

Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FoSBR)

Statement to WECA Joint Committee

Friday 4th December 2020 at 2pm via Zoom



1. Enlargement of WECA

FoSBR, amongst others, consider that it was a missed opportunity when North Somerset did not join WECA at its inception. However there is now a chance to put this right as the Council, under new leadership, has applied for incorporation into WECA. We strongly support this proposal. Apparently there is a very limited time period, by the end of next February, for this to be approved and the current impasse threatens this opportunity. We understand that there are issues with the financing of a larger WECA - but also continuing concerns, whether or not N Somerset joins, about the fair distribution of the available WECA monies between the different authorities. It is not for FoSBR to involve itself with these political issues but we urge all parties to come together to resolve these issues.

We believe that the current situation, with North Somerset being outside of WECA, is inefficient and wasteful. As far as public transport, especially rail, is concerned, it makes it much more difficult to plan and deliver improvement projects - and also to get funding for the projects. Because of this we also urge WECA to set up an **Integrated Transport Authority (ITA)** to cover the immediate Bristol travel to work area - which would of necessity have to include North Somerset.

2. Strategic Rail Investment Programme and Covid-19

FoSBR welcomes the 10 year delivery plan for Strategic Rail Investment that is being considered by the Joint Committee on 4th December. Obviously public finances in the future will be challenged by the large national debt being built up as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but FoSBR considers it essential that public transport, including rail, is improved and that investment in infrastructure is essential for the future. Thus we commend the statement in the SRI report that 'The infrastructure works referenced within this report will contribute positively to the post-Covid-19 economic recovery'.

3. MetroWest Phase 1a - Severn Beach and Westbury lines

We are pleased to see continuing support for this service enhancement and that money from the Investment Fund is to be released for infrastructure improvements to accomplish this. FoSBR has called for a half hourly service on the Severn Beach (and other) lines for many years and at last there is a firm date for this to be delivered - by the end of 2021.

4. New Stations

We welcome mention of new (re-opened) stations such as Charfield, St Anne's Park, Saltford and Ashton Gate. However we are concerned that there is no reference at all to stations Constable Road, Thornbury or Coalpit Heath.

5. MetroWest Phase 2

The Henbury Spur line forms part of MetroWest Phase 2. Although mentioned in the SRI, FoSBR would welcome some clarity on when this might be delivered - particularly as we suggest it needs to be in place before substantial housing development has taken place at Filton airfield.

6. Ashley Down station

The 10 Year Rail Plan suggests that the proposed Ashley Down station could be delivered early, before the Henbury Line MetroWest Phase 2 works, and could be served by existing services on the Filton Bank route. The Henbury line is initially proposed to be an hourly service whereas the Temple Meads to Filton Abbey Wood and onwards has a half hourly service. This raises the possibility of a half hour frequency at Ashley Down station from the time that it opens.

7. Henbury Loop

There is mention in the Rail Plan for a 'double junction at Holesmouth' and the 're-modelling of Holesmouth Junction'. This suggests that there are plans for opening up the route beyond Henbury station - which could form the basis for the Henbury Loop. However further works, to allow vehicle access to the docks, would still be needed for a Henbury Loop service to be created. FoSBR once again urges WECA to consider how this could be accomplished, including further negotiations with the Port Company.

8. Ashton Gate station

We are told that a station at Ashton Gate will be considered as part of the South West Bristol Infrastructure Investment Strategy. The Ashton Gate stadium has desperate need of good transport facilities within what is a very congested area around Winterstoke Road. We urge WECA to ensure that the need for this station is looked at urgently.

9. Westerleigh Junction

We are pleased that there is reference to enhancement of Westerleigh Junction, to be developed by 2030 and delivered by 2045. The junction, as presently configured, restricts the number of trains that can travel on the Gloucester to Bristol line and impacts MetroWest Phase 2 which intends to increase the frequency of the Yate service. FoSBR also has a long term ambition for re-opening the Thornbury branch line, trains for which

also pass through Westerleigh Junction and Yate. Use of the singled Westerleigh oil depot line should be considered.

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