heart of Wessex Line**, linking Wiltshire and Dorset. Western Gateway is funding an SOBC setting out the case for a regular 1tph service to Weymouth. Required network capacity improvements will include extensions of Maiden Newton Loop and the double track south from Castle Cary, and an intervention around Frome/Westbury. Working together we have agreed and are about to finalise the remit for the SOBC, which will commence in 2023.

Our *Bristol to Exeter and Bristol to Birmingham Corridor Strategic Studies* established the case for improved connectivity between the larger hubs between Birmingham and Exeter including Gloucester and Weston-super-Mare. Following joint work funded by Western Gateway in 2021/22 we have identified the case for a **Cheltenham Spa SOBC**. We have agreed a proposal for Western Gateway to support this SOBC, with work commencing in the new year. The same joint work with Western Gateway has helped shape a proposal for further service improvements between **Bristol and Weston-super-Mare**, which we are exploring with WECA.

Whilst progressing outputs of completed studies we are considering the next focuses of our programme of strategic studies and look forward to continuing to work with Western Gateway and other partners in the new year.

Daniel Round

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For and on behalf of the Network Rail Wessex and Western strategic planning teams

December 2022