

Open letter to candidates for Metro Mayor
The Post, Monday 3 April 2017



Dear candidates for Metro Mayor,

On Thursday 4 May 2017, one of you will become Metro Mayor of the West of England Combined Authority (WECA), with a devolution budget of £30 million per year over 30 years and a remit over transport, infrastructure, planning and skills.

This is a staggering responsibility and requires someone of calibre, experience and knowledge, particularly in public transport. In this letter we will set out our vision for one part of this remit, being local rail, which we think should be prioritised as the backbone for a truly regional public transport network, supplemented by bus and (funds permitting) light rail elements.

In the newly published December 2016 Joint Transport Study consultation, the 900 respondents to this consultation overwhelmingly favoured investment in rail to be prioritised over further road construction works. Road improvements alone are known to be counter-productive as they simply attract further road congestion.

The merits of a region-wide local rail network, properly resourced and maintained, should be obvious, both from the point of view of short and reliable transit times, independence of the rail network from road congestion and air quality improvements from electrification of rail lines. The benefits to social mobility and physical and mental health of an easy commute to work are well known and as it is ultimately the government who would benefit from this, rail investment should be prioritised.

However, a rail network will only be used by passengers if there is an adequate service frequency (our goal is 30 minutes), has direct services across the region with a minimum of changes, and adequate disabled access at stations. In turn, this is only deliverable with adequate rail infrastructure such as Filton Bank four-tracking and the remodelling of Bristol East Junction. Even now, stations such as Keynsham, Oldfield Park, Parson St, Bedminster, Severn Beach and Pilning still do not have a 30 minute frequency. But the MetroWest vision for region-wide rail goes further with the current MetroWest Phase 1 and 2 plans to reopen the Portishead and Henbury rail lines respectively and the Joint Spatial Plan proposals to reopen stations across the network as far afield as Charfield in S Glos and Saltford in BANES. We hope you will be inspired by our map which illustrates both the projects already in the pipeline (MetroWest Phase 1 and 2, in green) and our suggested aspirations for what we are calling MetroWest Phase 3, in blue.

The post of Metro Mayor has not been well advertised and the devolution scheme is in its infancy. We support the principle of a Combined Authority and welcome the opportunity this represents for joined-up transport thinking in the West of England. We urge you to seek a working relationship with North

Somerset that will reassure them as to the efficacy of the devolution model and encourage closer working in later stages of devolution.

Example 1 – the Severn Beach Line

In 2008, Bristol City Council committed £400,000 per year of revenue funding to fund a second train on the Severn Beach Line. The improvement from a once-hourly service to a 40-minute frequency resulted in the highest percentage growth in ridership of any branch line in the UK, and after five years the subsidy was taken into the Great Western franchise so that Bristol City Council does not now pay any subsidy at all for the line. There are similar success stories across the UK – Ebbw Vale, the Exmouth Line, the Tarka Line, the TransWilts line and Borders Railway – all brought about by a partnership between campaigners, politicians and train operating companies.

This year, the line comes of age as GWR are proposing to introduce high-capacity refurbished trains and smart-cards, and will be increasing the fares from their current 2007 levels in line with inflation. The line is acknowledged as a success and has seen a new evening service since 2003. Please take the success of this line as a vindication of investment in local rail and as a mode of transport that people of all social levels can benefit from. In response to the proposed 33%, 50% and 66% fare rises, we are proposing a commuter discount card scheme, along the lines of the scholar scheme introduced by the Severnside Community Rail Partnership, and urge you to negotiate with employers and work with stakeholders to support this scheme and find other ways of lessening the blow the fare rises will be to lower-income passengers.



Example 2 – the Portishead Line

You will be aware of the estimated tripling of costs for MetroWest Phase 1, which includes the passengerisation of the Portishead Line, from £58m (GRIP

2) to £145m-£175m (GRIP 3) but also includes a long-awaited upgrade to a half-hour service from Avonmouth to Bath.

Although the Portishead line is not in your current Combined Authority area, we urge you to engage in the re-scoping of this project if only for the lessons learned for future phases of MetroWest, being Phase 2 (stations to Henbury and Yate) and our ideas for MetroWest Phase 3, some of which is specified in the 2016 draft of the Joint Spatial Plan and Joint Transport Study. The delivery of the Portishead line is long overdue and still eagerly awaited and its implementation will give new energy to the realisation of future phases of MetroWest.

Please do not be disheartened from the over-run in costs of Phase 1, but note that the majority of this financial over-run is due to rail construction costs for a perhaps unrealistically high speed specification for the Portishead Line. We urge you to learn the lessons from this:

Firstly, you need to ensure high-calibre transport planning staff in the new Combined Authority, so that you can more accurately oversee the planning and specify a more realistic rail service. We urge you, the future Metro Mayor, to challenge the Phase 1 figures and to obtain a detailed breakdown of the GRIP 2 and GRIP 3 costs. Although the proposed three-stage plan seems reasonable to us, we propose some options for consideration, such as a 45-minute frequency service to Portishead using the current line-speed (a still-acceptable 22 minute transit time from Portishead to Temple Meads) and the two trainsets already agreed from revenue funds, just as for the Severn Beach Line.

Another aspect of your job as Metro Mayor is a firm relationship with the business sector. For example, we look to you to facilitate negotiations with the Port of Bristol to obtain a financial contribution and co-operation from the Port of Bristol during the Portishead engineering works, as they stand to gain substantially from the line upgrade. You should also be aware that the Avonmouth docks have a level crossing over the Severn Beach line which is impeding the introduction of a half-hour service to Severn Beach, let alone a meaningful Henbury Loop (not Spur) service. We therefore look to you to develop a good working relationship with businesses such as the Port, via groups such as SevernNet or Business West, as well as securing rail powers over Network Rail passenger and freight paths, which will facilitate a rail service to benefit the whole of society and not just narrow “big business” interests.

The Future of the MetroWest rail vision

Given the benefits of electrification to air quality and track condition, we urge you to ensure that any extra funding from the Department for Transport for the MetroWest rail project should not be at the expense of permanently cancelling the promised but delayed electrification from London to Temple Meads, by securing a date for recommencing electrification in the next Control Period.

We urge you to also secure full funding for East Bristol junction so that timetable improvements can be secured for local rail services for MetroWest alongside intercity services and to start the development of schemes such as those proposed in the Joint Spatial Plan and Transport Study, such as further station reopenings and the Henbury Loop – see Appendix for full details of our proposals.

We hope that the examples given here will encourage you to take the time during your campaign for Metro Mayor to learn about how local rail is funded and implemented and take encouragement from the success of the Severn Beach Line. Please also take the time to meet with the many stakeholders in local rail, from Network Rail, Great Western Railway, the Severnside Community Rail Partnership and campaign groups such as ourselves (Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways) and the Transport for Greater Bristol Alliance, who have experience (and some expertise) in public transport matters.

This region suffers most from a poor transport network, giving rise to congestion and poor air quality and is most in need of significant investment in local rail, good rail-bus interchange and effective central planning of bus routes. Please do not let us down!

Yours sincerely,

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Appendix

What does FOSBR campaign for?

FOSBR calls on our MPs, mayors, and local councillors in the immediate term to press the government to deliver:

- MetroWest Phase 1 to Portishead via Pill
- MetroWest Phase 2 to Henbury via Ashley Hill and North Filton
- completion of four-tracking of Filton Bank
- re-modelling of Bristol East Junction
- electrification to Bristol Temple Meads
- and the Temple Meads Spatial Plan.

At the same time we press the West of England Partnership and the constituent local authorities to:

- improve the timetable to complete a 30 minute service to all local stations including stations between Bristol Temple Meads and Severn Beach

