

# Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FoSBR)

Statement to West of England Combined Authority Joint Committee

Friday 17 December 2021 12 noon



**Note on Covid-19** – FoSBR urges the West of England Mayor to encourage continuing government investment in maintaining local rail service frequency throughout the pandemic, and to encourage car commuters to return to rail travel. FoSBR also commend the government policy of investing in rail infrastructure to restart the economy and commend the MetroWest programmes as a means to do this locally in the West of England.

## **1. MetroWest Phase 1A – half-hour services from Weston super Mare to Avonmouth via Temple Meads, hourly to Severn Beach; later extension to Westbury and Gloucester.**

a) FoSBR is delighted with the long-awaited and long-fought-for delivery of MetroWest Phase 1A with the successful start of the new timetable on Sunday 12 December 2021. However we note with disappointment the cancellation of many of the morning services in this first week, particularly the 07:28 departure from Clifton Down which was cancelled on two successive days, causing passengers to miss the onward connection to London. FoSBR urges the West of England Mayor to seek assurance from GWR that these first few weeks of this major improvement in the service should be prioritised so as to maintain and build passenger confidence, and that a log should be kept of all latenesses and cancellations, and an action plan established with GWR to restore the former good reliability, in particular supporting GWR to address the current driver shortage possibly brought about by the continuing Covid-19 pandemic.

b) We urge the West of England Mayor and the Mayor of Bristol to publicise and promote this major upgrade to the service as WECA's highest priority immediate contribution of local rail to air quality, and as being implemented as envisaged in 2021 would fall well within the current timescale of Bristol's Clean Air Plan which is due for implementation in the summer of 2022.

c) We also urge the West of England Mayor to ensure timely delivery of the MetroWest Phase 1A extension to Gloucester planned for the summer of 2022 and the extension to Westbury planned for Dec 2022 as this will deliver much-needed half-hourly services to Yate and Cam and Dursley, and to Keynsham, Oldfield Park and stations between Bath and Westbury.

## **2. MetroWest Phase 1B – the Portishead Line**

FoSBR notes with considerable alarm the threat of a further six-month delay to the Development Consent Order by the intervention of the Secretary of State for Transport. FoSBR notes that Network Rail have stated that if the approval of the DCO is delayed beyond mid-January 2021 then the consequences for the scheme will be "catastrophic". FoSBR draws the Joint Committee's attention to the formal questions submitted to this Joint Committee and urges that the West of England Mayor seeks a meeting with the Secretary of State to determine the true reason for the delay. FoSBR draws the Committee's attention to our support of the North Somerset evidence for the very low carbon footprint of rail compared to other forms of intercity and local transport and to the DfT Transport Decarbonisation Plan which notes the special status of rail in this respect. FoSBR notes that the opposition to HS2 by Extinction Rebellion is not in any way extended to local rail improvements.

## **3. MetroWest Phase 2 – services from Temple Meads to Gloucester and reopening of the Henbury Line**

a) We welcome the continuing investment in the Henbury line, including the plans for Ashley Down station, and note the long-term benefit of the scheme to public transport but also the immediate value of this investment producing jobs.

b) We appreciate the need for value for money at this time, but point out that the City Deal funds have been committed and that building the Henbury Line now will incentivise buyers and developers to build out the 8,000 homes in the Cribbs Patchway New Neighbourhood Scheme more rapidly, which in turn will deliver the ridership and modal shift that North Bristol needs.

c) Whilst we welcome MetroWest Phase 2 hourly service to Henbury in its current form, we note that a half-hourly service is technically feasible and also that it was the 40-minute service on the Severn Beach Line that was decisive in delivering the ridership of 1.4 million that the Severn Beach Line currently enjoyed in 2019 pre-Covid. We commend the light rail plans promoted by the Transport for Greater Bristol Alliance, particularly the suggestion that both MetroWest and the JLTP4 Mass Transit plans should form part of a more ambitious and integrated rapid transit scheme.

d) FoSBR notes that with the completion of Filton Bank four-tracking in December 2019, it is now feasible for Constable Road station, included in the JLTP4, to be brought forward, particularly as several large housing developments are under construction nearby, including 184 homes between Constable Road and Bonnington Walk. FoSBR urges that MetroWest officers conduct a new study on a station at Constable Road as it appears that the business case is six years old and does not include the impact of the 900 new homes planned in the area. Furthermore the previously proposed site is inconvenient due to its current inaccessibility. A site closer to or linked to Constable Road bridge should be explored. We also note that no replies have yet been provided to our questions about these issues.

#### **4. FoSBR's recommendations for the next steps in West of England rail investment**

- a) **Pilning station: £2m easy win for S Glos car commuters:** FoSBR notes that of all the existing stations in the West of England, Pilning station is the only one that has a weekly parliamentary service and in addition has only one, westbound, accessible, platform. Restoring the footbridge was estimated to cost £2m in 2016 when the footbridge was removed during electrification. If the footbridge is replaced, there are two trains an hour through Pilning – the Cardiff to Portsmouth and the Cardiff to Taunton – which could stop there, especially in the morning peak at 08:32 westbound. A selection of stops on services returning from Bristol to Pilning could be introduced on a trial basis. Pilning is an ideal site for a regional Park and Rail for S Glos residents north of the M4 to park at Pilning and take the train to work in Cardiff and North Bristol, currently a long trip round via the Severn Beach Line.
- b) **Pilning station: £2m easy win for Severnside workers:** Pilning is close enough to the Severnside enterprises to the south of the M4, for workers from Wales, especially Newport, to travel initially by bike on train. At present there are some intrepid workers who are making this journey by rail from Newport and other Welsh cities taking their bikes on the train on the Cardiff to Portsmouth and Cardiff to Taunton services, changing at Temple Meads, to catch the Severn Beach Line to St Andrew's Road. Not all workers are prepared to do this, so employers are being forced to lay on buses from Newport to Severnside. SevernNet and Pilning Parish Council have appealed to the West of England Mayor on this matter and FoSBR urges Mr Norris to act on this as a matter of the first priority. Network Rail's view that there was a need for more London to Cardiff services should be reviewed to reflect post-COVID changes to working patterns. In addition, the introduction of Class 387 units may allow accelerated timing of trains between Cardiff and Bristol Parkway, which could make a stop here more feasible from a timetabling perspective.
- c) **Coalpit Heath station not road bypass:** FoSBR note that although there is considerable rail investment, that the West of England Combined Authority seems to be persisting in progressing most of the JLTP4 road-building schemes, notably the South

Bristol Orbital and the Coalpit Heath and Winterbourne bypasses, despite strong local opposition and the JLTP4's stated aim of preventing climate change. FoSBR continue to commend feasibility studies into a rail station at Coalpit Heath, where there is room for a passing loop (until the proposed four-tracking is delivered in the future), and a new station at Corsham, as promoted by Wiltshire Council. As for the south of Bristol, FoSBR recommends that the proposed WECA mass transit scheme should include a light rail link to Radstock, and commends the light rail and traffic management plans drawn up by the Transport for Greater Bristol Alliance (TfGB) and presented by TfGB to the WECA meetings this week.

- d) New stations at St Anne's and Saltford for the Bristol to Bath corridor** – Although it will be necessary to implement passing loops at these stations, these new stations could render unnecessary the need for the proposed Mass Transit bendy-bus from Bristol to Bath as there are already express FirstBus services in place.

## **5. Investment priorities: public and active transport not road improvements.**

- a) FoSBR continue to bring WECA's attention to the fact that further road-building not only destroys the environment but also brings more cars onto the road and undermines public transport. We commend the instatement of the Bristol Bridge bus gate and pop-up cycle lanes in Bristol, and urge that the Living Neighbourhoods suggestions be acted on, as well as the more ambitious Traffic Management Plans and Parking Plan as promoted by the Transport for Greater Bristol Alliance.
- b) FoSBR welcomes the ambition of the West of England Combined Authority ten-year plan published in December 2020. We urge that these proposals are ranked in priority order and that MetroWest officer time is devoted to gathering evidence for the business plan of each suggested rail infrastructure improvement. FoSBR commends the organisation of the West Midlands Rail Executive and suggest that WECA initiate talks and visits with these and other ITAs in the UK to learn how to staff these Rail Executives and deliver schemes to budget and on time. FoSBR welcomes the ambition of the West of England Mayor in seeking to appoint qualified staff to the Combined Authority, and urges that a substantial proportion of the business rates revenue stream should be allocated to staff salaries.
- c) FoSBR welcomes the new extensive WECA Local Cycling and Walking Investment programme and suggests that a similarly detailed plan, with maps, is drawn up for rail and bus services, including rail-bus interchange. FoSBR would urge BCC to ensure that future MetroWest rolling stock is not only zero-carbon but has extra space for bicycles on board local services. The stations should also have cycle lockers and perhaps even e-bike hire, as well as designated parking space on the Voi app for use by the successful West of England Combined Authority Voi scooter scheme. The real-time bus information should be maintained and extended to all functioning bus stops and the printed timetables brought into sync with the online timetable and bus stop locations.

## **6. Bus investment and rail-bus integration**

- a) FoSBR notes with grave concern the imminent ending of Covid-19 funding for bus services and the danger that the promised new Enhancement funding for buses will be dissipated to cover this anticipated cut to Covid-19 funding.
- b) FoSBR notes the complementarity of buses and trains and the potential for full area coverage with a combination of rural rail services and a network of local buses calling into local rail stations.

c) FoSBR notes that although light rail is considered to achieve greater modal shift away from the car than the bus, yet buses are running here and now, and that a simple programme of encouraging bus travel as the climate-conscious mode of choice by responsible citizens, together with publicising existing ticket deals (such as GroupSave, the West of England-wide rail and bus day ticket and the £1 evening flat-rate), printing a bus map showing rail lines and stations, distributing copies of maps and bus and rail timetables to community centres, and liaison with bus driver unions, would do much to encourage greater use of the existing bus network. Additionally, there should be a rail and bus ombudsman responsible for the West of England area who liaises with both GWR and FirstBus and StageCoach and Bristol Community Transport and other operators to receive regular updates on reliability and of threatened routes.

**7. In summary:** FoSBR favour a West of England transport model where the local rail network provides a backbone for rail-bus and rail-cycling interchange, while awaiting the delivery of the Mass Transit scheme, and with the deterrent of the Bristol and Bath Clean Air Zones, should ensure a permanent shift away from the private car, with resulting improvement in air quality, citizen health and wellbeing and an immediate reduction in carbon emissions.

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Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways [www.fosbr.org.uk](http://www.fosbr.org.uk)

## Links

Press coverage of the GWR launch event marking the delivery of the MetroWest Phase 1A service: followed by service cancellations and coverage of the previous West of England Combined Authority Joint committee meeting: <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/better-bristol-rail-service-launch-6342289>

FoSBR Plan for Rail: [FoSBR Plan for Rail - Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways](#)

Article on JLTP4: [Reducing car use in the West of England – can rail do the job? - Rail Professional](#)

FoSBR statement in support of the N Somerset additional evidence on Carbon Budgets submitted to the Development Consent Order review process.

[https://fosbr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/portishead\\_dco\\_ns\\_es3\\_add\\_comments.pdf](https://fosbr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/portishead_dco_ns_es3_add_comments.pdf)

Summary of the Network Rail proposals for four-tracking on the Cardiff to Paddington line between Bristol Parkway and Westerleigh Junction as well as the remodelling of Westerleigh Junction

<https://fosbr.org.uk/four-tracks-from-bristol-parkway-to-yate/>

