

Portishead Railway Group
Minutes of the members' meeting [PRG 127]
Tuesday 21st March 2017, at 7.30pm, Folk Hall, Portishead

Apologies for absence: We received 8 apologies from members.

Minutes of the AGM of 18th November 2016: Accepted.

Chairman's report: Presentation given with a step-by-step timeline to bring people up to date containing the following:

The opening of the railway with a half hourly service was a manifesto promise by Nigel Ashton and Liam Fox. This included the two extra stations at Portishead and Pill. Budget for the scheme was £58.2m. mostly allocated by the West of England Joint Transport Board (WoE JTB).

Liam Fox wrote to Chris Grayling saying: Councils have been asking for regular updates of the cost but Network Rail said that the GRIP process didn't allow for this. The councils have no control over Network Rails costs despite the fact the councils have to meet 100% of the cost and the risk. Response from Chris Grayling says he recognises the value of the scheme but it's a third party funded scheme. A meeting was held to discuss the cost escalation; those present took away actions and will continue to work together. He concluded "It is important that Network Rail and the councils find a more efficient way of delivering the project".

Another letter by Mark Langman, Route MD Great Western outlines the problems and Network Rails continued support of the scheme. Saying they are keen to continue working with the councils and that it is a key priority for them.

Announcement of the delay

This was not managed well as the news had been circulated despite being embargoed. We had been expecting JTB papers detailing the price increase to be released on the 10th March; instead we received a call on the 8th March from ITV and BBC to say that costs had gone up to about £175m. Alan was requested to appear on BBC Radio Bristol the following morning at 8am. ITV wanted an interview on camera at 2pm. The press statement said the £100m extra money was due to extra engineering works in Avon Gorge. At that point we knew nothing other than it would cost more than £145m but we didn't know why.

Asked by the media if we were disappointed, we answered: we are amazed that part way through the project, costs should treble. It would make people wonder if there was a conspiracy theory to stop this project from happening, especially given that North Somerset is now outside of the new Metro Mayoral system.

We then got an e-mail to say there was an urgent Stakeholders' meeting on 10th March to explain what has happened. Councillors, MetroWest, PRG, FOSBRA, and other interested parties were present. The presentation said the price has increased significantly, but no-one could explain why. They just listed problems, such as renewing the track, reinforcing the bridges, re-routing roads and accessing the gorge etc. with an estimate that the work in the gorge could take 50 weekends.

They stated that they could still do the Severn Beach to Bath proposal as it doesn't need a Development Consent Order (DCO) but could be done under permitted development. It is clear that the cost of re-opening the section from Portishead to Pill hasn't risen much, but the costs of the work through the Avon Gorge has risen substantially, as has closing the level crossing at Ashton Gate. Is it possible that they are refurbishing every station in the vicinity under our project !!

On Monday 13th March the JTB Scrutiny panel met. 3 councillors from each of the 4 councils got together to scrutinise the project, but there was no new information and no answers. One of the councillors there wrote to us to say councillors are in purdah due to local elections so cannot comment. The blame seems to be pointed at Grip 2 calculations not Grip 3, with questions over Network Rail's figures.

Update from Dave Chillistone on how PRG tried to influence the JTB meeting on 17th March:

We knew there was a cost increase coming but didn't know the scale of it. Before it was announced, Dave produced 8 cost increase scenarios to try to find out how the Benefit Cost Ratio would be affected. If it's above 2 then it's a winner and it had been above 2.5. At £58.2m it was a very healthy project. He had run the scenarios to see if it was still viable costing from £5m up to £30m more. Of course what we weren't expecting was an increase of over £100m. When it got to £160million it is a whole different story.

Following the announcement but before the JtB meeting, the PRG committee developed a set of questions that we would table, however it became apparent that the costs were not understood by anybody, so there was no point in us asking questions. So instead we submitted a statement the day before and read it in full at the meeting.

On Network Rail's (NR) website, one of the things mentioned is "our" line, which would suggest that they must have got some money allocated against it already. The Portishead route also appears in NR's control period 6 work-scope so it should be possible to establish what level of funding NR may already have to contribute towards the scheme. If that is currently zero then it may be possible to get additional funding allocated via central government. Key point: NR's costs are described as being half of the new overall total project cost. Therefore the task of understanding the costs is far greater than only understanding the NR portion.

As it seems the latest total project costs are not yet understood, establishing the nature of the eventual service, then holding a public consultation and submitting the DCO are all on hold for the time being. PRG recommended that no decision be taken until the costs and sources of funding are sufficiently understood for both the two trains per hour and the one train per hour service. PRG understands that the data required to allow the JTB to make an informed decision on this basis could be made available in the summer. However, this recommendation was not taken.

Q&A

Question 1 from the floor, does NR costs included highway costs. Answer: no it doesn't.

Question 2: would there be a bridge at Ashton Vale instead of the level crossing. Answer: no, as there is not enough room. Instead there would have to be a compulsory purchase order and a new road built, which contributes to a large amount of the non-rail construction costs.

The JTB meeting covered:

- The original scheme overview
- Aims and objectives of the scheme.
- Cost estimates. GRIP3 has been completed. The indications are going to increase the costs to between £145-£175m.
- Cost breakdown revealing construction costs to form 50% of total with risk forming an additional 17% but PRG question whether the costs are correct.
- Key drivers for the cost increase are:
 - Bridge in Pill originally built for the freight trains is now having to be rebuilt as one track will go to Portishead another to Portbury. Originally it was thought all the bridges and paths were in place so there was a feeling that nothing was required for the structures. Now it has been realised that a lot more work is required.
 - A significant increase in the scope of work through the Avon Gorge in order to meet modern safety standards for passenger trains and to increase the line speed for 2 passenger trains per hour as well as the freight trains
 - The impact of 2 trains per hour at the Ashton Vale Road level crossing
 - Location of infrastructure works.
- Multiple speeds (50mph+) will be required along the route. The speeds will need to be reduced.
- Pictures of the track and tunnels showing the difficulties of accessing the track. Track built flat with a number of twists and turns for slow freight trains. For passenger trains the track needs to tilt and the curves straightened a little.

Our concerns

The original Phase One was just the Portishead line, now it seems to have expanded out to include a much wider area.

The GRIP process

GRIP 1 is mostly a desk top exercise where someone looks to see if the proposal is viable.

GRIP 2 is a bit more detailed but still people may not have visited the line.

It's only in GRIP 3 that people visit the site to check the condition of the track and highway access for 5km of work required. Also to look for rare species including: great crested newts; invasive species; reptiles, bats and whitebeam trees. The gorge is a very environmentally sensitive area.

It has cost the WoEP £8m to get to this point.

What next?

3 options have been suggested:

1. Do nothing – cancel the entire scheme
2. Continue to promote the scheme as currently proposed and aim to secure the additional funding necessary
3. Deliver the scheme in a staged manner as follows

Originally re-opening the Portishead line was a NSC project. Then the 4 local councils created MetroWest who proposed re-opening the line as phase 1 of a 2 phase scheme. Now, following three of the councils electing a Metro Mayor it could seem like the Portishead line has been demoted.

Each part of the scheme had been moving forward together, but now the other areas can go ahead under Permitted Development Rights, whereas the Portishead line needs a Development Consent Order which could take up to 18 months.

However the strategic benefits of the scheme are recognised and MetroWest has said that it will work to find a resolution to the funding challenges. We also have an opportunity to lobby the government to include the scheme in the HLOS something that sets out the Government's priorities.

Next stage activities:

- Review engineering design and identify minimum infrastructure necessary for initial stage
- Review service pattern
- Review the need for Ashton Vale level crossing closure.
- Relook at the cost benefit analysis.
- JTB meetings are now going to be every month rather than quarterly and ask NR and GWR to be there in order to have a better grip on the costs.

Q&A

Q1 Will stage B include Pill station? A: Yes

Q2 Is the BCR now under 2?

A2 For some of the options we may still be above 2. There is still a business investment case for the railway but there doesn't seem to be the money to make it happen. Even delivering a 1 train per hour service isn't going to reduce the costs by much. So the key to this could lie with central government in which case people should write to their MP to help make it happen.

The work scope has grown without the same growth in funding. It now seems that the original pot of money intended for the Portishead line is being spent on many other things that were originally outside of the scope.

Q3: There doesn't appear to be any dates on this although the press has reported 2021.

A3: This is because the costings haven't been done yet, so seems unrealistic to put a date in.

Q4: Can we call a public meeting with Liam Fox and some of these other people to come and talk to all the people of Portishead?

A4: Maybe, but this would need to be in the summer when we are likely to get more costings.

Q5: Costs have gone from £58m to £175m, are we convinced that this is the final figure?

A5: No, we still don't know

Q6: Who owns the cost model for this?

A6: Metrowest. £8m has been invested already, so if it was pulled straight away it would cost £2m each per council and they would lose credibility. The MD of Bristol Airport is on the JTB and spoke very well regarding the fact that if they can't deliver this they won't be able to deliver anything and will lose all credibility.

Discussion re the quality of the station for Portishead and that we shouldn't compromise on having a "proper" station.

Wendy: very cross that no-one does anyone mention people.

Treasurers update:

The balance in the PRG accounts as at the meeting date was £2938.55. We do however need more funds in order to up the level of our campaigning.

Membership update

533 Life members, a small increase from November, plus 18 Corporate and Community members

Webmasters report

The website has been updated on several pages with all the recent news including the PRG statement, MetroWest update and links to several press reports. The minutes of last year's AGM have also been uploaded. All future target dates have been removed pending new official timescales.

Traffic to the website has been higher than usual recently, peaking at 1000 page views on Thursday 9th March and averaging 234 per day during the last week.

Facebook update

A recent post on the PRG Facebook page has reached 485 people and received a number of comments and questions. The previous post on the delays reached just short of 2000 people.

Next members meeting to be held at 7.30pm at the Folk Hall, Portishead on Tuesday, 11th July