

Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FOSBR)

Response to Portishead cost escalations announced 9th March 2017



FOSBR are disappointed by the potential tripling of costs for MetroWest Phase 1 from £58m to £145m-£175m. The 30,000 residents in Portishead urgently need a rail connection to avoid road congestion between Portishead and Bristol.

FOSBR would like to see further details of the cost increases which MetroWest state are due to two main factors: the limited road access to the Avon Gorge and the alternative road access required at the Ashton Vale industrial estate. Previous studies of the Portishead railway were clearly inadequate.

The way the studies were overseen by our local authorities is further indication of their weakness and inability to work effectively. Unlike other cities, the West of England authorities lack staff with technical expertise to do the work and oversee others. The initial work was carried out by and on behalf of North Somerset, not the Partnership, and reflected their own agenda. Studies concentrated on offering a 17 minute commute from Portishead to Bristol and failed to consider Bristol stations on the Portishead line. We have been paying the price for this ever since.



Winterstoke Road level crossing to Ashton Vale industrial estate

MetroWest have suggested a three-phase approach to MetroWest Phase 1:

- delivery of Bath to Avonmouth half-hour service (hourly to Severn Beach);
- delivery of hourly service to Portishead by not upgrading the freight line beyond the 30mph limit and
- upgrading of the Portishead line to 70mph.

MetroWest are suggesting the 30mph hourly service as an intermediate solution. FOSBR recognise the technical difficulties involved in upgrading the line through the gorge but an hourly service at 30mph through the gorge is not what we should be aspiring to. We note that a full journey at 30mph could still take less than half an hour and FOSBR believe that even without the line speed improvements in the gorge a service could run at half-hour frequency.

FOSBR would like to see any service from Portishead to Bristol operated by two trainsets (with proposed double track at Ashton Gate and Pill station) as this would ensure that the projected service would be reliable. FOSBR notes that the experience of the Severn Beach line suggests that an unreliable hourly service, such as pre-2008 as provided by one train, will have a poor ridership. High reliability should be the key target.

A half hourly service is required to enable it to be convenient, attractive to passengers and ultimately successful. The success of the Portishead line will be a game changer but its failure would set local rail improvements back again and potentially stop them for decades to come. A half hourly service must be planned and instituted on the basis of slower journeys.

While FOSBR would support the three-stage plan proposed as an alternative to the full delivery, we fear that further upgrades to allow 70 mph running through the gorge will not happen. This would require works to be carried out on a working railway at greater expense than that already identified. We therefore urge work to enable a half hourly service without this.

Christina Biggs
FOSBR Secretary
Thursday 9 March 2017

MetroWest Press Release here:
http://www.fosbr.org.uk/files/20170309_mw_pressrelease.pdf