

Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FOSBR)

Submission to the Williams Review, 31 May 2019

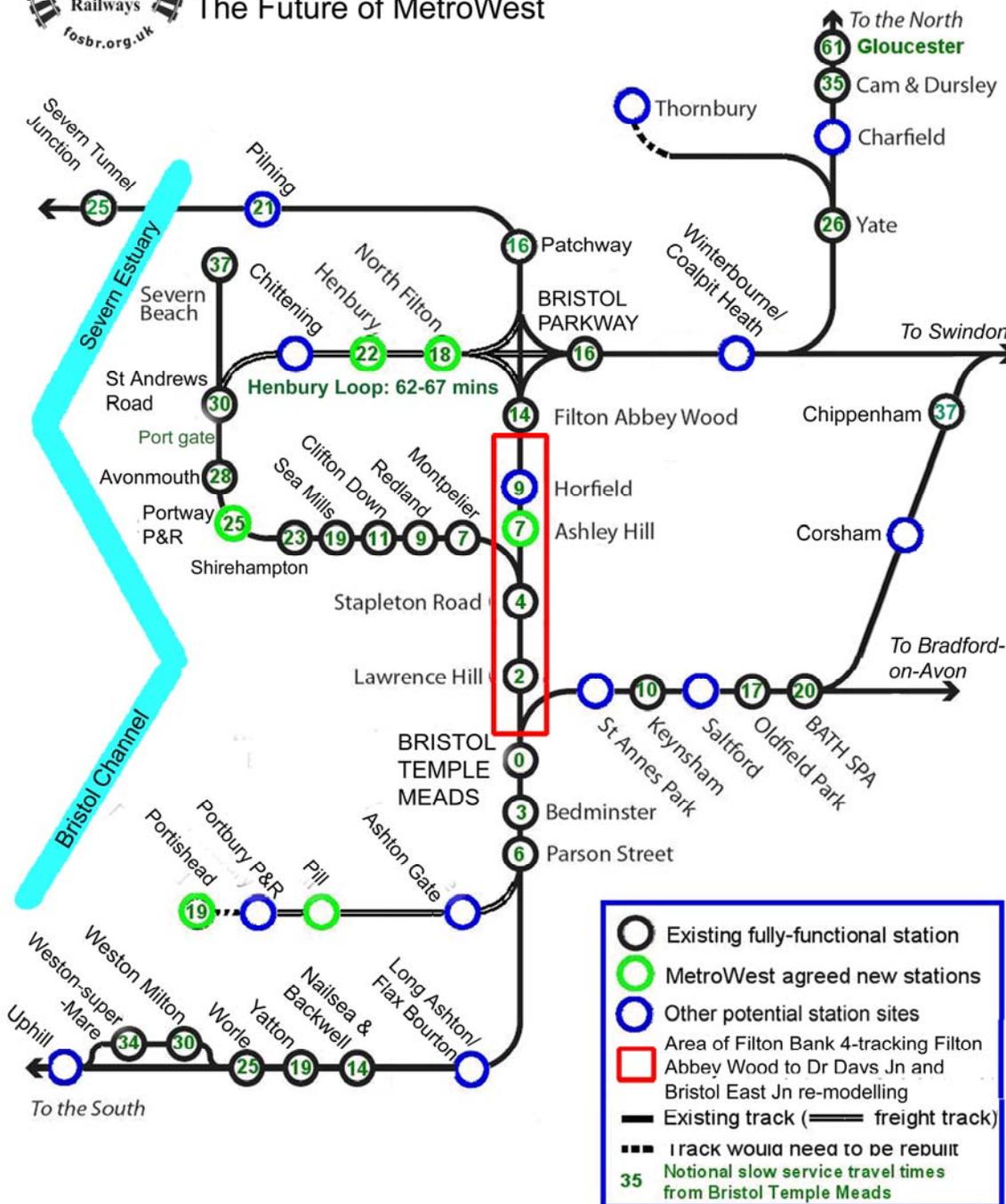


1. Who we are

FOSBR is a 200-member-strong rail user group (though not at present a formally affiliated Community Rail Group) which campaigns for local rail improvements in the West of England travel-to-work area. We have regularly presented statements at the public forum of the West of England Partnership and now the newly formed West of England Combined Authority. We have good relations with Railfuture, TravelWatch South West and the Severnside Community Rail Partnership as well as the rail unions. Below is our campaign rail map showing both existing and potential future stations, including MetroWest Phase 1 (Portishead and half-hour services from Avonmouth to Bath and beyond) and Phase 2 (Henbury Spur and services from Temple Meads to Gloucester), which are now going through the GRIP process and are at GRIP stages 3 and 2 respectively.



The Future of MetroWest



This year we are delighted that our long-running campaigns over the past 20 years have borne fruit: the completion of the Filton Bank four-tracking, the securing by the DfT of the final £48 million for the Portishead Line (thanks also to the untiring efforts of the Portishead Rail Group and the MPs and councillors of N Somerset) and the securing of £2m of WECA funds to open Portway Park and Ride. We are currently petitioning for the speedy implementation of MetroWest Phase 1A, a half-hour train service from Avonmouth to Bath (and potentially Westbury) and are encouraging the Mayor of Bristol and MPs to push for the remodelling of Bristol East Junction. We are also campaigning (with Pilning Station Group) for the inclusion of regular services to Pilning Station in the WECA Joint Local Transport Plan (the sole omission!) – Pilning’s footbridge was removed during electrification and never replaced despite sustained local and regional campaigning – an example of Network Rail being oblivious to the local transport needs of small stations and an example of the need for balance between local and national needs.

Scope of this submission

It should be stated at the outset that FOSBR support the public ownership of rail, but only if the management is competent and experienced, as we consider that DfT have made many errors of judgement and can be thought of as micromanaging and causing uncertainty by frequent changes of decisions. In addition, we also favour devolution, but again, only if the combined authorities take on adequate rail powers and take an interest in both day-to-day operation (controlling delays and cancellations) and formulate a rail plan that includes service frequency enhancements and new stations and routes. For this there needs to be adequate devolved funding, and the transport offering needs to be considered as a public service, not as a money-maker for private investors.

We note that the overwhelming focus of the current set of Williams evidence papers is on the delivery of existing franchise commitments and the restoration of reliability of services and value for money, rather than infrastructure enhancements or an increase in service frequency or new stations and train lines. We would contend that with the right infrastructure improvements to unlock capacity, both existing services and new offerings become possible.

For this submission we will be commenting on the conflicts between local and national rail, the existing and potential benefits of devolution, and the necessity for longer-term step changes in provision (in both rolling stock and rail infrastructure such as redoubling, four-tracking and new signalling technology) and their relationship to day-to-day delivery of existing commitments.

2. Lessons learned from local rail – devolution and subsidy

Example A – the need for clarity and ambition in commissioning rail enhancements

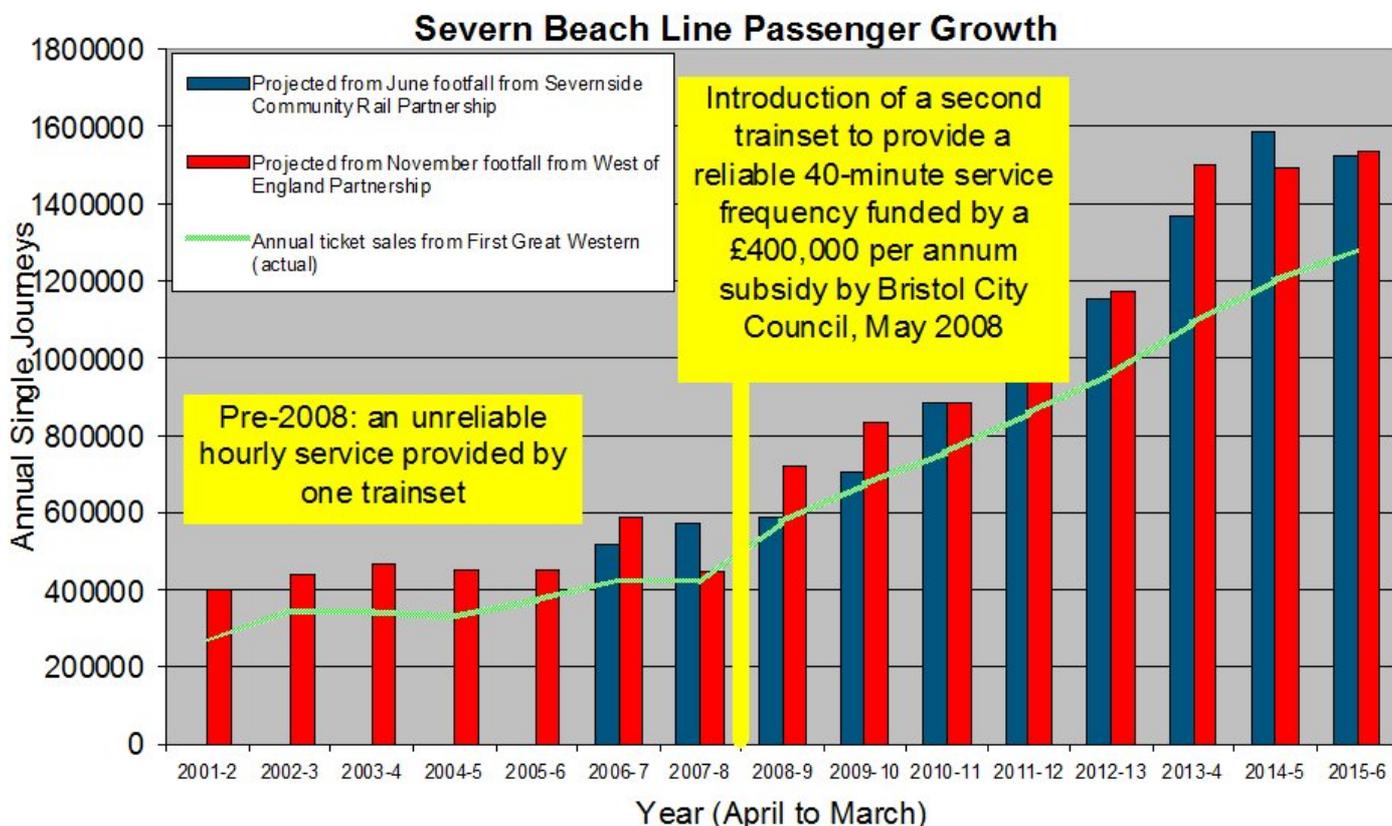
It should be noted that the recent rail investments in the West of England (Filton Bank, Portishead Line and Portway Park and Ride) have largely happened either before the formation of the West of England Combined Authority (WECA), or in spite of it. For example, as North Somerset Council voted to not form part of WECA, it was only by the direct intervention of the Secretary of State that the money was found for Portishead. The Filton Bank campaign started 10 years ago and was largely promoted by MPs acting together. And WECA itself has been very cautious in taking ownership of rail; MetroWest Phase 1 and 2 (and Portway Park and Ride) are legacy projects from the West of England Partnership days, and the first draft of the Joint Local Transport Plan included only five more rail stations.

In fact, although WECA did fund the last £2m for Portway Park and Ride and have committed £2m in funding for planning the Temple Meads Station Masterplan, they have only started planning one new station – Charfield – and have not yet taken on rail powers for determining timetables or fares, or even day-to-day oversight of delays and cancellations. This is in stark contrast to the Northern Powerhouse, and also to the enthusiasm with which WECA is planning yet more road-building which will simply attract more cars onto the already-gridlocked roads in Bristol.

There continue many uncertainties as to how to navigate the complex web of relationships in the rail industry and in particular how to cause local rail enhancements to enter the pipeline: there is no set of rules on how significant rail infrastructure enhancements could be funded (and the split in costs between regional and national government) and no clearly identifiable “front door” for local authorities wishing to commission new projects. The new Rail Enhancements Pipeline process does give some clarity on what a business case should include to be successful. However, it can be argued that the Benefit Cost Ratio concept and method of calculation favours a commercial model rather than regarding mobility as a paid-for public service, as for other transport modes such as bus services. This can damage the prospects of interventions that have strategic importance. We therefore favour a model where regionally devolved transport authorities have the power to commission new services, but also have control over fares and rolling stock deployment and day-to-day running of the timetabled services. This will need considerable regional staffing of competent and experienced rail professionals.

Example B – The need for locally-provided subsidy for pump-priming new services

In 2008, FOSBR succeeded in persuading Bristol City Council to pay a subsidy of £420,000 per year to DfT to run an extra trainset on the Severn Beach Line, augmenting the service from an hourly frequency to one every 40 minutes. The chart below shows the subsequent rise in ridership. The yearly subsidy was first renegotiated two years later by Bristol City Council to half that value, and paying the subsidy direct to GWR, and then a total of five years later entirely taken into the next franchise, showing the success of the pump-priming model where local authorities can initiate improvements and then reinvest the revenue into new schemes once the service becomes successful and the running cost is taken into the new franchise. Sadly, although we campaigned for this newly released revenue stream to be reinvested in further service enhancements, the released revenue was simply absorbed into the Bristol Council budget and soon was cut back in the austerity period that followed.



In 2014, the MetroWest Preliminary Business Case (for GRIP 2) as originally submitted, included in the financial mix a revenue subsidy of £1.1 million to be funded by the four constituent authorities.

This was predicated on the assumption that the DfT would take the cost of the subsidy into the franchise after three years. This is not borne out by our previous experience and we are concerned that, with the current cuts in funding to local authorities, this model of revenue subsidy is unsustainable, unless the new West of England Combined Authority (WECA) commits to providing revenue subsidies in the long term from its own funds, perhaps justified as a pump-priming initiative that is then reinvested into new services.

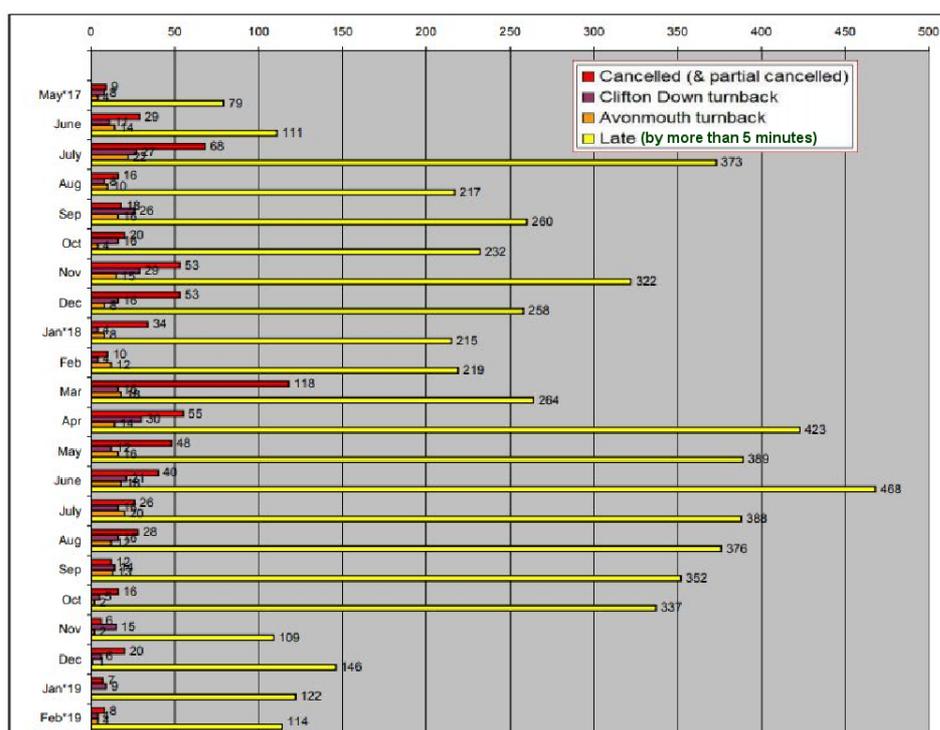
This dependence of devolution on local and national politics is the fly in the ointment of the devolution model: most recently in the local authority elections, the political colour of three of the constituent authorities of the West of England has completely changed. It will be interesting to see what this means in terms of the structure of WECA, but as rail is already a short-term prospect with the franchise system, the out-of-phase political timetable is hardly helpful to long-term thinking. Thus care needs to be taken to make sure that devolved authorities have a method of ensuring longevity of strategy.

Example C – The need for local monitoring of delays and cancellations, and the impact of infrastructure improvements on reliability

In 2017 we closely monitored the delays and cancellations on the Severn Beach Line arising from the introduction of Class 166 trains, to replace the Pacers and Class 150s trains. The chart below shows the decimation of reliability from delays, premature turnbacks at Avonmouth and Clifton Down (with detrimental consequences for the commuting of workers in Severnside) and outright cancellations. We feared that our careful campaigning over many years to nurture the growth on the Severn Beach Line was in danger of being reversed.

FOSBR met repeatedly with GWR and appealed to the DfT to identify the person or persons who had overview (and authority over both GWR and Network Rail) of the punctuality and day-to-day delivery of the services. We were finally referred to an official in the DfT, but were disconcerted to hear that he was largely operating on his own with very little resource. We were given repeated assurances that Network Rail and GWR were working closely together but we saw only repeated reallocation of blame, especially on the single-tracking on the Severn Beach Line which had previously not been a cause of undue delay, and an unquestioning priority given to CrossCountry intercity services over local services on Filton Bank.

Although GWR worked hard to fit the new trainsets with the capacity to open doors from the middle of the train rather than just from the ends, and to train the drivers and dispatch team, there was only one month (February 2018) when the service recovered to pre-2017 levels and then came the next blow – the Bristol area resignalling which produced teething troubles in the form of loss of local signaller experience and the need to tweak the Automatic Route Setting software. Then came the engineering possessions for various projects including Filton Bank.



The reliability in local services was only finally restored when the Filton Bank four-tracking was delivered in November 2018, an infrastructure enhancement that we had campaigned for over 10 years. We are of course pleased that the four-tracking has meant such a marked improvement in both local and regional service reliability, and we understand that the business case for Filton Bank was only accepted for the benefits it would bring to the intercity services. However, our primary motivation for campaigning for Filton Bank was that it would enable the delivery of both MetroWest Phase 1 (Portishead plus half-hour from Avonmouth to Bath) and Phase 2 (services to Henbury via North Filton), and we very much hope that the enthusiasm of Network Rail and DfT for yet more services to London will not result in further delays to MetroWest.

There is therefore a significant disconnect in priority between local, regional and intercity services. We appreciate that rail infrastructure is necessarily limited in capacity but we are also aware of the revolution that projects such as the Filton Bank four-tracking can deliver and the win-win this provides for local and intercity services, as well as the potential for selective double-tracking on branch lines. Infrastructure improvements cannot be wholly owned as benefiting only the regional services – there must be a common front door to commissioning such improvements. And there must be a focus on upper, middle and lower management expertise and continuity in managing change in rolling stock – we understand that the lack of readiness of GWR to cope with the new Class 166 trains was due to the DfT making decisions at very short notice. We would love to see an integrated railway but this must invest heavily in competence, informed overview, long-range strategy and information sharing.

In the longer term, we consider that a major priority should be to increase capacity and agility via innovative technology, such as smart moving-block signalling for trains to allow more frequent services. We welcome the emphasis in the Williams “Future of rail” paper on passenger convenience of wifi provision and automatic information gathering, but we would also stress the need to maintain adequate staffing levels on trains and at stations. We understand the Driver Only Operation issue to be primarily due to the concern of rail staff for the safety of the passengers.

3. FOSBR recommendations for governance of the rail industry

FOSBR commend the initial evidence papers published for the Williams Review and would favour the following governance to be implemented:

- An independent body to enable rail professionals to coordinate investment and oversee the industry (and remove DfT interference),
- Coordination not fragmentation so FOSBR opposes the Rail Delivery Group’s proposals for more competition and airline style advance ticketing (which would spell the end of walk-on fares),
- FOSBR supports devolution and local control via transport authorities such as the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). The latter would be required whoever services are run by – whether a private business, publicly owned or not-for-profit organisation, although we would prefer a not-for-profit model. We would also prefer services to be commissioned as a direct award specifying services rather than a franchise, which gives more control over what is provided. We would request that for devolution to work, there should be a statutory duty imposed on the combined authorities to act as a transport authority, including commissioning new services, rail powers over both Network Rail and the train operating companies, and day-to-day oversight of delays and cancellations.
- New bodies would need competent and informed leadership, be drawn from the rail industry, and there should be a formal and close relationship with local councils and transport authorities to ensure the focus is on local as well as national rail. That should include formal

passenger involvement with transport authorities, via Community Rail Partnerships and other rail user groups such as ours.

- FOSBR would also like to see regulation of the rolling stock companies (ROSCOs), to lower the substantial rolling stock hire fees which has resulted in the need for such high revenue subsidy in the first place.

National and local issues that illustrate these points:

- The Department for Transport has been repeatedly criticised in the rail industry journals for short-sighted planning, micro-managing, changing decisions at short notice and renegeing on commitments. The East Coast Mainline is, we feel, a case in point. We consider it is very important for any integrated railway to be managed by railway professionals with competence, experience and long-sighted planning.
- More recently, DfT has been erratic in managing changes to the timetable, repeatedly delaying the authorising of changes to the timetable and when they did it was too late for operators to train staff, organise staffing rotas and test the new timetables. This shows the need for a competent and far-sighted "guiding mind" for the industry as a whole as could be supplied by public ownership.
- The lack of such a guiding body also makes it difficult to build new lines because there is no consideration of the overall impact of improvements on the whole network, i.e. the bigger strategic picture. The classic example is extending the Borders Railway to Carlisle or improving the service on the Settle-Carlisle line, and more locally to our Henbury Loop and the presenting issue that the existing Bristol Port main gate access is across a single level crossing. If combined authorities such as WECA could bring together the road and rail requirements, there might be provision of funding to the Port of alternative road access to remove this key block to the delivery of the full Henbury Loop rather than the existing proposal of a turnback on the Henbury Spur. This is an argument for close working of such a national guiding body with the regionally devolved Combined Authorities.
- The change in rolling stock on GWR regional services to the Turbo Class 166 was planned in advance and in the Great Western Route Utilisation Strategy document from about 2016, to cater for the predicted increased passenger numbers. It was part of the reallocation of stock from GWR's West London routes. Any changes to type or provision of different rolling stock is negotiated between franchisee and DfT, with very little consultation with passengers or local authorities. Passengers enjoyed the more comfortable rolling stock but not the resulting delays and cancellations!
- On the same issue (Turbo introduction), while it was not a GWR decision to have the rolling stock, the DfT should have given GWR time to prepare for the change. However the dates of electrification and rolling stock orders were constantly changing, often due to DfT changing their mind about infrastructure and rolling stock decisions, if not here then elsewhere which has a knock-on effect because of the national shortage of rolling stock. It has often been the case that franchisees do not have the time they expect to train drivers, and Network Rail the signallers, because the goal posts are moved, often several times.
- We understand that the reason for the current delay in the delivery of MetroWest Phase 1A is due to DfT and Network Rail not wanting to have too many changes at once though they have, as usual, prioritised intercity services. This is again an example of local services being sacrificed to the needs of the national network, and shows the need for closer working of devolved authorities with a competent central organising body to decide on a clear method of prioritisation.

4. Conclusion

In summary, FOSBR supports a centrally co-ordinated railway with substantial co-working and co-funding with regional authorities, staffed by experienced and competent railway professionals, balancing both the geographical needs (local and national) and also the short and long-term oversight and planning. This seems to fit best with a model of public ownership, provided the management is competent.

Finally, we commend to you our FOSBR Rail Plan 2018 (below) as a template for local rail enhancements elsewhere, so that rail becomes a mode of choice for local authority investment. We would like to draw your attention to the triple structure – operational running of existing franchise commitments, infrastructure enhancements to unlock capacity, and the commissioning and third-party funding of new rail lines and stations.

FOSBR Rail Plan 2018 – car-free travel from your door



A reliable half-hour train service:

- WECA to have rail powers and operational oversight;
- **Longer** trains with more seats and **room for cycles**;
- Rail-bus interchanges at Filton Abbey Wood for Southmead Hospital and Nailsea & Backwell for Bristol Airport, accurate real-time bus information at stations;
- Multi-modal **smart ticketing**, with guards on all trains;
- Delivery of MetroWest Phase 1A **half-hour train service between Avonmouth and Bath**, hourly to Severn Beach;
- 30 min service for Patchway, Parson St and Bedminster;
- Future 15 or 20 minute frequency.

Robust infrastructure to unlock capacity:

- Completion of Filton Bank four-tracking;
- Bristol East and Westerleigh Junction remodelling;
- Replace footbridge at Pilning for Severnside commuters;
- Emission-free trains: electrification to Bristol Temple Meads and battery or hydrogen-fuelled local trains;
- Extra platforms and bus hub at Temple Meads;
- Selective double-tracking of Severn Beach Line.

Reopening stations across the network:

- Deliver Portishead line with an initial hourly service with planning for half-hour service;
- Henbury Spur extension to Henbury Loop;
- Welcoming WECA's proposals for Horfield (at Constable Rd), St Anne's, Salford, Ashton Gate & Charfield;
- Consideration of further stations at Coalpit Heath, Chittening, Uphill/Locking, Corsham & Long Ashton;
- Exploring an extension of Tytherington line to Thornbury.

Williams Review submission - compiled by Christina Biggs and Robert Dixon, Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FOSBR) May 2019, Bristol