

Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body

Board Meeting

Paper A

Date **25 February 2026**

Title of report: **Revised Western Gateway Work Plan**

Purpose of report: **To set out a revised Work Plan for 2026/27 following confirmation of Department for Transport (DfT) funding and options for the Strategic Investment Plan review.**

Recommendations:

The members of the Board are recommended to approve:

- I. Acceptance of the Department for Transport grant of £450,000 for 2026/27
- II. Funding for 2026/27 and 2027/28 as set out in Table One, Table Two and Table Three
- III. Revised Work Plan for 2026/27 as set out in Appendix One
- IV. Progression of option 2 for the STP/SIP light touch review outlined in section 3 and Table Five.

1. Background

- 1.1 On 2 September 2025 the Department for Transport (DfT) wrote to all Sub-national Transport Bodies (STB) informing them funding will finish at the end of March 2027. The STBs were asked to submit a Work Plan and a transition funding bid for 2026/27 by 8 December 2025.
- 1.2 A Work Plan for 2026/27 and a funding ask of £600,000 was approved at the Board on 3 December 2025 and with minor changes was submitted to the DfT on 8 December 2025.
- 1.3 The Work Plan was focused on three key themes identified by the Board for:
 - 1) Co-ordination – cross boundary collaboration including rural mobility, coach, freight, rail and the Regional Centre of Excellence
 - 2) Prioritisation – maintain the Strategic Investment Plan and Strategic Transport Plan
 - 3) Linkages and ongoing stakeholder relationships – with neighbouring STBs especially Peninsula Transport, Network Rail, National Highways and Homes England

- 1.4 As requested by the local authorities, key areas of work are early business case development and advocacy for priority SIP schemes.
- 1.5 The Board felt it was important for the Western Gateway to continue into 2027/28 operating in a regional convenor and advisory role. This approach ensures regional collaboration and technical support and pushes forward projects with high regional significance. This represents a shift in focus away from meeting the requirements of the DfT towards those of the local authorities.
- 1.6 On 26 January 2026 the DfT confirmed funding of £450,000 for the Western Gateway. Whilst this is £150,000 less than the ask it is still good news and will enable the Western Gateway to carry on with only minor amendments to the Work Plan. As expected, the funding letter stressed there will be no further central government funding for the Western Gateway beyond March 2027. The letter did however, state STBs will remain valuable partners to the DfT and its agencies as they continue to provide regional advocacy and support to their members.
- 1.7 The DfT has requested confirmation the Western Gateway accepts the allocation. It is recommended the Board accepts.

2. Revised Work Plan and DfT funding ask

- 2.1 The original budget for 2026/27 was £816,000. The DfT funding leaves a shortfall but the overall programme requires only minor adjustment.
- 2.2 It is proposed to move £78,000 from the contingency budget to top up some of the DfT shortfall to make a total budget for 2026/27 of £716,000 as shown below.

Table One: Total budget for 2026/27

Funding source	Amount
Department for Transport	£450,000
Local authority contributions	£188,000*
Contingency	£78,000
Total	£716,000

* Subject to confirmation. No contribution from Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole. WECA providing £20,000.

- 2.3 Savings of £100,000 will be made from freezing the vacant Transport Officer post and putting on hold bus and resilience work. Table Two shows planned expenditure of £716,000 for 2026/27.

Table Two: 2026/27 Planned expenditure

Expenditure 2026/27	Amount
Staff* and organisational costs	£375,000
Projects/early business case development	£341,000
Total	£716,000

* Technical Lead, Senior Transport Officer, Transport Officer, Project Manager, Project Support/Comms Officer. All posts to be extended to end of March 2028. Vacant Transport Officer post frozen. Transport Data and Research Officer secondment not continued after October 2026.

- 2.4 As noted in Table Two Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole are unable to provide a contribution for 2026/27. There is no provision in the constitution for measures to take when this occurs. It is, therefore, proposed to put in place a protocol for managing this and the Board's views are sought.

Staffing

- 2.5 With all the uncertainty around the future of STBs and late decision on funding from the DfT it is unsurprising and understandable that officers in the Western Gateway team have looked elsewhere for employment. As a result the Transport Officer role has been vacant since January and the Senior Transport Officer role will be vacant from the beginning of March 2026.
- 2.6 With the loss of staff there is a risk to the ability of the Western Gateway to deliver the Work Plan. There is a point when the Western Gateway becomes too small to maintain its effectiveness. Three options, therefore, are proposed to address this.

Option A.

Both posts could be readvertised. Given the lead in times for recruitment it is likely to be four months before new officers start. With the reduction in DfT funding it is proposed to freeze the Transport Officer post as a saving. The proposal for 2027/28 set out in Table Three means it would be possible to recruit to the Senior Transport Officer post on at least an 18-month contract.

Option B

The option of officers being seconded from the West of England Combined Authority is being explored. Offering up to 12 months of valuable experience this could be attractive to officers looking to do something different and develop their skills and experience across a wider geography. They will bring with them valuable knowledge of how the accountable body works so to a degree they will hit the ground running.

Option C.

An alternative is to bring in external consultant to provide one full time equivalent support for the next 12 months. This could be at Senior Transport Officer or Transport Officer level. It will provide resource to support most of the current Work Plan. There will be a higher cost estimated at 1.5 times the in-house rate.

- 2.7 With Options A and C the intention is to extend these posts to the end of March 2028. This is to provide certainty, retain staff and provide the capacity to deliver the Work Plan.

2027/28

- 2.8 By the start of 2027/28 the Western Gateway will have transitioned to a regional convenor/advisor role. In this role it will help the constituent authorities and emerging Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCA) to keep thinking regionally and talking to each other by providing support through continued early business case support and advocacy for SIP priority schemes, support for regional freight and EV forums, hosting the Regional Centre of Excellence with its spatial planning tools and continue to engage with Network Rail, National Highways and Homes England on studies, projects and consultations. Projects will be progressed in a way that allows future MCAs to pick them up and deliver.
- 2.9 Funding of £637,000 from prior years reserve and underspend in 2025/26 is available to fund this role in 2027/28. This assumes no local authority contributions. Budget for 2027/28 shown in Table Three.

Table Three: 2027/28 Budget

Expenditure 2027/28	Amount
Staff* and organisational costs	£359,000
Projects/early business case development**	£278,000
Total	£637,000

* All remaining posts extended to end March 2028

** Additional £188k for projects if LAs contribute at same rate as in 2026/27

- 2.10 Under this budget it is possible to fund posts to March 2028 without local authority contributions. With local authority contributions a substantially larger project fund would be available. Structure for 2027/28 to be reviewed as the new regional convenor and advocacy role develops and MCA proposals start to emerge. This may lead to savings to be refocused into project work. It is likely staff will start to move on during 2027/28 which will enable more funding for projects.
- 2.11 WECA as the accountable body pick up redundancy costs as these are paid for through the annual overhead charge on all salaries.
- 2.12 During the course of 2027/28 it is assumed the picture around new MCAs will be clear and the Board will be asked whether the Western Gateway has a role and should continue beyond March 2028. If so the only source of funding remaining is the local authorities' contributions assuming they continue to provide them. The authorities are asked to give an early indication of whether they intend to continue to financially support the Western Gateway.

Ten Point Action plan

2.13 With funding now confirmed a list of ten key actions for taking forward the Work Plan are set out in Table Four below. These meet the Board's ask to focus on:

- STP/SIP light touch refresh leading to revised list of priority schemes for;
- Early business case development and;
- Advocacy for priority SIP schemes and case for change
- Promoting regional collaboration
- Technical support.

Table Four: Ten Point Action Plan

1) Strategic Transport Plan and Strategic Investment Plan light touch refresh to set priorities for early business case development and advocacy for schemes.
2) Recruitment or secondment from WECA or FTE consultant support to March 2028 to cover the departure of the Senior Transport Officer.
3) Work areas to continue as set out in Appendix One.
4) Work areas to go on hold as set out in Appendix One.
5) Accelerate move towards early business case development.
6) Commission consultants to support early business case development if required.
7) Streamline officer meetings, Boards and forums. Less frequent and evenly spaced out to maximise use of reduced resources.
8) Linkages and close working with National Highways, Network Rail and Homes England to continue.
9) Maximise use of newsletters/briefings to promote the work of the STB and advocacy for SIP priority schemes.
10) Advocacy role accelerated with possible use of outside agency.

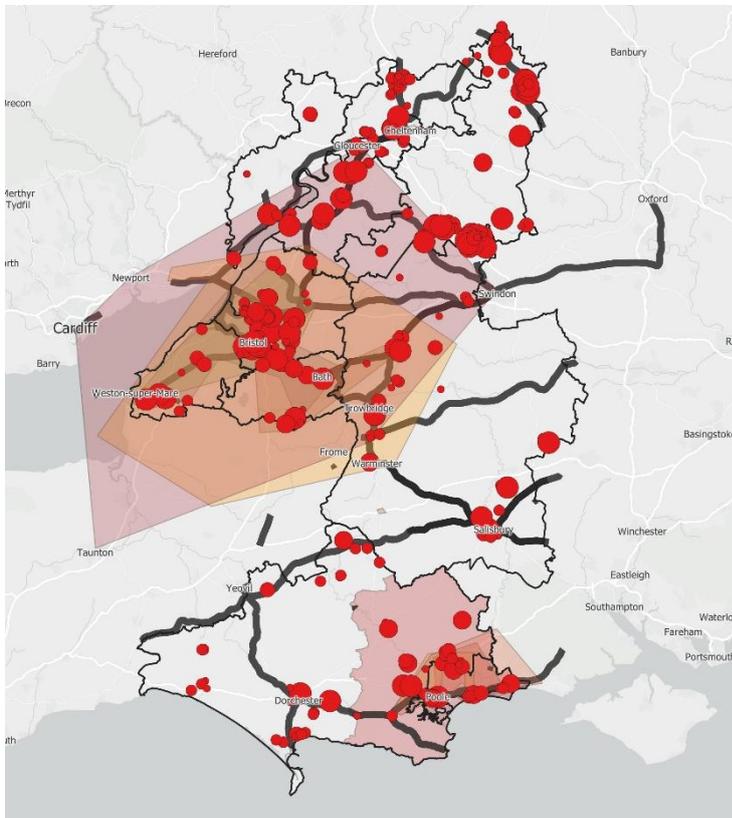
3. Strategic Transport Plan and Investment Plan refresh approach

3.1 The Western Gateway's Strategic Transport Plan (STP) was approved in March 2024 and the associated Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) a year later in March 2025. At the time, Members agreed that both documents would be reviewed and, if necessary, revised following a) the identification of sites for new (enhanced) housing growth and b) the publication of the Integrated National Transport Strategy (and/or other clarity on Government objectives, given that the STP was developed under the preceding Conservative government). The lack of direct support for housing growth and the alignment with superseded policies were both identified by Members as significant shortfalls in the current document. There are also secondary considerations, for example invitations for proposals were restricted to a small pool of stakeholders (who had limited time to submit options) and that many schemes on the Strategic Road Network had not reached a sufficient stage of development/approval to be included.

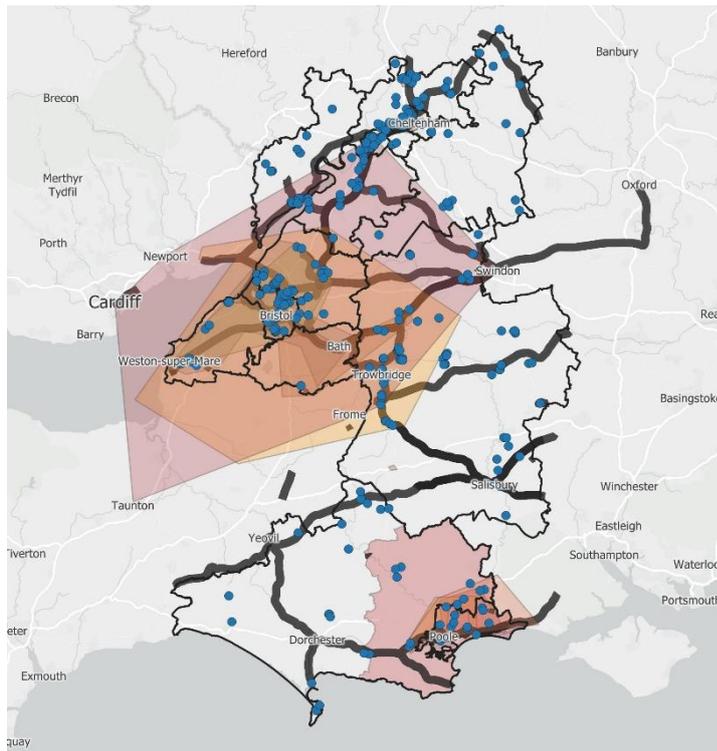
3.2 Those considerations remain valid. In the interim, however, the Government has announced the intention to cease funding STBs from March 2027 and to accelerate a path to devolution, which together raise new considerations about

the longer term status and maintenance of a region-wide transport strategy on the current WG geography. Whilst maintaining a STP and SIP is no longer a requirement of DfT funding they have clearly stated should STBs wish to take these forward the DfT and their arms' length bodies will continue to take an interest in them and take them into account. So there remains justification for undertaking a review.

- 3.3 At the Board meeting on 3 December 2025, Members asked Western Gateway officers to undertake a comparison of proposed housing and economic development sites to consider whether the existing distribution of SIP schemes adequately supported the delivery of new growth. The outputs of this analysis are shown in the map below. Red dots (scaled) show the distribution of planned housing growth, shaded polygons and thick black lines show existing SIP schemes.



3.4 A similar assessment of employment growth sites was also conducted.



3.5 The maps show some gaps in coverage of existing SIP schemes compared to growth sites (especially housing) in north Gloucestershire, west Dorset and south east Wiltshire. We then undertook a sensitivity analysis looking at introducing additional scoring to schemes in these areas that would support growth but are not currently prioritised in the programme. This resulted in a very limited change in schemes in the priority programme, elevating just a single scheme in Wiltshire.

3.6 The lack of change in the programme is mostly due to the fact that we simply have not received many proposals in the under-represented areas. It is also possible that a change in the relative weighting of different criteria in the assessment may also result in some additional change. It is possible this approach could be used to align the outputs more closely with current national or local priorities.

3.7 As a result of this assessment, we conclude:

- 1) The current priority SIP programme fails to support significant areas of planned growth
- 2) Adding a score to existing scheme proposals (in the long list) is unlikely to fill that gap and does not result in significant change to the existing programme
- 3) Weighting of criteria in favour of development may help, but still would not fill gaps due to lack of proposals in certain growth areas

3.8 We are, therefore, not able to address the shortfalls of the current STP and SIP programmes simply by re-evaluating the existing proposals.

- 3.9 We have, therefore, identified four general options for consideration, summarised in Table Five below. These have been discussed with the Senior Officer Group and their recommendations are outlined below.
- 3.10 Consultation with senior officers revealed no single clear preference across the group. While no one favoured unnecessary expenditure of resources and there was a general enthusiasm to proceed towards scheme delivery, there was also a general recognition that current STP could benefit from clearer alignment to current priorities and that certain areas and proposals are under-represented in the existing programme.
- 3.11 The emerging (but not unilateral) suggestion is that a review could start with a light touch approach (option 2) and progress in stages to option 3, and then potentially to a more comprehensive review and submission of additional proposals (option 4). This option retains flexibility but at the expense of overall systematic work planning for the remaining STB period. Funding was already allocated to cover a detailed review (option 4) so the light touch approach (option 2) is budgeted for. Should option 3 or 4 be required this can be funded from the original budget. If option 3 or 4 are not required savings will be redirected to support early business case development and advocacy work.

Table Five: Options for the Strategic Transport Plan and Strategic Investment Plan refresh

Options	Summary of option	Positives	Negatives	Resourcing requirements	Cost
1: Do nothing	No refresh to existing SIP or STP documents	+ No resource required. + Other documents produced by Strategic Authorities can support changes + Focus on delivery of existing prioritised list.	-STP/SIP out of date due to changes in central government priorities - Some areas of strategic growth not supported - Some current proposals missing from programme (e.g. SRN) - Previous board decision needs to be reversed	None	No cost.
2: Light touch	Add housing and employment priorities to existing prioritisation list. No changes to other information in prioritisation.	+ Work by Western Gateway officers with minimal resource required from LAs. + Strengthens inclusion of housing/employment growth in criteria	-Unlikely to make major changes to existing prioritisation list with equal weighting and current proposals available.	Western Gateway staff time only, focus on SIP refresh only.	Western Gateway staff time only. Some costs associated with SIP refresh document.
3: Light touch + Adjust weighting	Weighting of priorities (instead of equal weighting) across prioritisation list. No changes in existing information supplied.	+ allows prioritisation of specific objectives +Weightings could be aligned with current/emerging government policy (e.g. INTS) + May not change weightings around commonly agreed themes	-Differences of opinions on weightings between members likely. - Would need political discussion and ratification -Could change priorities substantially, dependent on weighting, but no sense yet of how	Additional input for local authorities regarding weighting. Western Gateway staff time required to adjust both STP and SIP. Participation by members.	Western Gateway staff time and possibly limited LA officer time. Some costs associated with SIP refresh document.
4: Reopen submissions + more detailed review.	As option 3 + Additional call for items to assess in SIP prioritisation. Potential revision of wider assessment criteria	+Enables new projects to be added to SIP prioritisation. + most likely to resolve gaps in support for growth + new government priorities could be brought in + enables resolution/improvement of weaknesses in existing SIP	-Most resource intensive option for both UAs and Western Gateway officers. - Requires engagement with additional parties - slows transition to delivery - May require revision of SIA	Substantial resourcing by Western Gateway team, possibly with support from consultants. LA officer time to submit new proposals	Additional cost for consultants required for resourcing assessment of new projects. Resourcing this option could limit ability to delivery other elements of the workplan

4. Consultation, communication and engagement

- 4.1 In preparing the original Work Plan workshops were held with the Board and the Senior Officers Group and draft versions shared. Discussions were held with the DfT and an early draft of the Work Plan provided. Given confirmation of funding was only received on 26 January 2026 there has been limited time available to engage on the revised Work Plan. The Senior Officers Group have been kept up to date and on 2 February 2026 took part in a Miro workshop on approaches to the SIP refresh.

5. Equalities Implications

- 5.1 No adverse impact on any protected groups. It should be noted that the revised Work Plan has the officers of the Western Gateway at its heart. This is about people who work tirelessly for the region and this is to be respected.

6. Legal considerations

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

7. Financial considerations

- 7.1 The DfT is providing £450,000 of funding for 2026/27.
- 7.2 The local authorities have been asked to increase their annual contribution from £20,000 to £24,000 for 2026/27. Eight of the nine authorities have indicated they will provide funding for 2026/27. This is subject to final confirmation as part of their budget setting processes in February 2026. One authority is unable to provide any funding. Total contribution likely to be £188,000. A verbal update will be provided at the Board on the latest position.
- 7.3 The DfT has long required STBs to hold a contingency budget to pay for redundancies and other winding up costs should they cease to exist. WECA as the accountable body is liable for redundancy payments. Any other winding up costs will be met from the 2027/28 budget.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

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

Appendix One: Revised Work Plan for 2026/27

Contact Officers

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Appendix One

Revised Work Plan for 2026/27

Work area	Why retain	How deliver
Strategic Transport Plan limited review including INTS impact review	Priority for the Board. Review inputs into SIP and priority projects for business case development and advocacy	Recruitment or FTE consultant support or secondment from WECA
Strategic Investment Plan partial update following STP review	Board priority. Update identifies SIP priority projects for early business case development and advocacy	Recruitment or FTE consultant support or secondment from WECA
Early business case development for priority projects with regional significance including rail	Key ask of the Board and SOG to support LAs. Provide advice, technical support and business case development for SIP schemes.	Consultant commission
Advocacy of priority projects including case for change documents	Key ask of the Board and SOG and major part of move to Regional Convenor and Advocacy role	In-house with consultant support
Rural Mobility Pilots	Round three grants building on success of previous pilots	In-house
Partnership work - Network Rail, National Highways, neighbouring STBs and Homes England on rail and road strategies, RIS3, M4 Dorset Coast, A303	Board request to maintain linkages and ongoing stakeholder relationships and joint working	In-house
Forums EV, rail, freight and Spatial Planning Tool to continue	Board request for co-ordination and cross boundary collaboration and continuity for regional transport conversations	In-house with reduced frequency
STB Meetings - Board, Senior and Transport Officers Group meetings	Maintains direction, collaboration and input from the LAs	In-house with reduced frequency
Rail – business case development including Heart of Wessex	Board and SOG recognition of the importance of looking at rail regionally	Consultant/Network Rail commission
Regional Centre of Excellence – focused on vision led planning	Supports LAs with spatial planning tools. Continues work on SW Corridor Study with Homes England.	In-house with consultant support for continued development of tools
Newsletter/information service	Maximise use of newsletters/briefings enable cut back of meetings and boost comms	In-house
Work area on hold	Why on hold	Impact
Buses	Insufficient resources	To be reviewed. Project Coral support was for the LAs.
Resilience Stage 3	Await introduction of Government's CREDO resilience tool	To be revisited
Technical support for officers in emerging MCAs	Unclear timescales Insufficient resources	To be picked up in 27/28 when the picture becomes clearer

Coach forum	Insufficient resources	Peninsula discussion on future of forum
Avonmouth Rail Freight Terminal business case development	Insufficient resources	In discussion with WECA on taking over lead and funding