

Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FoSBR)

Submission to the Open Floor Hearing for the Inspection of the MetroWest Phase 1 Development Consent Order



Summary of verbal statement on Monday 26 October 2020 at 6.30 pm
Submitted in writing to the Inspectors on Tuesday 2 November 2020

Who we are

The Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FoSBR) are a rail user group in the Bristol and Bath travel to work area. We were formed in the 1980s and have been campaigning for the passenger service to Portishead (MetroWest Phase 1), as well as the Henbury Line (MetroWest Phase 2) and other improvements, some of which have been adopted in the latest Joint Local Transport Plan (JLTP4), for over 20 years. Most recently we saw the delivery of the Filton Bank four-tracking scheme which gave an instant improvement to the reliability of services in the area.

We are attending this hearing to express our full-hearted support for this scheme and to make some observations that give us confidence that this scheme will realise the full anticipated benefit to the public purse in terms of the calculated passenger ridership, despite the current Covid-19 situation and despite the initial provision of the Portishead Line as being mainly an hourly service.

1. Covid-19 – FoSBR note that over the summer of 2020, passenger ridership has been returning to the Severn Beach Line and other regional lines, and that GWR are now recommending the promotion of rail travel nationally, with appropriate public safety measures. FoSBR also note the government policy of investing in infrastructure to restart the economy and commend the MetroWest programmes as a means to do this locally in the West of England. FoSBR also note that over this time, the Severn Beach Line has seen a greater ridership than longer-range regional lines, and suggest that this is because passengers feel safer when making short rail journeys as they can stand for the duration of journey and therefore minimise contact with others on the train, and are wearing masks for a shorter time. In the timescale of the MetroWest Phase 1 scheme, we therefore anticipate that by the time the scheme is delivered, the ridership will be back to its pre-Covid levels.

2. MetroWest Phase 1 – anticipated ridership

- a) We note that the main measurable outcome of the Portishead Line and the Henbury Line combined (MetroWest Phase 1 and 2), is a projected ridership of 1.45 million extra passengers a year, calculated from the projected residential population in reach of the Portishead and Henbury Lines. When combined with the WebTag calculations of the monetary return to the public purse from journey time savings and other considerations, this calculation gave a benefit-cost ratio of above 5.0
- b) While FoSBR campaign for a half-hourly service to all local stations in the Bristol to Bath travel to work area (the West of England), we are aware of the physical and economic constraints on the Portishead Line, due to the condition of the existing track and the decision taken by the scheme promoters to re-scope the scheme from a half-hourly service to a mainly hourly one.
- c) We note that the population of Portishead is 25,000. This is quite similar to Yate (22,000) where the hourly service is well used – a ridership for Yate station of 385,000 passenger journeys per year. Similarly, Keynsham has a population of 16,000 and a ridership of 500,000 annual passenger journeys, and Bridgwater with a population of 35,886 has a ridership of 350,000 passenger journeys a year. These stations all have an hourly service and see a healthy ridership.
- d) We note that although the Portishead Line will see an hourly service during the day, the first trains of the morning are planned to be at 45 minute intervals. This is very similar to

the Severn Beach Line which has a 40-minute service and has reached a ridership of 1.4 million passengers a year, which is similar to the calculated ridership for the new Portishead Line and Henbury Lines combined.

- e) Further, we note that Portishead has restricted road access. In particular the M5 roundabout at Gordano Services is a notorious pinch-point. Any improvements to the road layout will merely increase the existing extreme congestion on the M5 and feeder roads. The provision of the rail line will bring much relief to this beleaguered community, and augurs well for a further increase the ridership of the Portishead Line over that calculated from population and service frequency alone.
- f) Portishead is not only a location from which commuters travel to Bristol and London, it is also a tourist destination in its own right, with a marina, boating lake and outdoor Lido as well as good dining and attractive coastal walks. With Covid restrictions on overseas holidaying and the continuing need to restrict greenhouse gas emissions from unnecessary air flight and car travel, a rail line to Portishead is anticipated to bring many visitors in by train, not least the owners of boats in the Portishead Marina.
- g) FoSBR have worked closely with the Portishead Rail Group (PRG) and we note the overwhelming public support for the scheme, evidenced by the very few number of objections to the scheme. We would support PRG's request to streamline the approval of the Development Consent Order.
- h) FoSBR is linked to many other campaign groups across the country, including those advocating for the Oxford Metro and station reopenings across the North and South-West as well as CrossRail in London and the TransWilts direct service from Swindon to Southampton. The campaign group ConnectedCities advocate for new housing to be located specifically at existing and reopened rail stations as the most sustainable option, taking advantage of existing freight line infrastructure. In this context, MetroWest is held in admiration and hope by campaigners across the country, as delivery of the Portishead Line will substantially boost investor confidence in local rail as an appropriate and worthwhile use of public money, which will not only tackle climate change and air pollution but also stimulate economic growth.

In summary, FoSBR commends the MetroWest Phase 1 scheme to the Inspectors, and urge that the Development Consent Order for the Portishead Line be approved. We urge the Inspectors to work rapidly to settle the remaining issues which other stakeholders have brought to the attention of the Inspectors.

Christina Biggs
Campaigns Lead, Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FoSBR)



The FOSBR vision: Rail as the backbone of the public transport network and more specifically as the rail component of the Joint Local Transport Plan of the West of England Combined Authority (WECA)

The Future of MetroWest

