



Severnside Branch Newsletter No. 45 Spring 2021

Contributions to the Newsletter are welcome and should be sent to the Branch Secretary, Nigel Bray.
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More information about campaigns is available on the Railfuture national website.

What Railfuture Severnside branch has been doing behind the scenes during lockdown

Railfuture Severnside branch has responded to Consultations for

- Somerset West & Taunton Council Task and Finish exercise on transport.
- Bath & North East Somerset Local Plan Partial Update
- Wiltshire Council Local Plan.
- South Gloucestershire Council Local Plan Phase 1.

Bruce Williamson spoke on Bristol local radio on 15th April 2021 concerning the remodelling of Bristol East Junction this summer. Listen to the 7-minute recording of his interview at <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/display2657>.

The Consultation responses can be viewed on the Railfuture website or the Secretary can supply paper copies on request.

Thanks are due to John Hassall, Gerard Duddridge and David Redgewell for their help with some of the Consultation responses.

Your chance to help Railfuture at the WSRA Steam Fayre, 7th and 8th August 2021

The Severnside branch hopes to have a stand at the West Somerset Railway Association (WSRA) Steam Fayre at Norton Fitzwarren (near Taunton) and we need volunteers. A couple of hours on one or other dates would be a great help.

If the Taunton- Bishops Lydeard shuttle trains are resumed on Saturdays in the high summer, it is likely they will call at Norton Fitzwarren platform, a short walk from the Fayre.

Any offers of help manning the stand, or any queries, to John Hassall on 01823 972267 (mobile 07939 304406) or hassalls53@gmail.com

A Railfuture stand at the Fayre would give us an opportunity to promote our South West Regional recruiting leaflet.

Branch meetings will resume when there is clarity as to permitted numbers for an indoor venue. It may be possible to hold an outdoor meeting, e.g. in a pub garden, before very long. The Branch AGM is more likely to be held in the autumn. Definite fixtures will be advertised first on the Railfuture website and then in the next Branch Newsletter.

GWR Central Timetable Planning Zoom meeting, 4th February 2021

Report by Nigel Bray

This event was chaired by Tom Lydon, a Great Western Railway (GWR) Public Affairs Manager, deputising for Jane Jones, GWR's Head of Public Affairs. "Central" in this context means GWR services in the mid West of England plus Cardiff- Portsmouth / Brighton.

Improvements planned for integration

Dan Okey, a GWR Regional Development Manager, described improvements to bus / rail integration at Swindon, including a bus information screen in the station concourse. Integration with Metrobus was planned for Bristol Parkway and improvements to bus / rail interchange at Chippenham were said to be at an advanced stage of planning. GWR was also working with G-First (the Gloucestershire LEP) to improve access between Gloucester station and the Kings Quarter redevelopment.

In reply to Councillor Neil Butters (Bath & North East Somerset Council), Dan Okey said improved seating, shelters and wayfinding were planned for Freshford. He hoped to arrange a meeting to discuss cycle parking at Bath Spa, where Network Rail would be bidding for funds to widen the gateline.

Gordon Edwards said buses needed to get into the station forecourt at Castle Cary because those for Street stopped on the opposite side of the busy road where there was no proper standing area. Dan Okey replied that space in the forecourt was very tight but the position of the bus stop would be improved. A café in the former creamery opposite the station was also in prospect. Luke Farley (GWR) added that more information about buses was needed for passengers arriving at the station.

On behalf of Railfuture, I said Gloucester rail and bus stations needed live information displays for each other's services. Luke Farley replied that a new bus entrance from Metz Way into the station forecourt was proposed (so that passengers would not have to cross a busy dual carriageway to transfer from train to bus or vice-versa). He agreed that Gloucester needed the kind of information provided at Swindon. Bryony Chetwode (TravelWatch SouthWest) said she had raised the issue with Rupert Cox, MD of Stagecoach West.

Timetable issues

Mark Utley, Long Term Planning Manager, GWR, said he wanted to protect capacity in the May 2021 timetable on services which may become popular again. The plan was to run 89% of 'SX' (not Saturdays), 83% of 'SO' (Saturdays only) and 85% of Sunday services which were in the September 2020 timetable. GWR will reinstate services when asked to do so by DfT and would do so with about two weeks' notice. Restoration, rather than enhancement, of the timetable would be the priority.

Late night Saturday and early Sunday morning services in the Bristol area have already been curtailed in connection with the remodelling of Bristol East Junction. The main blockade would be from 10th July to 5th September, when all new signals will be commissioned. The new signal gantry would have clearance for electrification. There would be a total closure of Temple Meads station on 8th August and from 31st August to 3rd September. Cardiff- Portsmouth services would be diverted via the Rhubarb curve, avoiding Temple Meads.

Questions from stakeholders

Nina Howe (Transport Focus) and Gordon Edwards said Journey Planner was allowing passengers to book tickets on trains which had not been reinstated. The reply was that Network Rail should have published lists of planned cancellations.

Paul Johnson, Chair of TransWilts Community Interest Company, said north-south services via Westbury needed to be reviewed. The practicality of a journey from Melksham to Weymouth depended on very tight connections which could be narrowly missed. The Saturday evening Weymouth- Westbury service needed to be reinstated to make day trips feasible.

Matthew Cambourne replied that GWR wanted to encourage leisure travel. “We identify near misses and we will do this again for May but it is not possible in every case. We accept that Westbury is a key interchange and we would like the Exeter- Paddington semi-fast service to become hourly. We are very conscious that Bristol East Junction engineering work affects the Weymouth route.”

Jon Harris (Gloucestershire County Council) said Cross Country Trains needed to restore trains, cut during the pandemic, which had catered for schools traffic from Lydney. Richard Gibson, Communications Manager, Cross Country Trains said XC hoped to resume the full timetable for Lydney and full train formations from May.

Stations Improvement Fund

Simon Gledhill said this was part of GWR’s Direct Award obligation. 25% of this fund must involve improvements to accessibility. Year 1 money has been allocated to Newbury, Reading West and Theale.

I asked whether better passenger accommodation and integration would be provided at Filton Abbey Wood, which had a pre-Covid footfall of around 1 million passengers per year. Dan Okey replied, “Good point. We’ve looked at improving passenger facilities (there) in the past and it’s on our list for potential SIF schemes. We would welcome your response to the SIF Consultation.”

In reply to a question concerning possible reuse of the Midland trainshed at Temple Meads, James White (West of England Combined Authority) said the Temple Quarter Master Plan envisaged reinstatement of Platform 0 by 2043 but only for five-car sets, which meant the Midland shed was not required for trains but would be used as part of a proposed new northern entrance to the station.

I asked why “Can you travel another way?” posters discouraging rail travel had still been displayed at Newton Abbot and Torquay stations in the summer and early autumn of 2020 when non-essential journeys *were* permitted. Chris Lund (GWR) replied that those posters were not in the current Station Display Guide. “Since last summer we’ve been keen to ensure the anti-travel messages don’t return whilst striking a balance on the need for essential journeys when there is a lockdown.”

Report of WECA webinar on mass transit for Bristol area, 25th February 2021

Jason Humm, Head of Transport at the West of England Combined Authority, said WECA envisaged an incremental plan for mass transit, “not a big bang.” A mass transit system would complement improvements to heavy rail, bus, walking and cycling provision. He said car use in the area needed to fall by 20% if the net zero carbon target was to be met by 2050.

Mr. Humm pointed out that at present WECA had an open mind as to the transport mode for mass transit. “It could be Metro, underground or Bus Rapid Transit but has to be segregated from other traffic. It will link existing services instead of replacing them. We are also open minded about whether the routes are overground or partly underground. What do we want mass transit to achieve ? Improved air quality, encouraging more active travel, offering freedom and flexibility, reducing inequality. Electric (car) vehicles would still cause congestion and not improve wellbeing.”

Dave Andrews (Bristol & Bath Trams Association) asked why WECA was not pursuing a tram system at full speed as in many other UK conurbations. Mr. Humm replied, “We can learn from those areas. We are keeping an open mind about modes. The DfT would not be happy about a sudden decision to favour one particular mode without analysis.”

Another speaker suggested the mass transit scheme assumed pre-Covid levels of commuting. The reply from Jason Humm was, “We still need to make a step change to meet climate targets. Not everyone can work from home and people are social beings. Working from home will not go anywhere near the level needed to meet our targets. We need to have more public transport, more active travel and mass transit.”

Mr. Humm would not commit for or against use of the Bristol and Bath Cycle Path (a former Midland railway route) for mass transit but said there would be “a significant challenge” if it were used.

The webinar held a poll on the question, “What is the greatest barrier to using mass transit ?” Reliability was voted the top issue from a list. Interestingly, the options “Doesn’t feel safe” and “Doesn’t feel clean” both received no votes.

Asked how mass transit could achieve WECA’s carbon neutral target by 2030 when the system might take 15-20 years to build, Mr. Humm said incremental improvements to bus, rail and active travel would be made in the meantime.

Next Railfuture Severnside newsletter will be number 46 in autumn 2021.

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