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Dear Sir or Madam

Western Gateway Draft Transport Strategy Consultation

I am pleased to attach Railfuture's unified response to the above Consultation, compiled by our Severnside and Wessex Branches.

Our page or section numbers correspond with those in the Draft Strategy. Sentences quoted from the Draft Strategy itself appear in italics.

If anything in this response requires clarification, please let me know.

Yours sincerely

Nigel Bray

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Railfuture
Secretary, Severnside Branch.

5. Transport Challenges

Access to jobs for the young, lower paid and apprentices (page 19) would be greatly assisted by improving public transport as many of these people cannot afford cars. It is significant that younger people make up a high proportion of train passengers.

We support the intention to minimise the increase in car-based travel demand from planned growth in housing and industry (page 20). It is essential that new developments are designed to encourage sustainable transport, ie with pavements, lighted footpaths, safe cycling routes and good signage to rail and bus services with weather protection at stations and bus stops.

The study area has many down-at-heel station environments with poor accessibility and insufficient facilities. An ageing population underlines the need to improve accessibility and facilities such as toilets.

For good door-to-door connectivity, rail passengers often rely on connecting bus services, which in rural areas are now infrequent or have been withdrawn altogether.

Improving Strategic Connectivity and Network Resilience (pages 20-21).

We agree that a weakness of the rail system in and around Western Gateway is the long journey time in relation to distance on some routes. This is particularly true for travel between the Southern Hub and the Peninsula STB (for lack of a direct rail route); and for north-south journeys generally. Enhancements to train services in recent years have tended to favour east-west routes connecting the region with London and the Home Counties.

Improving access to International Gateways (page 22)

Earlier this year North Somerset Council refused permission for plans to expand Bristol Airport, citing poor public transport access and the climate emergency as principal reasons. The Coronavirus pandemic may well slow or even reverse the demand for air travel in the longer term. Railfuture would support plans for a rail link to the airport, as there will always be people who need to fly. However, we do not accept that airports are the only International Gateways. If the STB is serious about decarbonising transport, it should promote travel by rail and sea or Eurotunnel.

Whilst travel by ferry to the Channel Islands is not strictly an international journey, the lack of a convenient bus service between Poole station and the ferryport is a disincentive to using rail. There is a bus route serving Hamworthy station which stops close to the ferryport but this needs more publicity.

6. Strategic Transport Plan Objectives

The Western Gateway STB has the stated aims of driving innovation, maximizing economic growth and improving industrial productivity. Its growth agenda envisages 300,000 new homes and 190,000 new jobs. For this level of development to be sustainable, it follows that sustainable transport modes such as rail should be favoured above those which exacerbate pollution, climate change and congestion.

The Transport Strategy should set a target of zero growth of road traffic volumes and journey times; and set out what is required of the rail network's capacity and connectivity across and around the Western Gateway in order to achieve it. The Strategy should therefore aim to develop the rail network sufficiently to accommodate a combination of travel demand growth arising from increased population and economic activity, and modal shift to rail from existing road users.

Whilst we welcome the intended Social Outcomes of encouraging modal shift away from cars; designing developments to remove reliance on car travel; and promoting end-to-end journeys by sustainable modes (page 26), these will require a great deal of attention to detail. A few years ago Gloucestershire County Council commissioned Harris Ethical to investigate the factors inhibiting people from using each of the nine National Rail stations in the county. Harris Ethical held stakeholder meetings where attendees were invited to suggest how the respective stations could be made more accessible, eg through easier interchange with other modes, better signage, more convenient footways etc. Engagement with rail users and others with local knowledge is essential to overcome difficulties with the "first and last mile" of a journey.

A major cultural barrier to using public transport is ignorance of rail and bus services. Regular users are likely to know their way around public transport systems. Community Rail Partnerships and Rail User Groups have done a great deal to increase public awareness of journey opportunities and bus connections from local stations. For instance, Melksham Rail Development Group has produced a booklet, distributed to local households, promoting services from Melksham station. Friends of Wool Station have been commended for their "How to get to Tank Museum / Lulworth Cove" bus summaries which they display at the station bus stop.

We would add to Long term Environmental delivery priorities (page 27), further rail electrification with priority for the deferred sections of the Great Western main lines, ie Chippenham- Bath- Bristol Temple Meads and Bristol Parkway- Temple Meads

Even electric cars pollute with tyre dust. They are still subject to congestion and would also tend to reinforce inactive lifestyles. By contrast, all public transport journeys, particularly rail, involve an element of walking with its health benefits.

Proximity to an existing station can unlock land for housing, leisure and commercial development. New industrial developments should, if possible, be located where they can be served by rail. Stations could be re-imagined as community hubs leading to enhanced commercial activity and improved urban environments.

7. Western Gateway area wide Rail Strategy (pages 29-31)

We strongly support the vision for a Seven Day Railway (page 29). Bus substitution during planned Engineering work is a major disincentive to rail travel but is often seen by train operators and Network Rail as the easy option even when alternative rail routes are available. A glaring example in 2018 during electrification work at Swindon was the official advice to Gloucester-London passengers to take a substitute bus to Reading (about 75 miles, two-thirds of the distance), for which they were paying a train fare! GWR staff at Gloucester had the sense to advise passengers to catch trains to Bristol Temple Meads and connect into Paddington services diverted via Newbury.

The rail network needs resilient diversionary routes, particularly for journeys between the Western Gateway and Peninsula STB areas, if bus substitution at times of disruption is to be minimised.

Existing rail freight facilities, including those not in regular use, must be safeguarded if more freight is to be transferred from the roads. This includes the mothballed Hamworthy branch line, currently the only direct rail connection to a Dorset port. The STB must resist plans to redevelop freight terminals for housing, as at Ashchurch, unless the local transport authority (in this case Gloucestershire) engages with the rail industry to provide an alternative site. New industrial developments need to reserve land for rail sidings.

InterCity Railfreight Ltd works with a number of train operators including GWR to convey light goods by passenger train between main stations. In 2018 Bristol City Council's Draft Transport Strategy suggested onward distribution within cities by power-assisted bicycle trailers. A recent proposal for faster, shorter container trains could improve rail freight competitiveness at Avonmouth.

We agree with the comment about poor north-south connectivity (page 30) across the region and would emphasise the need for improved services on the Bristol-Weymouth and Cardiff- Portsmouth routes.

We would not disagree with the Rail Strategic Priorities listed on page 31 and would add the following:

Choice Priority 2: Some stations outside Western Gateway offer good rail to rail interchange for journeys between stations within it, eg Worcestershire Parkway for connections between Gloucester/ Cheltenham and the North Cotswold line.

Social Mobility Priority 2: Shortlisted bids announced in June for assistance from the Government's Restoring Your Railway Fund include Charfield, Cirencester Community Railway, Radstock, St. Anne's Park and Project Wareham, the last mentioned intended to create an all year train service to Swanage. Additionally Devizes Parkway has been awarded £ 50,000 from the Fund to help create a business case.

8. Western Gateway's Northern Transport Hub (pages 33-35)

In view of the inclusion of Tewkesbury in the map on page 33, it is illogical to exclude Stonehouse and Stroud from the Northern Hub. The latter two towns represent the third largest urban area in Gloucestershire but lack a direct rail connection to the STB's Central Transport Hub. Connectivity between the Stroudwater conurbation and Greater Bristol would not be improved by an obsession with fast InterCity trains between Bristol and Birmingham.

Rail usage in Gloucestershire is relatively low because of the scarcity of local stations. Extension of MetroWest to Gloucester will help but the proposed hub station near M5 Junction 11 is likely to increase, rather than reduce, local trips by car. The priority for highway schemes listed on page 35 flies in the face of decarbonising transport and addressing climate change. The Northern Hub needs greater emphasis on improving regional connectivity where rail is concerned.

9. Western Gateway's Central Transport Hub (pages 37-40)

Public transport access to the port is still limited (page 38).

It does not have to remain so. Greater capacity on the Severn Beach line is needed, as is a full Henbury loop service which would link three Enterprise Zones (Avonmouth Severnside, Filton and Temple Quarter).

Whilst we strongly support MetroWest, we are concerned at the slow delivery, particularly of Phase 1. This is partly due to the tedious GRIP and Development Consent Order processes. Since at least 2013, Portishead residents have been told each year that their railway will be operational in another four years. The STB should urge central Government to streamline these procedures in order to prevent rail projects from being kicked into the long grass. A light rail system should be investigated for corridors not served by MetroWest Phases 1 and 2.

10. Western Gateway's Southern Transport Hub (pages 44-46)

The map on page 43 fails to show all railway lines. Surely Bristol- Weymouth is key to north-south connectivity for Western Gateway.

the aim (of the Transforming Cities Fund bid) is to provide people with real choices on how to travel without a car (page 44).

So why does the list of priorities (page 46) overwhelmingly favour road schemes and almost completely ignore rail? The only rail project in that list is light rail for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP); even that is after 2025, despite having been in Dorset's Local Transport Plan 3 since 2011.

11. Strategic Corridor H1: South East to South Wales (pages 48-52)

Page 48. The Golden Valley line (Swindon- Gloucester) is the main diversionary route for London- South Wales but Brighton / Portsmouth- Cardiff is far more relevant to this Strategy because it has regular daily scheduled services and links nine cities.

Proposed housing growth at four towns in Wiltshire (page 51) makes a case for enhanced rail services from Chippenham and reopening of stations at Corsham, Hullavington (on the A429 south of Malmesbury) and Royal Wootton Bassett.

Continued electrification to South Wales (page 52).

It is not clear whether this refers to extension from Cardiff to Swansea or via Bath and Bristol Temple Meads to the London- South Wales main line just west of Bristol Parkway. We are surprised there is no reference to the need for upgraded rolling stock on the Cardiff- Portsmouth route and its electrification in the longer term.

12. Strategic Corridor H2: South East to South West (pages 55 to 58)

The map (page 55) needs to show a green connecting line between Southampton and Salisbury as a principal rail route. There is no mention of the West of England line (London- Salisbury- Exeter) operated by SWR. In the short term it needs longer trains and summer services to destinations west of Exeter. In the medium term additional loops are needed, eg in the Dinton- Tisbury area, as is replacement of the increasingly unreliable Class 159 trains. In the longer term the route should be double track throughout from Basingstoke to Exeter, as proposed in a most recent report by Lord Berkeley and Michael Byng, featured in Railnews. It should also be electrified with suitable InterCity rolling stock.

To improve connectivity between the BCP conurbation and the Peninsula STB area in the short term, a dedicated fast rail link coach service should be introduced between Dorchester South and Axminster stations. In the longer term track remodelling south of Yeovil would enable Heart of Wessex line trains to call at Yeovil Junction and allow direct Weymouth- Exeter services.

Connectivity to London and the South East by rail from Portland, Weymouth and Dorchester is poor with some of the slowest journey times across the Western Gateway area (page 56).

We take issue with this because (1) Portland has no rail connectivity! and (2) there are much slower journey times in Western Gateway, eg Weymouth- Bristol. Perhaps what was meant was poor journey times to/from London, with which we would agree.

Investment in rail freight at the port of Poole could create capacity on the rail network to remove HGVs from the road (page 57).

In this case the Hamworthy branch line needs to be safeguarded and if necessary upgraded.

Salisbury, not Paddington- Newbury- Taunton, is the principal rail gateway to Stonehenge (page 58). There are plans to remodel Salisbury station forecourt to improve interchange with buses. Wilton Parkway station, proposed by Wiltshire Council, would be closer to Amesbury and Stonehenge.

Digital signalling upgrades from Basingstoke to Weymouth and electrification of the line in the long term will also improve rail connectivity in this area (page 58).

Electrification of this line was completed to Bournemouth in 1967 and to Weymouth in 1988. Did the Strategy's authors mean Basingstoke- Exeter ?

We suggest the following priorities for rail:

Short term: A regular Swanage- Wareham service (already shortlisted in the Restoring Your Railway scheme); lifts at Dorchester South and Pokesdown; improved passenger accommodation at Poole; remodeling of Weymouth station forecourt to enable buses to call.

Medium term: Track remodelling of Weymouth station throat to reduce conflicting moves; redoubling Moreton- Dorchester South; upgrading power supply west of Poole; relocation of Poole station further east on straight track with superior passenger facilities, eliminating High Street level crossing.

Longer term: Reinstatement of bay platform at Wareham for Swanage trains or their extension to a new west-facing bay at Bournemouth; grade separation for the junction with the Reading line at Basingstoke to segregate east-west and north-south trains.

13. Strategic Corridor V1: Midlands to South West (pages 62-67)

The map on page 62 has transposed Gloucester and Cheltenham. Ironically, a rail journey to Bristol normally takes less time from Cheltenham (47 miles) than from Gloucester (41 miles) as the latter has few fast trains to the regional capital.

We certainly agree that *the regional rail offering along this corridor is poor; and that without modal shift the corridor will also fail to support the overriding need to decarbonise the transport network* (page 63). This is why we support *rail upgrades with regular local stopping services from Worcester...through Gloucester to Bristol* (page 64). For these rail improvements to happen, the transport authorities (particularly Gloucestershire) and STB need to advance definite proposals for new stations and services, otherwise rail will be sidelined by the undue priority suggested for road building.

We support electrification of the Bristol-Birmingham line; more trains and additional platforms at Ashchurch for Tewkesbury station, which would serve the proposed garden town (page 66). In the short term Cross Country Trains needs longer train formations and more stops at Gloucester.

14. Strategic Corridor V2: Midlands to South Coast (pages 69-74).

We are astonished there is no mention of the importance of rail for container traffic from Southampton Docks. Both the regular route via Winchester and the first alternative via Romsey, the Laverstock curve (Salisbury) and Andover have been cleared for high cube (9' 6") containers. A second diversionary route is via Melksham and Swindon.

We are pleased with the recognition of the TransWilts rail service as an important strategic route (page 70).

Cruise passengers via Portland (page 70) need better bus connectivity with Weymouth station. The existing Weymouth-Portland bus service does not call either at Weymouth station or the cruise ship terminal. Redesign of the station forecourt could resolve this. The possibility of restarting ferry services from Weymouth is under discussion. Therefore Weymouth should be included as a South Coast port in its own right.

Improvements suggested for the Heart of Wessex line (page 73) are too timid. An additional passing loop is needed between Maiden Newton and Yeovil. Redoubling between Yeovil and Castle Cary is needed to increase the resilience of this vital diversionary route between Reading and the far South West. Remodelling of track and signalling through Yeovil Pen Mill would increase capacity. In the longer term a turnback south of Dorchester would enable faster direct services between BCP and Bristol or the Peninsula STB area.

Our conclusions

Whilst we agree with many of the comments about modal shift, social mobility, the environment and decarbonisation of transport, we are most concerned that highway schemes generally have a higher priority than those to expand sustainable modes.

We would also like to see a commitment to reviving rural bus services and encouragement of electric bicycles as both these measures would greatly widen the catchment area of rural stations without the need to use a car or taxi.

The Government has committed to rebalancing the economy away from the South East in favour of the Midlands and North, most recently by announcing a Northern Transport Acceleration Council with £6 billion funding. It must do something similar for the South West, provided the emphasis is on sustainable transport.