

Western Gateway Board 24 June 2026

Rail industry strategic update - Network Rail

Industry reform

The journey towards GBR continues, with DfT sharing a [Policy publication timeline](#) earlier this month, which sets out when the policies and other key documents central to GBR formation will be consulted upon.

Currently out for consultation is the [GBR licence policy document](#), which sets out the design of the new accountability framework for GBR. Network Rail has published a discussion paper on the future [Access and Use Policy](#), which will be key to delivering the benefits of rail reform.

The Railways Bill has now passed the House of Commons and had a first reading in the House of Lords. The Act is likely to be passed later this year, and GBR established formally in 2027. Ahead of that operators continue to be brought back into national ownership, under DfT Operator initially, with SWR in May 2025, and GWR confirmed for December this year. This is already making it easier to develop business cases for improvements to services, and to deliver improvements that are within the collective organisations' reach.

Great Western Route

A new direct service to Oxford was launched in May, providing a seamless link to Bristol, Bath, Chippenham and Swindon every two hours. This is a direct result of joint strategic planning work which culminated in the 2024 [Case for Change](#) document. We are now working on the aspiration to make this an hourly service, and, potentially to continue through Oxford to offer even stronger inter-regional links.

We are leading detailed cross-industry work to ensure that new services linking the Western Gateway area with South Wales are developed in an integrated way, in particular alongside MetroWest future services. We will establish an industry timetable development working group to continue the excellent progress with a wide range of industry partners. This will provide the framework to consider Bristol area improvements including new stations and decarbonisation.

This work is a significant input to ongoing cross-industry work on delivering decarbonisation through fleet replacement. With GWR we continue to develop the business case for the Regional Fleet Renewal Programme that could deliver diesel-free battery trains across the region.

We are committed to driving forward the Wiltshire Rail Improvement Programme and our recent work with Western Gateway and Wiltshire Council shows that a new platform at Westbury is a key enabler for exciting new local and regional connections. We would like to progress a business case for the investment required.

Our programme of strategic network planning studies continues, with the Bath Bristol Corridor Study shared for comment with key partners and the Gloucestershire Rail Review Study kicking off. The Somerset rail strategy, which is also relevant to Western Gateway, is also being finalised with partners. Each consider shared aspirations for improved services and examine how they can be delivered alongside committed industry schemes. Support from local partners in each of these studies is critical to delivering an evidence-based and objective-focused strategy.

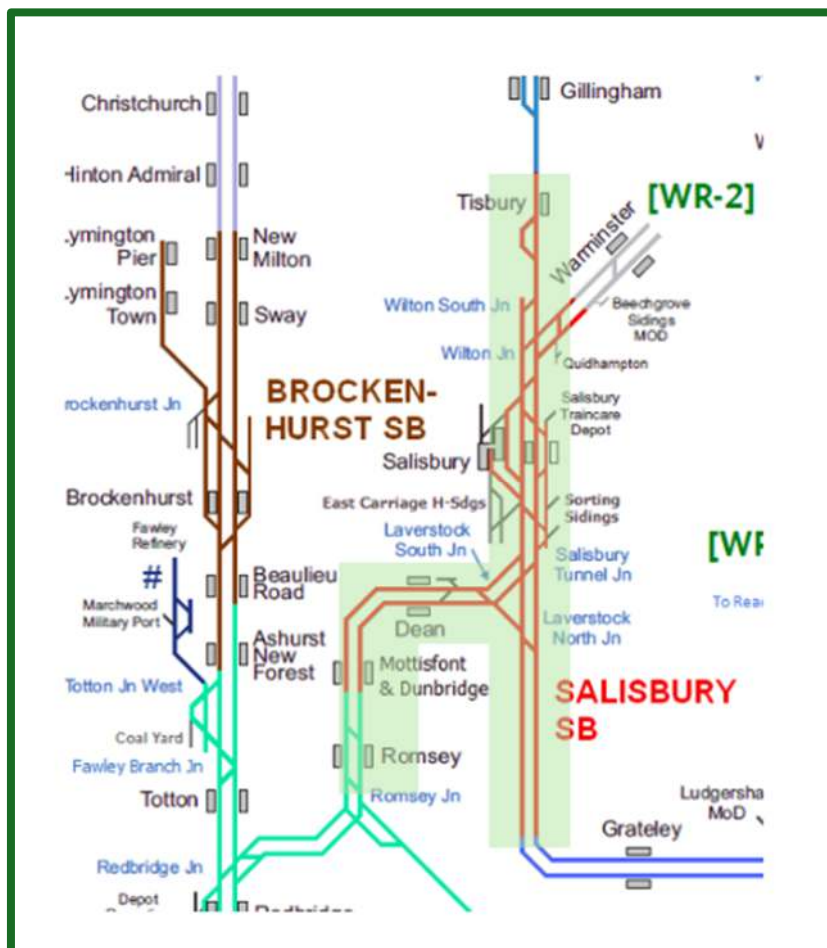
Wessex Route

West of England Line/ Salisbury

The new SWR/Wessex Integrated Business Unit (IBU), led by Lawrence Bowman, has taken previous work produced by the Wessex Strategic Planning team, including the West of England Line CMSP, Salisbury Area Strategic Study, and the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) work joint funded with Western Gateway STB, together with the NR/SWR work on the diesel fleet replacement, to produce the WoE Integrated Modernisation Plan.

This document sets out a series of package options based on meeting various outcomes or objectives for the line. The IBU have set-up the WoE Stakeholder Advisory Board, on which James White represents the STB, and they had the first meeting on the 14 May. This is the forum for discussing these options/packages with stakeholders.

Alongside the Integrated Modernisation Plan, we in the Wessex Strategic Planning team are working with our Asset Managers to see what improvements to capability we can include in the Salisbury Re-signalling renewal programme in Funding Period 1 (FP1 – 2029 to 2034). The Salisbury signalling area is shown in the map below, highlighted in pale green.



The re-signalling scheme offers an opportunity for us to make efficiently delivered improvements to the capability of the signalling system to provide active or passive provision for some of the service and infrastructure changes that have been suggested in our strategic studies and advice. For instance:

- **Salisbury Platform 1:** reinstating platform 1 for passenger service use
- **Wilton Junction to Westbury Headway Improvements:** improving the signalling headways to 4 minutes to allow additional flexibility and provide future capacity
- **Salisbury Tunnel Junction to Romsey Headway Improvements:** improving the signalling headways to 3 minutes to allow additional flexibility and provide future capacity

Owing to funding constraints, we are focusing on signalling enhancements that we think we will be able to integrate into the renewal for no or minimal additional cost. Enhancement aspirations, like the **Tisbury Loop**, aren't being actively progressed at this time, however, we have requested that there is sufficient capacity in the signalling interlocking for the loop to be delivered at a later stage (passive provision). This will make it easier to deliver the **Tisbury Loop** extension at a later stage when funding becomes available.

We also continue to work with Devon stakeholders on the Devon Metro concept. It should be remembered that the Devon Metro service improvement, +1tph between Exeter Central and Axminster, has benefits for the Western Gateway, including for residents of Chard, where housing growth is proposed, who are within a short drive of Axminster and would benefit from the service uplift.

Heart of Wessex

Since the Western Gateway STB part funded the SOBC for the Heart of Wessex Line service improvement (1tph service aspiration), our Western Strategic Planning colleagues have been working on the Westbury Platform 0 development workstream. This is a key infrastructure change required to unlock improvements to the Heart of Wessex Line service.

3rd Party funding is likely to be required to deliver the loop between Yeovil Pen Mill and Castle Cary that would enable the service change. It is also aligned with GWR's fleet replacement programme and the need for additional rolling stock to operate the service.

The first step to making changes on this line is delivery of Platform 0 at Westbury so focus should be concentrated on how that can be delivered as an initial phase.

South West Main Line (Dorset)

The Dorset Connectivity Strategic Study proposed the 'Dorset Metro' service frequency improvement to better connect Wareham and the wider Dorset area to the BCP conurbation. Western Gateway STB and Dorset Council subsequently provided funding to progress the Dorset Metro SOBC; this focused on what was required to deliver an additional hourly Wareham to Brockenhurst service throughout the day.

Unfortunately, the business case was poor for this specific change. However, we have not given up on seeking to understand what changes may be achievable. The Poole Area Strategic Study provides another opportunity to look at the Dorset Metro concept.

An initial scoping session with stakeholders is set-up for the 7th July, but broadly, the scope of the study will be:

- Redevelopment and enhancement of Poole station in its current location
- Investigation of the potential opportunity to relocate Poole station in line with aspirations to redevelop the town centre

- Closure of the level crossing at Poole, linked to the redevelopment of the town centre
- Freight aspirations in the Poole area
- Stabling and operational improvements
- Dorset Metro timetable analysis

The last point, Dorset Metro timetable analysis, will offer the opportunity to build upon the proposals that SWR will be consulting on in September for the timetable change in Dec-27/May-28 to understand what is achievable in terms of service improvement with little or no infrastructure change. The previous work looked at a specific service change, in this work we will look to be more creative and see what opportunities for incremental service improvements there are.

Further Information

Click on the [link](#) to be taken to the Network Rail website, then scroll down to 'Regional planning documents' and select 'Southern', this will give you access to all the documents our team have published.

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