



Statement on WEP Preliminary Business Case for MetroWest Phase 1

FOSBR is delighted that a preliminary business case has been completed for MetroWest Phase 1 and would urge WEP JTB to accept the report and proceed to the next planning stage, with the below comments accepted for incorporation by officers in the next iteration of the business case. Note that there are very few recommendations in this statement for a particular option over another. This is not because of the absence of a view, but that given the recent release date of the report it would be preferable for FOSBR to meet as a committee first to discuss the options and canvass for opinion to consider the options so that the recommendations are then agreed as a group. The following comments are intended as an attempted clarification of the many and complex issues in lieu of extensive formal questions. A written officer response as confirmation of the accuracy of this “statement of fact” (whether at the meeting on Friday or later) would be welcomed.

1. Choice of timetable options: rejection of baseline Option 1

FOSBR would agree with the officers that either Option 5B or Option 6b would be preferable to a baseline option of a shuttle service between Portishead and Bristol Temple Meads, as MetroWest Phase 1 presents a rare opportunity for a step change for the railway service in all four WEP councils, for the following reasons:

1.1 BCC would benefit from the proposed timetable improvement on the Severn Beach Line of 40 mins service to half-hourly clockface on the Severn Beach Line;

1.2 BANES would benefit from the change from hourly to a half-hourly service for Keynsham and Oldfield Park as BANES offices are being relocated to Keynsham;

1.3 N Somerset would gain from the new half-hour service for Portishead and Parson St.

1.4 Both Bristol and S Glos would benefit from the direct connectivity across Greater Bristol from Portishead to the Severn Beach Line including the Greater Bristol suburban stations. FOSBR has been recently campaigning for a “Unite the City” approach to avoid bad connections (and indeed not having to change trains at all) at Temple Meads for routine cross-city travel. This will surely relieve traffic congestion across Bristol.

1.5 A quantification of these benefits could be the basis for sharing the capital and annual subsidy between the four councils.

2. Agnostic on choice between timetables Option 5B and Option 5C

2.1 FOSBR accept that the option giving double connectivity to the Severn Beach Line (to both Portishead and Bath) is a welcome improvement for the residents of north Bristol (particularly when the Henbury Loop is completed in MetroWest Phase 2) and therefore that there will also be a considerable advantage to South Glos in the future and therefore a reason to contribute to the funding of MetroWest Phase 1 as well as MetroWest Phase 2 (Henbury Loop).

2.2 However, we also see the benefit to Portishead of direct connections with both the Severn Beach Line and Bath, even though the Severn Beach to Bath service would then not be direct. We note that as this option is more expensive (and therefore BCR much lower) due to not using the two existing Severn Beach Line trains to the full. FOSBR therefore would simply urge WEP to choose the most viable timetable option at least to start off with. It might be helpful to cost up the baseline option 1 (shuttle Portishead to Temple Meads) for comparison so that if no revenue funds are available then at least the Portishead line infrastructure is put in place using the already promised City Deal capital funds.

3. Annual subsidy

3.1 FOSBR agrees with the officers that the most significant cost of the proposed two options for the MetroWest enhanced services (whether 5B or 6B) would be the annual cost to the four councils to be found from their revenue budget (presumably with no prospect of external funding), for running the extra four or five extra train sets, but would agree that the proposed benefits far outweigh the temporary subsidy from revenue funding needed and that if at all possible the enhanced services for all four councils should be promoted in preference to the baseline Option 1 shuttle from Portishead to Temple

Meads. FOSBR considers that the estimated +/- 5% = £1.1m total per year to be found for the first three years is reasonable (in fact still too pessimistic – see below) for the advantage to all four councils, given that this £275k per annum per council is close to the £200k subsidy paid by Bristol City Council for the Severn Beach Line subsidy until October 2012 inclusive.

- 3.2 FOSBR notes that as the Severn Beach Line subsidy was paid from 2008 to 2012 (no payment in Oct 2013) that the DfT might not take over the funding of the new MetroWest Phase 1 services after just 3 years, but that as the DfT did in fact take over the Severn Beach Line subsidy in five years (with the renegotiation from £420k to £200k halfway through) that the promise of DfT similarly taking over the MetroWest subsidy in a similar time is not unreasonable.
- 3.3 FOSBR also agrees that the initial “pessimistic” estimate of a £1.8m subsidy required per annum is indeed very pessimistic and that the real costs might well be as much as the +/- 10% over/underestimate for the following reasons:
- 3.3.1 The projected revenue from the initial ridership and passenger growth figure used, rather than the WebTag statutory 4% per annum, should surely be the argued to be the same as the 15% growth per annum that we have seen on the Severn Beach Line since 2008 as the rate of growth on the Severn Beach Line shows no signs of levelling off. It would also be worth quoting the considerable passenger ridership increase in other South West branch lines such as TransWilts (through Melksham), the Tarka Line (Exeter to Barnstaple) and the Heart of Wessex line. This would then strengthen the case to the DfT for a high projected revenue and therefore a low subsidy.
- 3.3.2 Furthermore, if the promised timetable improvements to the Severn Beach Line from 40 minute to 30 minute are delivered, we would estimate that this passenger growth will rise even more, as passengers have often commented on the clunkiness of a 40 minute service simply in terms of the necessity of having a timetable always to hand and difficulty of remembering departure times. Coupled with the proposed direct connection to Bath the Severn Beach Line passenger figures, already surpassing 1 million journeys per year, should see a major step change.
- 3.3.3 **Projected costs:** Basing the costs on hiring 2 drivers per train and 2 train managers per train, on the basis of needing to cover all shifts would give an overestimate as staff do not work for just 50% of the available hours (so the quoted anecdotal 1.75 drivers and train managers seems more reasonable). However, we agree that a conservative figure of 2 drivers and train managers clearly needed to be used now before the exact timetable is decided on for the following two reasons:
- 3.3.4 As officers indicate, the figure of 1.75 drivers and train managers per train cannot be adopted until the timetable is decided and a rota of drivers across Bristol area can be decided on.
- 3.3.5 **Revenue protection:** FOSBR would strongly suggest that the new trainsets have adequate revenue protection officers or guards. An estimated 70% of potential income was received on the Severn Beach Line in 2013 and this problem will only get worse with the better connectivity.
- 3.3.6 **Station staffing:** It would be helpful for the new stations to have open and staffed ticket offices or smart cards, particularly at Portishead so that visitors receive a warm welcome to this festive and glamorous town.

4. The subsidy is subject to negotiation!

We note the 100% transfer of costs and 100% transfer of revenue to the DfT mentioned in the report and so conclude that the revenue, although originating from ticket sales, is surely not collected by special WEP ticket collectors, but that the DfT and FGW will have some system of estimating ticket sales for the particular new WEP services. We also assume that WEP will not have to pay the £6m trainset hire and staffing costs up front before collecting the fares. This therefore means that the subsidy is a matter of negotiation with DfT and FGW and therefore that there is room for arguing with DfT and FGW for a higher

ridership and lower costs. We would remind WEP that for the Severn Beach Line, Gary Hopkins negotiated a halving of the Severn Beach Line subsidy from £420,000 to £200,00 per annum in 2011, by renegotiating the terms of the agreement so that the ticket revenue was paid to First Great Western instead of the DfT.

5. Rolling stock

We would also urge WEP to not assume that 2-car sets would be adequate for all trains, particularly for Portishead commuters. There might need to be 3-car sets even from the start, but we anticipate the ridership will be much more than projected so we do not think this will increase the subsidy. In fact this would be positive evidence for DfT that the service was a success and that therefore they should take over the funding of the subsidy much earlier!

6. Siting of Portishead station

FOSBR notes that there is a risk of the difficulty of the Portishead station siting stalling the MetroWest Phase 1 plans. FOSBR gives the following comments on the different options:

6.1 Royal Portbury Dock Road site

FOSBR notes that one option considered in the report is to site the Portishead station on the Royal Portbury Dock Road for ease of access from the M5 and from the large residential area on Portishead Hill south of the marina who would be out of walking distance from any of the three proposed sites in Portishead town. However, FOSBR believes that a siting of the Portishead Station in the Royal Portbury Dock Road would only exacerbate the traffic congestion from Portishead to the M5 roundabout as to access this site would necessitate using the M5 roundabout itself, albeit on the first exit clockwise so perhaps achievable with extra lanes on the roundabout or a road cutting across the chord. Still, this would be the least satisfactory option as it would then not enable visitors to Portishead to enjoy a walk to the marina from the station and would not bring the same festive ambience to Portishead that a train station near the centre traditionally does.

6.2 Portishead town sites

Within this proviso that a siting of Portishead station is preferable within the town, FOSBR remains agnostic about the optimum siting of the rail station and would simply urge the most expedient solution to be promoted, at least until the service is up and running. It would seem that a bus shuttle from South Portishead to the new station would be necessary in any case so perhaps the main consideration is space for a bus stop and turnaround and also space for parking cars at the station and then some attractive landscaping of the pedestrian approach from the station to the marina and up to the Lake. It would be worth comparing the station distances from town centre versus ridership relative to population for cities such as Bristol, Weston super Mare, Oxford, Cambridge, Salisbury, Melksham and Barnstaple.

7. Omission of stations from MetroWest Phase 1 plans

FOSBR note that Bedminster and Ashton Gate have not been mentioned although Portishead, Pill and Parson St have. We take these in turn:

7.1 Omission of Bedminster station from the Portishead service

In view of the fact that there is no disabled access at Parson St and the abysmal stopping service at Bedminster, we would strongly urge officers to at least consider a semi-fast alternating pattern at both Bedminster and Parson St. FOSBR have long campaigned for better services to Bedminster and Parson and have long anticipated that the Portishead service brings with it the solution to the woes of these South Bristol “Cinderella” stations. We appreciate that there are many fast and semi-fast trains coming through from Taunton which will not want to be held up behind Portishead trains. However we would urge officers and members to ensure that Bedminster is included in the Phase 1 timetable for the following reasons:

7.1.1 Both Bedminster and Parson St need a half-hour service

South Bristol is a low income area and there is an urgent need for Bedminster to be connected to areas of high employment either in North Bristol or Portishead. South Bristol has a poor bus and train service with a five-hour gap on Sundays and an hourly service only in the middle of the day.

7.1.2 Bedminster has superior access and facilities to Parson St.

Whereas Parson St has no disabled access and no car parking and is also in the middle of a roundabout with no easy pedestrian access, Bedminster Station has excellent ramps for disabled access, provision of free and NCP parking near Bedminster Station, is near to the Bedminster pedestrianised shopping street and flagship companies such as Bristol Blue Glass, has beautiful murals commissioned and installed by Severnside Community Rail Partnership.

7.1.3 Network Rail assurance of half hour service with three tracks to Parson St

In reply to formal questions at BCC/WEP, Network Rail gave assurances that double-tracking south of Parson St was not needed to ensure a half-hour service for Bedminster and Parson St. If this is now found to be false, could not the fourth line be reinstated between Parson St and Temple Meads as FOSBR has often urged?

7.1.4 FOSBR request to WEP to reinstate Bedminster in the plans

FOSBR therefore urges the WEP officers and members to reconsider this fatal omission of Bedminster Station in the plans. We consider this a major betrayal – we considered the new Bedminster earlybird and early evening service introduced in May 2014 after extensive campaigning, not as the endpoint of the aspiration to improve the stopping service but as small first steps. Please reconsider and let us try to find a solution!

7.2 Ashton Gate:

We note that Ashton Gate (along with Horfield&Lockleaze and Ashley Hill) is the subject of a Halcrow New Stations study that was originally due to be completed in January 2014 and only now in September 2014, with still no published outcome, is addressing the issue of potential passenger footfall. We would urge WEP to accelerate this study and to consider the options for siting Ashton Gate so that it serves both the football ground and also Ashton Court, but in the meantime to build in a stop at Ashton Gate into the Phase 1 timetable so that the timetable would not need to be changed once Ashton Gate is built. This interim “ghost stop” would merely introduce some slack into the initial timetable and as Ashton Gate is off the main Bristol – Taunton and SW line would not have implications for capacity, as on the stretch from Parson St to Temple Meads.

8. Governance

We congratulate WEP on this achievement to develop the MetroWest plans as far as this business case and we appreciate that the four members of WEP have worked well together in the past. We also acknowledge the high calibre of the officers concerned. However, we consider that the major task of delivering this major improvement to the Greater Bristol train service is too big to be undertaken and managed by WEP alone. We are particularly alarmed that WEP itself has no funds “in common” and has to at each stage apply to each of the four councils for funds (both capital and revenue) and rely on the goodwill of the four councils to vote through the necessary funds. We would strongly urge that WEP look at its funding, governance and staffing to enable it to operate more as a Local Transport Body. Running a train service over such a wide area is a serious undertaking and we understand that the present staff are very overworked. The budget needed for this major improvement is sizeable and there needs to be accountability and structure to bring this project through to completion.

Dr Christina Biggs
FOSBR Secretary, 11/09/2014