

# Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FoSBR)

## Statement to BCC Growth and Regeneration Committee

### Extraordinary Meeting on enlargement of WECA Weds 6 January 2021



#### 1. Preliminary comments

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. Such a transport body, configured along lines such as the SouthWest Peninsula Task Force, the West Midlands Rail Executive and the Northern Powerhouse, should have sufficient rail and bus powers to co-ordinate not only the current individual projects but also the day-to-day running and co-ordination between different types of transport. We list below some of the current rail projects and the timeline, many of which fall within the next 4-year time period which we understand is at stake here. With the continuing climate crisis and the necessity to be zero-carbon by 2030, the importance of maintaining momentum with these WECA public transport projects in the next few years cannot be underestimated.

#### 2. 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 the possibility of it being delivered by December 2021, and mention in Network Rail plans of bringing forward delivery to May 2021. As there is also the possibility of introducing MetroWest branded zero-carbon rolling stock, it remains vital that there is an assured revenue and capital funding stream. There is also the JLTP4 aspiration of a twenty-minute service on the Severn Beach Line and the further possibility of a 15-minute service, using and extending the Montpelier to Narrowways Junction double-tracking specified in the new Strategic Rail investment Plan.

### **3. MetroWest Phase 1b**

The benefits to North Somerset of formally joining WECA should be obvious – notably, the Portishead Line cannot continue on piecemeal funding. Although MetroWest Phase 1B has now passed GRIP 4, we would remind members that there are ten GRIP stages, and the current PACER proposals will only be streamlining the process up to GRIP 4. As the Portishead Line is currently due to be completed in 2024, any uncertainty around funding will directly impact on the delivery of this project.

### **4. MetroWest Phase 2**

The Henbury Spur line forms part of MetroWest Phase 2. We understand that this scheme, too, is due to be delivered in the next four years, and we welcome the proposal in the new WECA Strategic Rail Investment Plan to extend this line to Severn Beach by means of a new chord at Holesmouth Junction. This seems to be a good solution to the problems that caused the deferral of the Henbury Loop earlier.

### **5. Strategic Rail Investment Programme and Covid-19**

FoSBR welcomes the further proposals laid out in the 10 year delivery plan for Strategic Rail Investment that was approved by the WECA 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 maintained and improved. 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'.

### **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. Again this will be in the next four year time period which is at stake.

### **7. 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. Again we cannot wait another four years before advancing this as provision needs to be made as part of the Portishead Line.

## **8. Other proposals of new stations**

We welcome continued mention of new (re-opened) stations such as Charfield, St Anne's Park, Saltford and Ashton Gate. FoSBR also advocate for Constable Road, Thornbury and Coalpit Heath as they would serve the newly approved housing in Bonnington Walk, and the current proposals for housing in South Glos. Again, assured funding is required to plan and deliver these schemes as stations now cost around £10 million each.

## **9. Mass transit**

We await with interest the preliminary report due at the January 2021 WECA meetings, and continue to commend the plans presented by the Transport for Greater Bristol Alliance, especially their suggestions for a complete light rail network which uses and builds on the existing rail infrastructure, with extensions to Clevedon, Radstock and Thornbury. We cannot simply wait ten years while such plans are worked up, as the evidence shows that car use will otherwise continue to escalate, to continued detriment to air quality and climate emissions.

## **10. Summary**

There is much at stake here and it is essential that sufficient investment funding for the next four years is secured. We urge the members to come up with a concrete proposal for consideration by the Department for Transport, and to press for a meeting with the Secretary of State for Transport before the February deadline expires.

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