

Western Gateway STB Board Meeting – 11 July 2022

Network Rail update

General updates:

Covid, demand, and train service contracts

The latest industry figures show that railway passenger numbers continued to recover between April and July. Passenger figures were at or above 80 % of pre-covid levels throughout June until the impact of industrial action saw significant falls in the penultimate week of the month. However the following week, ending 2 July, saw overall passenger numbers at 87 % of pre-covid levels, a new peak.

The trend of weekend demand recovering more strongly remains, with Saturdays and Sundays regularly exceeding pre-covid demand, but in revenue terms they still lag behind weekdays. The leisure sector continues to grow with demand beyond pre-covid levels, and in parts of Western Gateway substantially so. Commuting and business sectors continue to recover but at a slower pace and to a lower level than leisure.

Covid has accelerated the transition for operators from rail franchises to National Rail Contracts, with most operators moving to their contracts imminently and away from their Emergency Measures Agreements. SWR entered a National Rail Contract in May 2021, whilst GWR entered theirs in June 2022. They are for two and three years respectively with the option for extensions. It is envisaged that these will be replaced by Passenger Service Contracts, let by Great British Railways. Both see financial risk remaining with the DfT and align with the greater role in service development and specification for local and regional authorities as set out in the Plan for Rail.

Industrial Action

The RMT (Rail, Maritime and Transport Trade) Union asked members to take strike action on Tuesday 21, Thursday 23 and Saturday 25 June as a result of a dispute over pay and terms and conditions. Strikes affected all Train Operators providing services for Department for Transport (DfT), and Network Rail. The strikes coincided with strikes on London Underground (21 June) as well as the Glastonbury Festival (Wednesday 22 – Sunday 26 June). Levels of service were severely affected across the region and passengers were advised not to travel. There were no local services in Gloucestershire or Dorset and very limited services across Wiltshire.

Across the network demand fell by approximately 80 % on strike days, and approximately 25 % on the days between strike days, compared to the previous week.

Whilst negotiations are ongoing the possibility of further strike action by RMT remains, as does that of industrial action involving other unions including the TSSA (Transport Salaried Staffs' Association) and Aslef (Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen), which represents train drivers, both of which have balloted members.

Restoring your Railway Ideas Fund

The June 2022 Restoring your Railway Fund programme update confirmed the status of several schemes within Western Gateway that were funded to SOBC under the Ideas Fund. A major success was the commitment to fund further work on Devizes Gateway new station, in the form of £400k to Network Rail for an interim feasibility study. The full status of all Western Gateway RyR schemes is:

Not progressing beyond SOBC:

- Reopened lines and new passenger services, Kemble – Cirencester (round 2)

Progressing to SOBC – awaiting decision:

- New Station at Langport and Somerton, Castle Cary (round 2)
- Reopened lines and new passenger services, Wareham – Swanage (round 2)
- New Station at St Anne’s Park, Bristol Temple Meads – Bath Spa (round 2)

Progressing to SOBC – awaiting submission:

- Reopen Corsham station (round 3)
- Reopen Stonehouse Bristol Road station (round 3)

Network Rail has supported or is supporting the promoters to develop SOBCs for each scheme. For each round 2 scheme SOBCs were submitted by December 2021. Formal announcement of the outcomes, and any next steps, for each of the above proposals is awaited from DfT. For each round 3 scheme SOBCs are due to be submitted by September 2022.

Schemes progressing past SOBC:

- To reinstate rail access to Devizes via a new station at Lydeaway (round 1)

Network Rail has been asked by DfT to lead a multi-partner project to develop further the Devizes Gateway station concept as set out in the SOBC submitted by Wiltshire County Council in 2021. This will involve close collaboration, in particular with Wiltshire Council, the Devizes Development Partnership, and GWR, to produce an interim feasibility study that builds on the existing SOBC and allows a decision to be made by Government. This work will be completed by March 2023. Work packages include detailed timetabling work, and development of the proposed investment at Westbury that is required to serve the new station at Devizes Gateway.

The Devizes Gateway SOBC made clear that investment may be required outside the new station area and especially at Westbury, and Network Rail is taking the opportunity to look at other passenger and freight strategic aspirations around Westbury as part of this work. This forms an important part of Western Gateway’s Midlands to South Coast strategic corridor and the outputs of the work offer benefit to this partnership group.

Great British Railways and the Whole Industry Strategic Plan

The Great British Railways transition team continues to develop, and a key focus remains the Whole Industry Strategic Plan (WISP). GBR is tasked with assembling a 30-year strategy for rail and it is likely that this will be based on the WISP. A version of the WISP is still expected to be submitted to the Secretary of State for Transport in late 2022.

Network Rail has a good relationship with GBRTT colleagues working on the WISP and all parties are clear that there remains a crucial role for route-based strategic planning in consultation with local partners, of the sort that Network Rail is carrying out across the Western Gateway.

GBRTT published a [summary of responses to the Call for Evidence](#) on the WISP in June. In July the six shortlisted locations for the GBR HQ were announced: Birmingham, Crewe, Derby, Doncaster, Newcastle, and York.

GBRTT have recently launched a new [Call for Evidence on how to increase the amount of freight moved by rail](#). This consultation is open until 27 September 2022. Responses will be used to inform future rail freight growth target options for the rail network.

Strategic study updates

The programme of strategic studies was agreed with Western Gateway and other relevant Sub-national Transport Bodies, most recently in spring 2021. Studies in the Western Gateway are designed to support implementation of the Western Gateway Rail Strategy, as well as the Corridor Strategic Partnership Groups.

Completed strategic studies

West of England Line Study

Published in 2020, the study recommends service improvements between Salisbury and Exeter as well as performance improvements and diversionary capability. A number of loops and extensions to reduce the length of single line are required. Development work funded by Devon County Council is ongoing for Exeter area improvements and a proposal has been put to Western Gateway for Tisbury area improvements.

Dorset Connectivity Study

The study recommends connectivity improvements to and across Dorset including a metro level of service across BCP, and improvements on the Heart of Wessex Line to Weymouth. Infrastructure requirements include signalling improvements, track upgrades, and level crossing closures between Brockenhurst and Wareham. On the Heart of Wessex Line a loop between Yeovil Pen Mill and Castle Cary and an intervention around Frome/Westbury would be required. A proposal has been put to Western Gateway for further development of both the Dorset Metro and Heart of Wessex Line improvements.

Bristol to Exeter Corridor and Bristol to Birmingham Corridor Strategic Studies

The Bristol to Birmingham and Bristol to Exeter Strategic Studies have been published. Both studies recommend improved connectivity between the larger hubs between Birmingham and Exeter, with particular improvements recommended for Gloucester, and Weston-super-Mare. The studies were developed in close collaboration with Western Gateway, and a portion of subsequent development work was funded by Western Gateway in 2021/22. A proposal has been agreed for business case work on Cheltenham Spa bay platform.

Solent to the Midlands Multimodal Freight Strategy Phase 1

Joint study with National Highways on the strategic priorities to accommodate growth in existing and new freight markets. Diversionary rail routes including via Salisbury are identified as a key development priority. The study is now published on the NR and NH websites and a second phase is underway.

Ongoing strategic studies

Greater Bristol Strategic Study (GBSS)

The study seeks to answer the key question *how can rail best support sustainable economic and housing growth in Greater Bristol?* It integrates the previous Bristol Birmingham and Bristol Exeter corridor studies as well as other key aspirations such as those detailed in the Union Connectivity Review. Key emerging recommendations include the case for: faster journey times between Bristol and Cardiff; better local connectivity on the Bristol Westbury corridor; a Bristol to Oxford direct service; improved frequency on the Severn Beach line; and support for the recommendations of the Bristol Birmingham, Bristol Exeter, and Dorset Connectivity studies). The study has followed a collaborative approach and input from Western Gateway has been invaluable. A draft report is due at the end of July.

Solent to Reading Freight Study

This study picks up from the joint Network Rail / National Highways multimodal study and considers the core freight route from Southampton to Reading, via Basingstoke, as well as diversionary routes. The study remit and scope have been agreed and detailed workshops have been held with freight industry partners on diversionary routes and operational challenges.

South West Main Line Strategic Study Phase 2

This study considers South West Main Line markets from Woking outwards and involves detailed consideration of 8 regional hubs including Salisbury and Bournemouth.

Development work arising from strategic studies

The principle of the strategic studies, themselves incorporating Western Gateway Rail Strategy objectives, is that they identify and support development work to take forward the highest priority recommendations. In the case of the completed strategic studies high priority further development work has been identified for the Dorset Metro, the Heart of Wessex Line, and the West of England Line. In addition, a significant programme of development work is ongoing arising from the Bristol area studies. This includes work on the service benefits enabled by a Cheltenham Spa bay platform.

Working closely with Western Gateway over priorities and resources, including funding, Network Rail has shared three proposals with Western Gateway for taking forward packages identified in the West of England Line and Dorset studies:

1. Heart of Wessex Line SOBC
 - To provide an hourly service between Westbury and Weymouth
 - Development required on double tracking, loop extension, level crossings, and potentially Weymouth and Westbury works
 - Potential delivery opportunity alongside proposed resignalling CP8 (2029-2034)
2. West of England Line – Tisbury SOBC
 - To deliver an additional hourly service to provide 2tph, with calling pattern options
 - Requires Tisbury loop extension
 - Potential delivery opportunity alongside proposed resignalling CP8 (2029-2034)
3. Dorset Metro SOBC
 - To regularise existing and / or add additional South East Dorset (BCP) services
 - Requires level crossing closures, additional track capacity, and signalling improvements
 - Potential delivery opportunity alongside proposed resignalling CP8 (2029-2034)

Similarly, through collaboration we have identified an opportunity to progress work on a Cheltenham Spa SOBC, to provide an additional Cheltenham to Swindon / Chippenham service and unlock other passenger service benefits in Gloucestershire. This jointly developed proposal is the subject of a paper at the July Western Gateway Board meeting.

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