

## **Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body**

### **Board Meeting**

#### **Paper A**

Date **17 September 2025**

Title of report: **Dorset Metro and West of England Line (Tisbury Loop)**

Purpose of report: **To update the Board on the Dorset Metro and West of England Line Strategic Outline Business Cases and set out next steps**

#### **Recommendations:**

The members of the Board are recommended to:

- I. Approve the Strategic Outline Business Cases for the Dorset Metro and West of England Line (Tisbury Loop)
- II. Approve the next steps for the Dorset Metro as set out in section 2.6
- III. Approve the next steps for the West of England Line (Tisbury Loop) as set out in section 3.8.
- IV. Approve up to £50,000 from existing budgets be used to provide consultant support if required for the Dorset Metro multi modal corridor work.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1 Funded jointly by Dorset Council and the Western Gateway the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) for the Dorset Metro has now been produced by Network Rail. Dorset Metro was one of the proposals emerging from Network Rail's Dorset Strategic Connectivity Study in 2023. The Business Case includes an extra train an hour between Wareham and Bournemouth, the regularisation of services between Weymouth and Bournemouth/London including infrastructure improvements between Dorchester and Moreton and the possible extension of services from Wareham to Swanage. The area covered is shown in Figure 1.

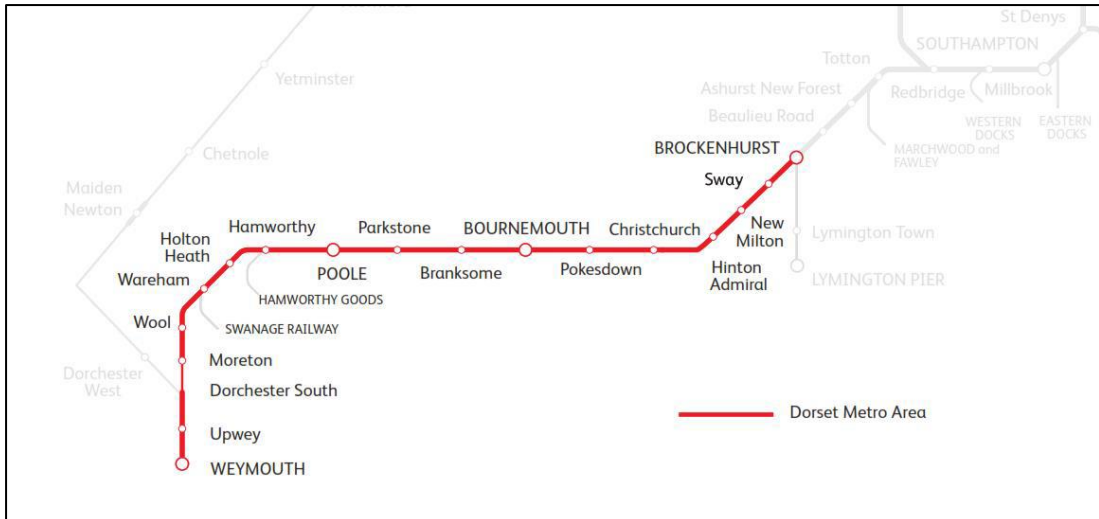


Figure 1: Dorset Metro area

- 1.2 Funded by the Western Gateway the Strategic Outline Business Case for half hourly services on the West of England Line between Salisbury and Yeovil has been finalised by Network Rail. There have been long standing aspirations to improve the service on this line which is currently hourly and this was one of the recommendations in Network Rails West of England Line Continuous Modular Strategic Plan in 2020. The line also suffers from significant capacity and performance constraints. Early work identified an extended passing loop at Tisbury, a critical bottleneck on the single track section, would provide the capacity to run additional services and improve the performance and resilience of the line. Several loop options have been explored. The route of the West of England Line is shown in Figure 2.

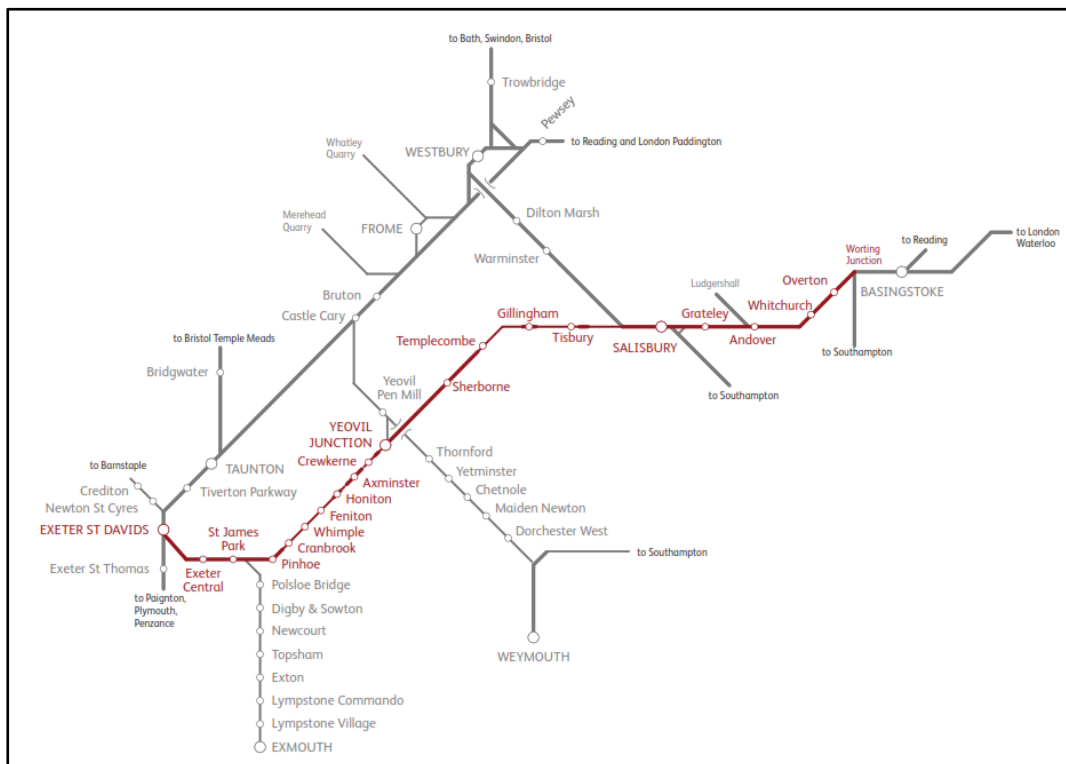


Figure 2: West of England Line route

- 1.3 Both SOBCs can be found on the [Western Gateway](#) website. The Western Gateway is grateful to all the work Network Rail have put into the two business cases and for the continued support and input from South Western Railways, Great Western Railway, Dorset Council, Wiltshire Council and Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole Council.

## 2. Dorset Metro main findings and next steps

- 2.1 The principal benefit of the Dorset Metro is reduced journey times for passengers, enabled by more frequent or regular services. Costs include building new infrastructure and running additional trains.
- 2.2 Six options were analysed, covering hourly shuttle or regularised services delivered either in conjunction with scheduled renewals or as stand-alone projects. Each option was assessed for its operational feasibility, infrastructure requirements, and alignment with strategic objectives. Costs ranged from £37.3m (alongside renewals) to £66.7m (standalone scheme) for the Wareham to Brockenhurst shuttle and £86.2m for the Weymouth to Bournemouth/London regularisation of services.
- 2.3 Unfortunately all options showed low Benefit Cost Ratios (BCR). The shuttle service options between Wareham and Brockenhurst scored between 0.16 and 0.20 (rated Poor Value for Money), while the Weymouth service regularisation options received negative BCRs (rated Very Poor Value for Money) due to losses in connectivity to London outweighing any local benefits.
- 2.4 The option for a shuttle service between Wareham and Swanage was only considered at a high-level so no infrastructure interventions were identified. Whilst not yet costed, this option is recognised for its potential to support tourism, improve access to the Isle of Purbeck, and enhance regional connectivity. The economic analysis concluded that the volume of passengers required to breakeven, i.e. for farebox revenue to cover the train operating costs, does not seem unattainable.
- 2.5 Although the BCRs are disappointing this SOBC should be viewed as a starting point and interim position. There is still great potential in the Dorset Metro proposals and the SOBC includes a series of recommendations for going forward as set out below. These recommendations collectively aim to build a robust, integrated transport system centred on rail, but supplemented by improvements to other modes, while delivering short-term benefits and laying the groundwork for future enhancements.

Wider Recommendations (led by local stakeholders – local authorities and the STB):

- **Adopt a Multi-Modal Strategy:** Integrate rail with bus, light rail, active travel, and park-and-ride solutions to improve access and connectivity.

This should include further examination of the Swanage Railway service and how best to encourage traffic off the roads

- **Align Housing and Employment Growth with Rail Corridors:** Encourage development near stations to boost rail demand and support economic viability; this is perhaps the most important of the recommendations and needs to be seriously considered as Local Plans are developed
- **Leverage Regeneration Projects:** Incorporate rail improvements into urban redevelopment plans, such as Poole town centre, and explore developer contributions
- **Enhance Other Public Transport Modes:** Use BSIP funding to improve bus services and integrate them with rail, reinforcing the case for a connected transport network

Railway Recommendations (led by the rail industry):

- **Utilise the Renewals Work bank:** Influence Network Rail's renewals programme to deliver incremental infrastructure improvements aligned with Dorset Metro goals
- **Pursue Incremental Service Enhancements:** Explore incremental timetable changes and service extensions to improve frequency and coverage
- **Investigate Alternative Service Patterns:** Assess new hourly service options, such as New Milton–Wareham and Bournemouth–Swanage, for feasibility
- **Conduct Performance Analysis:** Evaluate the operational impact of proposed service changes to ensure reliability and resilience

## Next Steps

- 2.6 The Board is asked to approve the Dorset Metro SOBC and the recommendations for the rail industry and local stakeholders. The Board is asked to give its support to Network Rail to continue its work on the Dorset Metro. For the Western Gateway it is proposed to take a multi modal corridor approach to the Dorset Metro. Although rail is a key part of the connectivity solution for area, a multi-modal approach is required to capture all the benefits that an integrated public transport system could offer. This approach will bring in previous study work, Local Plans, the joint Dorset and Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole Local Transport Plan and interlinked projects including the rural mobility pilots, Heart of Wessex Line proposals, Bus Service Improvement Plan schemes, integrated ticketing, park and ride and the Western Gateway Strategic Cycle Network and Coach Strategy. Principally the work will be done in house working alongside officers from the local authorities. Should additional consultant support be required this will be funded from existing budgets with a cap at £50,000.

## 3. West of England Line (Tisbury Loop) main findings and next steps

- 3.1 Three core options were looked at which will enable service change and meet key strategic drivers for performance, productivity, connectivity, growth and safety.
- Option 1A: Additional 1tph, extend Tisbury Loop eastward (~6 miles) and westward into Tisbury station with a new platform
  - Option 1B: Additional 1tph, extend Tisbury Loop eastward (~6 miles); no station upgrade
  - Option 1C: Option 1C: no additional service, extend Tisbury Loop into Tisbury station with a new platform
- 3.2 Option 1C for an extended loop is the preferred one owing to lower cost, passenger experience improvements and potential performance benefits.
- 3.3 Under all the options tested the BCRs are below one (ranging from 0.09 to 0.22 for Option 1C) and the Value for Money rating is Poor. The upfront capital costs which range from £31.5m alongside renewals to £88.6m standalone scheme and ongoing train operating costs outweigh the journey time benefits generated by the proposals.
- 3.4 Please note performance benefits are yet to be applied which will hopefully improve the BCRs. It is recognised the performance analysis undertaken thus far is limited and therefore one of the recommendations of the SOBC (see below) is to do more in depth analysis. This will particularly look at reactionary delay (delay caused to other, non-West of England Line services), and the impact a loop extension could have had on the current service reduction caused by the Soil Moisture Deficit issue on the line.
- 3.5 Whilst this is not an optimistic picture it should as with the Dorset Metro be seen as an interim position. The West of England Line is a vital artery connecting communities across the South West to London and other major regional centres. Persistent performance challenges and limited capacity, reliability and resilience remain major issues. The SOBC, despite the low BCRs, nonetheless sets out a compelling vision for change. It is a first step toward a more reliable, accessible, and flexible West of England Line.
- 3.6 To this end and as with the Dorset Metro SOBC a series of recommendations have been identified, split by whether they are for the railway industry to progress or wider stakeholders.

Railway Recommendations (led by the rail industry)

#### **R1. Progress Option 1C**

- Advance the westward extension of the Tisbury Loop into Tisbury station with the focus on performance improvement and passenger experience
- Align development with Salisbury signalling renewals (CP8 2029 to 2034) for cost efficiency
- Consider further extensions for additional performance benefits

#### **R2. Seek Opportunities Through the Renewals Workbank**

- Influence the Salisbury signalling renewals programme to incorporate passive or active provision for Option 1C with the aim to maximise efficiencies and reduce capital costs

### **R3. Seek Incremental Service Change Opportunities**

- Explore small-scale timetable improvements and extend individual Salisbury services to Gillingham or Yeovil Junction.

### **R4. Conduct Further Performance Analysis**

- Quantify reactionary delay caused by the West of England Line
- Focus analysis on providing performance benefit not additional services and consider other loop extension lengths

Wider Recommendations (led by local authorities and the STB)

### **W1. Focus Housing and Employment Growth on the Rail Corridor**

- Align housing allocations with rail accessibility to boost demand
- Encourage development near stations to support rail investment
- Integrate with local planning processes and national housing targets

### **W2. Take Advantage of Regeneration and Development Proposals**

- Improve station accessibility and facilities and use Section 106 or CIL funding for rail-related improvements

### **W3. Make Improvements to Other Public Transport Modes**

- Enhance bus services and active travel links to stations
- Use BSIP funding to support rural accessibility and service upgrades
- Promote multi-modal integration to support rail patronage

- 3.7 Under R1. Network Rail are committed to aligning with the Salisbury signalling renewals and are already having discussions with the signalling engineers as they start to remit and develop the renewals package. This is the key opportunity for taking forward the Tisbury Loop and one not to be missed.

### **Next Steps**

- 3.8 The Board is asked to approve the West of England Line (Tisbury Loop) SOBC and the recommendations for the rail industry and local stakeholders. The Board is asked to give its support to Network Rail to continue its work on the West of England Line with particular focus on performance. The Western Gateway will take forward the wider recommendations in discussion with the local authorities. No specific Western Gateway work is planned at this stage.

## **4. Consultation, communication and engagement**

- 4.1 Dorset Council, Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole Council and Wiltshire Council have been involved throughout the process of producing the SOBCs for the Dorset Metro and West of England Line (Tisbury Loop). Their input and commitment are greatly appreciated.

## **5. Equalities Implications**

- 5.1 No adverse impact on any protected groups. Enhanced passenger services will increase connectivity opening up new travel opportunities whilst infrastructure improvements will improve journey times and reliability. It is considered that any delivery of the enhancements will significantly benefit many groups including households that do not have access to a car.

## **6. Legal considerations**

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

## **7. Financial considerations**

- 7.1 For the Dorset Metro it is proposed to take a multi modal corridor approach using in house and local authority resources. Should additional consultant support be required this will be funded from existing budgets with a cap at £50,000.

## **8. Conclusion and recommendations**

- 8.1 The Board is asked to approve the Strategic Outline Business Cases and the next steps for the Dorset Metro and West of England Line (Tisbury Loop)

## **Contact Officer**

James White, Technical Lead, Western Gateway Sub-National Transport Body  
Email – [james.white@westofengland-ca.gov.uk](mailto:james.white@westofengland-ca.gov.uk)