

Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body

Board Meeting

Paper C

Date **25 June 2025**

Title of report: **Technical Programme Progress update**

Purpose of report: **To provide a progress and delivery update on the ongoing work to deliver the technical work programme of the Western Gateway Sub-National Transport Body.**

Recommendations:

The members of the Board are recommended to:

- To note the progress of the programme update report.
- To note the technical work that has been delivered so far and plans of delivery for the new financial year.
- To note the response from the Secretary of State about the A303 letter.
- To note the future funding, options and structure of the Western Gateway.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report contains an update on the progress of a number of elements of the Western Gateway Sub-National Transport Body (STB) technical work programme and the work that has been delivered so far this financial year.

April – June 2024

- Develop and launch of the Strategic Transport Plan (STP)
- Launch of the South West Coach Forum
- Delivery of the 8th round of Freight forum (Sub groups and main group)

July – September 2024

- Develop Rural Mobility Pilot Programme Prospectus.
- Complete feasibility study of first of three priority routes identified in the Coach Strategy
- Complete work on modelling future transport scenarios

October – December 2024

- Produce Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) for Heart of Wessex Line

- Develop the Electric Vehicle (EV) Strategic Action Plan
- Completion and roll out of EV Charging Infrastructure tool via Transport for the North (TfN)
- Final version of Alternative Fuels for Freight tool released via Midlands Connect
- Commence work on phase three of Coach Strategy
- Release the Carbon Assessment Playbook to Local Authorities (LA), with over 150 subscribers
- Network Rail produce Wiltshire Strategic Rail Study with Western Gateway input

January – March 2025

- Completion of Intervention Assessments report for Dorset Metro
- Service enhancements feasibility work commissioned with Basic Services Agreement signed for West of England Line
- Completion of the Bristol to Oxford 'Case for Change' document for new rolling stock - [Bristol and Oxford Case for Change document](#)
- Finalise the Strategic Investment Plan (SIP), including the Sustainability Appraisal - signed of in March Board meeting - [Strategic Investment Plan 2025-2035](#)
- Finalise grant funding agreements with the selected organisations and commenced the four rural mobility pilots across the South West.

March – June 2025

- Delivered Freight awareness workshops and produced workshop report
- Finalise Coach (phase 2 and phase 3) feasibility study reports - [Coach feasibility studies](#).
- Completion of Coach Parking survey/report
- Finalise strategic outline business case report for the West of England Line and Dorset Metro work.
- Finalise Regional Centre of Excellence Hub (online portal for local authority officers to access a range of tools and information)
- Finalise Strategic Cycle Network and next steps.
- Appointed Polaris Consultancy to conduct a feasibility study for a rail freight terminal site at Avonmouth – report due Autumn 2025
- Hosted successful freight, EV, coach and land use planning forums for local authority officers and wider stakeholders.
- Service agreement for Westbury Platform Zero feasibility study agreed with Network Rail and relevant stakeholders.
- Welcomed Department for Transport Operator to the Rail Officer Group to brief officers on transition process of South Western Railway and other train companies to public ownership.

Ongoing work from last financial year that is set to be completed this financial year. April – July 2025

- Finalise production of reports and guidance to support LAs to meet the new housing requirements with minimal disruption and impact on the region's transport network.
- Finalise the Interchange Guidance and Active Travel, Social Value and Health guidance as part of Centre of Excellence for Local Authorities
- Summary report for 2024/25 freight work, including evaluation of the backloading trial.
- Another call for applications for funding available for rural mobility pilots
- Business case development for shortlisted site(s) of alternative fuel infrastructure (e.g. for use by HGVs, or coaches)
- Engage with the Energy Saving Trust, Network Distributions and Charge Point Operators and other stakeholders across the South West to support the roll out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure.
- Work with local authorities on establishing common access standards for bus stops and support cross boundary bus service improvements.
- Work with stakeholders to develop a business case for coach route between Cheltenham and Bristol Airport.
- Finalise the Strategic Outline Business Case of the West of England Line
- Finalise the STP modelling report

2. Freight Strategy Implementation and freight forums

- 2.1 Context: Work undertaken jointly with Peninsula Transport. Phase 2 efforts resulted in a monitoring report outlining the achievements following the publication of the Freight Strategy, available on our website. The report highlights the continued success of the Freight Forum and progress on key interventions, including work on the impact of bridge strikes, lorry parking and facilities, a backloading trial, shifting freight to rail and maritime, and drone delivery engagement with the University of the West of England (UWE).
- 2.2 Work to Date: The freight forums (three sub-groups and the main forum) has been continuously maintained with a focus on fostering a broader range of engagement. Forum meetings have been coordinated and continue to take place, with the latest one held at the end of May. Series of freight awareness workshops were held with local authority officers and councillors enhancing understanding of industry needs and challenges and highlighting the key levers available to local authorities to influence positive change. The learning materials for these workshops will be available on the website soon. Rural freight ideas workshop with local authorities was held to explore the potential for alternative ways to deliver freight in rural areas and will tie in with the 2025/26 call for rural mobility pilots.

- 2.3 Agreements have been signed between Western Gateway STB and Polaris Consultancy, to conduct a feasibility study for a rail freight terminal site at Avonmouth. All key stakeholders were invited to attend a site visit, and will continue to be updated through the Steering Group meetings. The final report will be available end of September.

3. Rail Strategy

- 3.1 **Dorset Metro:** Funded jointly by Dorset Council and the Western Gateway the Strategic Outline Business Case for the Dorset Metro is expected from Network Rail at the end of June 2025. The Business Case includes an extra train an hour between Wareham and Brockenhurst, include improvements between Dorchester and Moreton and the possible extension of services from Wareham to Swanage. The report will include recommendations on what further development work is required such as alternative service patterns and looking at wider aspects of connectivity including buses. A summary document will be produced. The Dorset Metro will be reported to the September Board with recommendations for next steps.
- 3.2 **West of England Line (Tisbury Loop):** The Strategic Outline Business Case for half hourly services on the West of England Line between Salisbury and Yeovil is nearing completion. Various options for an extended passing loop at Tisbury have been explored. Costings and the economic case are awaited and are expected end July 2025. The performance and resilience benefits from the passing loop are considerable and will make a strong case for future funding. It is intended to report to the September 2025 Board meeting with recommendations for next steps.
- 3.3 **Westbury Platform 0:** As part of the Business Plan for 2025/26 the Western Gateway is committed to commissioning work for reinstating Platform 0 at Westbury station. This is a project with regional and national benefits and will improve services north-south and east west including to Bristol, Bath, Cardiff, Salisbury, Southampton, Portsmouth, Weymouth, Dorchester, Exeter, Yeovil, Reading and London. It is included in the Western Gateway Strategic Investment Plan, agreed by the Board in March 2025, as a priority scheme for the region. By providing more capacity at Westbury it will strengthen the case for a new station at Devizes Gateway. The study will also include timetabling for the Melksham single line upgrade and additional calls at Pewsey station. Commissioning the study from Network Rail, costed at between £70,000 and £100,000, is being undertaken through the Western Gateway's accountable body processes. Work is expected to start in late June 2025 with completion by the end of October 2025. A report will be brought to the December 2025 Board meeting.
- 3.4 **Filton Bank:** The West of England Mayoral Combined Authority with Network Rail and Great Western Railway have commissioned work on developing a business case to electrify the Filton bank between Bristol Parkway and Bristol Temple Meads. Given the regional and national decarbonisation and performance benefits of electrification the Western Gateway is contributing

£10,000 towards the £460,000 cost of the study. The work is expected to report in February 2026. Progress will be reported to the Board.

- 3.5 **Rail Case for change document:** With so much rail work going on and with most of it interlinked it is the intention to bring all the projects together into a making the case for change document. This will set out at high level the value and benefits of our rail proposals both locally, regionally and nationally. It will be used to make the case for future funding and incorporation into future rail services as part of Great British Railways.

4. Electric Vehicle Charging

- 4.1 Both Western Gateway and Peninsula Transport STBs identify decarbonisation and the transition to zero-emission vehicles as a priority within their respective transport strategies, which has led to collaborative working across the South West region. It involved setting up a South West EV forum for local authority officers, and to publish an EV Strategic Action Plan for the South West which identifies tangible measures the STBs can undertake to support the accelerated delivery of regional EV charging infrastructure.

- 4.2 The STBs undertook an analysis on EV uptake, electric vehicle charge point requirements and demand across the region up to 2050. The findings and full report were published on the STB websites. The establishment of a successful EV South West forum, to support the Local Authorities (LAs) is ongoing and well attended by officers from all LAs and external stakeholders, such as Energy Saving Trust, to identify the issues and opportunities in delivering the required infrastructure and electrical grid capacity to meet forecasted demand. The next EV forum will on June 24th, with the aim of having them quarterly. There will be continuous engagement with National Highways, private sector Charge Point operators and Network Distributors to understand the opportunities and challenges within the EV industry. Also, engaging with Energy Saving Trust to oversee common accessibility standards for chargers across the region.

The EV Charging Infrastructure Tool which was developed by Transport for the North on behalf of all STBs has been completed and rolled out to all LAs. A framework session which included a live demo of the tool was held on 12th of February 2025 which showed the useability of the tool as well as an opportunity for LAs to ask questions. A further update on the progress of the EV work package will be given at the next Partnership Board Meeting.

5. Coach Strategy

- 5.1 The feasibility study of all three priority routes identified in the Strategy is complete and available to view on the website. The potential to develop a business case for route two (Cheltenham-Bristol Airport route) is being explored with stakeholder, but likely to be dependent on additional internal resource.

- 5.2 The studies indicated that the two routes coming up from the south coast to Bristol Airport and Gloucestershire are probably not suitable for end-to-end coach services. Alternative options integrating bus, rail and coach are being investigated, dependent on internal resources.
- 5.3 The Southwest Coach Sector Forum is ongoing, with engagement including local authorities, coach operators, Bristol Airport, Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT) and National Highways. The next forum is scheduled for November 2025, and, for the present, the STB has decided to continue the organisation of these forums in house, rather than rely on consultant support. This will be reviewed on an ongoing basis. Peninsula Transport STB have launched their own forum, and the two STBs continue to work closely together.
- 5.4 The Coach Forum continues to generate effective engagement, with the last one in March resulting in an audit of coach parking issues and options which has been shared with BANES and two operators working with Bristol Airport to test the layout of their new planned interchange and coach park, using a variety of vehicles. WGSTB have also been invited to the launch of the Public Transport Interchange at the airport in July.
- 5.5 AECOM conducted site visits to coach parking locations in Spring 2025, and have produced a report to highlight the challenges coach operators face at particular sites. This was a priority action identified by the forum members, STB officers will work with relevant authorities to explore opportunities for improvements and changes.

6. Alternative Fuels for Freight

- 6.1 In March 2022 Western Gateway and Peninsula Transport STB jointly commissioned Atkins, with their industry partner CENEX, to undertake a study to consider the barriers and opportunities associated with the transition of freight vehicles to alternative fuels. The study adopted a methodology successfully applied in a similar study for the Midlands Connect STB.
- 6.2 A site ranking tool has been developed by Midlands Connect to shortlist potential refuelling locations. The DfT provided additional capacity funding to Midlands Connect to roll out this function and undertake this work for all STBs. The tool can be used to test range of potential locations and the criteria can be adjusted to reflect the rurality of the Western Gateway areas. The advisory tool combines a mapping function with demand forecasting to indicate when sites will be needed.
- 6.3 The tool and accompanying dashboard are now developed and will be made available for Local Authorities to feed into Local Plans and Local Transport Plans. Tool is now available for all Local Authorities. Consideration will be given by Western Gateway to supporting the delivery of potential sites through business case development and working with stakeholders and operators in the next financial year and will be tied as a workstream under Freight work package.

7. Regional Centre of Excellence work

- 7.1 Early this year, Western Gateway initiated a new workstream, bringing together planning and transport officers from across the region to explore ways to effectively deliver increased housing growth at sustainable locations, ensuring suitable connectivity and accessibility. This has been well received and is gathering momentum. In partnership with Local Authorities, we have commissioned four tools to assist with the identification and appraisal of potential housing development sites: Health, Physical Activity and Social Value evaluation tool, Interchange Guidance, Strategic Site allocation tool and Spatial/transport planning tool for detailed connectivity assessment of development sites.
- 7.2 We have been invited to partner with Homes England, National Highways, Network Rail and Active Travel England on an innovative study of the M5 corridor to better understand the options, opportunities and limitations for housing growth associated with different approaches to site selection and transport planning.
- 7.3 We have also developed a new, password-protected section of our website to host tools, guidance and chat functionality for partners.
- 7.4 New tools from the DfT, including the Connectivity Tool and Local Transport Carbon Infrastructure Benchmark Tool, as well as the Quantifiable Carbon Guidance (QCG), are expected this summer. Western Gateway has coordinated feedback to DfT on the emerging QCG and Connectivity Tool and will be provide introductory sessions for partners once launched.
- 7.5 We continue to extend our working partnerships with universities around the region and hope to provide more student research opportunities (depending on resources).

8. Buses

- 8.1 As part of the Regional Centre of Excellence programme for 2025/26 the Western Gateway is committed to undertaking work on buses and in particular cross boundary services. To this end the Board at its meeting on 25 March 2025 agreed the recruitment of an additional Transport Officer. Unfortunately, due to the approval processes at the accountable body taking longer than expected there has been a delay in advertising the role. Adverts are now out and it is hoped to have the new officer in post by September 2025. The delay means starting the bus work is on hold until then although the ideas for the work programme will continue to be developed including recommendations from the Coach Strategy.

9. Strategic Investment Plan and Strategic Transport Plan

- 9.1 The Strategic Transport Plan (STP) was approved in March 2024 and the Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) in March 2025. The STP was approved prior to the change of national Government and is structured around the delivery of the

previous Government's objectives for transport. There is, therefore, a stated intention to review both of these documents at an appropriate time.

- 9.2 Recently, the Government has announced its intention to publish a number of key pieces of transport policy and guidance. Chief among these is the Integrated National Transport Strategy - the current estimated timeframe for this is by the end of the calendar year. The Quantifiable Carbon Guidance is expected to be published in late July, followed by the Local Transport Plan guidance later in the year.
- 9.3 The timetable for the STP and SIP update is dependent on the release of these key pieces of policy. It is therefore not expected that work on these can begin much before the final quarter of the current Financial Year (or later, if the DfT's timetable slips). However, work has already commenced on gathering feedback on the previous SIP process from partners and enhancements to our comms and stakeholder lists, in order to be ready to go with an improved approach when that opportunity arises.
- 9.4 It should be noted that one of the repeated requests from partners is to have longer to submit schemes (the current window was 5 weeks) so we should be mindful of the need to have a longer programme if we are to respond to such requests.
- 9.5 Another identified limitation of the current system is the lack of consistent, region-wide data on risks to transport and asset resilience, both now and in the future. Early scoping work has begun on a possible Resilience study to address this gap.

10. A303 letter to the Secretary of State

- 10.1 It will be recalled that at the Board meeting on 25 March 2025 approval was given to send a letter to the Secretary of State for Transport setting out the need for an alternative package approach to resolving the issues of safety, connectivity and resilience left following cancellation of the A303 Stonehenge Tunnel. A reply has been received and is attached as Appendix One. In the letter the Minister for the Future of Roads recognises the ongoing issues and the need to work with local partners and has asked her officials to get in contact with the Western Gateway. This is a positive response and we look forward to working with the Department for Transport.

11. Future funding, options and the structure of the Western Gateway

- 11.1 There is no update on whether the Western Gateway will receive funding from the DfT for 2026/27 and beyond. It had been hoped that a two or three year settlement would be announced as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review. Whilst the DfT now know their budget they are working through the detail and there is no clear timeline on when funding for STBs will be confirmed.

- 11.2 The Western Gateway remains fully funded for 2025/26 and will continue to deliver its work programme as set out in the Business Plan agreed at the 25 March 2025 Board. Going forward into 2026/27 there are three options:

Option One: No further STB funding

- 11.3 Under this option the STB would be wound up. Existing programme commitments for 2025/26 would be fulfilled. Officers to be made redundant. Some work projects to be transferred to the relevant local authorities. There is sufficient contingency budget to carry on the work of the STB for at least six months beyond the end of DfT funding. This would be a decision for the Board to take. Any remaining assets to be disposed of as agreed by the Board.

Option Two: One year funding settlement based on 2025/26

- 11.4 This would enable the current programme to continue into 2026/27. Existing structure and staffing levels as shown in Figure One to remain if no increase in funding. The current structure, however, is increasingly under pressure with the team taking on a substantial workload and vacant posts to be filled. As a priority it is proposed to review the roles of the Technical Lead and Senior Transport Officer with a view to rebalancing the workload.

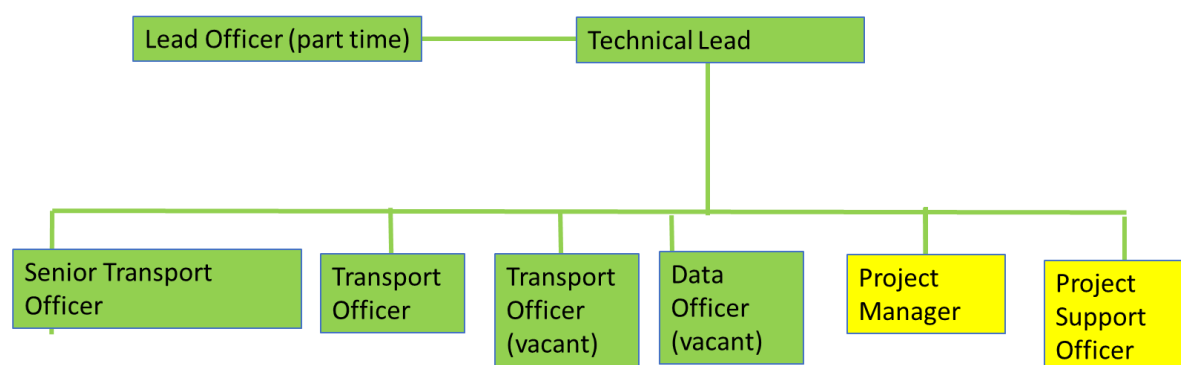


Figure 1: Current Western Gateway team structure

- 11.5 If funding is increased there is the option to review the STB's overall structure in line with Option Three below. A one year settlement does not assist longer term planning and at the end of 2026/27 there would remain the possibility of the STB being wound up as per Option One.

Option Three: Two to three funding settlement

- 11.6 Should a two or three funding settlement be confirmed the structure of the Western Gateway needs to be reviewed. To date the structure has evolved with officers appointed as the work programme has expanded and the budget increased with increasingly more work brought in house to avoid over dependency on consultants. To this end the Board approved appointing an additional Transport Officer and a new Data Officer at its meeting on 25 March 2025.
- 11.7 With the increasing workload and the ability to plan ahead with a two/three year settlement it is proposed, subject to funding confirmation, that a new structure is produced which creates a more balanced approach. This will separate

activities into Strategy and Technical sides with respective managers under an overall Head of Service type post. Additional Transport/ Senior Transport Officers would be recruited. This form of structure is in line with those of Transport East STB (nearest comparable STB to the Western Gateway) and Transport for the South East STB. The proposal is presented as a marker for the potential restructure and is not set in stone.

11.8 Should funding for the Western Gateway be confirmed before the next Board meeting a full proposal will be brought to the Board for approval in September. It should be noted that as the accountable body new posts and job titles for the proposed structure will have to go through West of England Combined Authority processes. The important issue in this respect is that the structure and posts must reflect the needs of the Western Gateway and not be tied to those of the accountable body.

11.9 No decision is required at this stage. Instead the Board is asked for its guidance and views on Options One to Three with officers to prepare more detailed proposals for future reporting to the Board.

12. Consultation, communication and engagement

12.1 This update has been discussed by the Programme Management Team and approved by the Senior Officer Group.

13. Equalities Implications

13.1 No adverse impact on any protected groups

14. Legal considerations

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

15. Financial considerations

15.1 The technical programme is produced within the allocated budget as spelt out in the business plan.

16. Conclusion

16.1 This paper provides a summary of the various element of the Western Gateway technical programme of work and the progress made since the last board meeting as well as the work that has taken place so far this financial year. Also, the future funding, options and structure of the Western Gateway. The Board is recommended to note these.

Contact Officer

Mena Abidakun, Programme Manager, Western Gateway Sub-National Transport Body

Email - mena.abidakun@Westofengland-CA.gov.uk

Appendix One: Response to the A303 letter to the Secretary of State



Department
for Transport

From the Parliamentary
Under Secretary of State
Lilian Greenwood MP
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London SW1P 4DR
Tel: 0300 330 3000
E-Mail: lilian.greenwood@dft.gov.uk
Web site: www.gov.uk/dft
Our Ref: MC/00037573

Councillor Manda Rigby
Chair
Western Gateway Sub-National Transport Body

1 May
2025

Dear Councillor Rigby,

Thank you for your letter of 3 April addressed to the Secretary of State, which outlines the proposed package approach for the A303 following the cancellation of the Stonehenge Tunnel scheme last year.

I appreciate that the cancellation of this major scheme was a great disappointment for many people, and I recognise that the challenges it had been designed to address have remained. Regrettably, the audit of public spending in July identified £3.5 billion of unfunded pressures related to transport in 2024-25, and over £800 million unfunded capital commitments in 2025-26. In response to this, this Government had no choice but to cancel several low value and unaffordable programmes which included the scheme planned for the Stonehenge Tunnel.

Thank you for sharing your advice on the future opportunities for a package approach on the A303 to address some of the key issues around safety, resilience and connectivity. It is essential that stakeholders work closely together in order to find an affordable and effective solution for the A303 which aligns with our forthcoming Integrated National Transport Strategy. I recognise the magnitude of the original Stonehenge Tunnel Scheme and the ongoing issues in this part of the region.

I have therefore asked my officials to continue to work with local partners and help to support discussions between key local stakeholders. They will be in contact with you about the best ways to do that.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lilian', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

LILIAN GREENWOOD MP
MINISTER FOR THE FUTURE OF ROADS