

Portishead Railway Group

Minutes of the members' meeting [PRG 131]

Tuesday 11th July 2017, 7.30pm, Folk Hall, Portishead

Attendance. There were 47 members present. **Apologies:** There were 12 apologies from members.

Committee member apologies: Dave Chillistone, Peter Maliphant, Gareth Jones

Minutes of the last meeting: Accepted

Update from deputy chair, Colin Howells

WECA: This is the West of England Combined Authority, with Mayor Tim Bowles; and representatives from Bristol, South Gloucestershire and BANES.

WoEJC: This is the West of England Joint Committee, which includes North Somerset; this replaces the Joint Transport Authority. Their first meeting was on 28th June and was attended by Nigel Ashton NSC.

We are expecting an update on the railway at the next WoEJC meeting on the 8th August, together with the next steps. We are still expecting the project to move along at some pace. (PMN. WoEJC in August has been cancelled)

Update from chairman, Alan Matthews

After the costs rose to £150m+, three options were put forward: 1, Continuing with the scheme, in its current form; 2, Scrapping the scheme or 3, Implementation with a phased approach, the third option is the recommended option. With this option, the Portishead line will open with an initial one hour passenger service to Portishead, with a view to update the line to provide two trains per hour, at a later date.

There have been some positives: Both the Government and Network Rail have recognised the strategic benefits of the scheme. We also have an opportunity to lobby the Government and the Portishead line has been mentioned by Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling on the 6th July when he said: ***"There is now four tracking at Filton Bank and upgrades to the Bristol East Junction. We are now trying to sort out the difficulties around the Portishead line."***

The last WoEJC meeting mentioned 'The Terms of reference for development of a joint local transport plan covering the combined authority area and North Somerset'. North Somerset is still seen as a crucial partner in transport projects for the wider area. There are two key rail schemes listed in the current programme one of which is MetroWest Phase 1. Updates on the scheme with a proposed approach to delivery will be announced later this year.

The four unitary authorities have already spent £8.8m in development costs over the past three years with another £38m due to be spent on MetroWest Phase 1 over the next three years. We are waiting to see how much of that is committed to the Portishead line. In total funding of £58.2m has been secured.

Questions from the floor

Q1. What is the capital cost for the addition of two trains an hour?

A2. We will know when the next meeting happens in August. We have put in a Freedom of Information request, which was refused, so we are appealing this decision to find out exactly how the figure of £175million was arrived at.

Q2. Where will the extra money come from? Will the second stage really cost £100m?

A2. We don't know yet. We will know on the 8th August. We have posed the same questions. You will be the first to know as soon as we get the information.

Q3. Do we know how many people would use the line and would it just be commuter traffic?

A3. In the scheme consultation that took place in 2015, 32% of those asked said they would catch the train at least once per week. A big proportion would be commuter traffic, but it is believed that there will be more than enough people to make it viable. Train demand is now such that Ebbw Vale's new line has exceeded expected passenger numbers four times over since it opened.

Q4. With just one train per line, if everyone uses it who says they will, it will be over crowded at first then people are likely to stop using it, or they won't start using it as it won't go at the right time then they won't get enough money for the next phase.

A4. We agree, we have had the same concerns and have put that to MetroWest.

Statement on progress submitted by James Wilcox, MetroWest project manager

"We are making substantial progress with re-scoping the scheme and achieving cost reduction. Until we have reported this work to our decision makers we are not able to give you detailed information."

Upcoming meetings

PRG has been exclusively invited to a meeting with Network Rail, MetroWest and their legal advisors, which is taking place next Monday 17th July, at the offices of the Legal Team. We want to meet with them to understand why they are recommending a DCO and we want to know where we are in the process.

Next year, we will hold all members' meetings the week after the WoEJC meetings which means our information will be more up to date, but does mean the dates will change.

Lobbying group or campaign group?

Views were asked of the audience about whether PRG should be a lobbying or campaign group. We feel we started as a campaign group but that wasn't effective, so we became and are currently a lobbying group, pressing, probing and working with the likes of Liam Fox, MetroWest and the Council.

Feedback is that PRG should be more in the public eye and that we need to be stronger, to really make the railway happen. It's not enough just to have a web page as people need to know about the group before they know to visit the page. Need to have a greater public presence. Opinion: there is a role for members to help to spread the word.

Colin asks if we should continue to be a membership organisation, just represent the railway. No strong opinions given other than we need to reach a wider audience. Alan: We represent over 500 households, although all the households don't know that we represent them!

Leading up to the break, a DVD produced by Ben Maliphant, showing 24 hours in the life Portishead reduced to two minutes was shown. This is now available on YouTube.

IDEAs initiative

After the reported price hike, PRG canvassed members for ideas to keep the costs lower. 38 members responded and the ideas were compiled, summarised and submitted to MetroWest. So far the IDEAs initiative has achieved its aims ensuring that MetroWest and Network Rail continue to prioritise the railway.

Accounts: £2,980.55p

Membership: We have had a clean-up of our membership database to ensure that everyone still wants to be a member and is contactable. Following this we now have 513 members of which three are community groups and nine are corporate supporters. Of the 501 households who are PRG members, just 25 have confirmed that they do not have or do not wish to use email for communication.

Facebook and communication

We now have 1,064 people following our Facebook page. Many of these followers are separate to our members, so we are reaching a much wider selection of people and a wider demographic, including many younger people.

Webmaster:

Any publicly available information received is put on the website. People are still interested in wider information and whenever anything hits the press we get more than a thousand hits on the website. Colin also puts leaflets in the library and all of them continue to go.

However PRG receives three types of information: things we want everybody to know, things that are confidential and information that falls in between. Proposal: we could put in a password protected, members only zone on the website for this latter section of information, to include minutes of members' and committee meetings. Attendees said this was a good idea.

Question: why can't everything be open to everyone?

Answer: As we are a members' organisation we feel we should give members some additional information.

Concern raised: that this information could be copied and published more widely.

Date of the next meeting: Next members meeting will be 5th December 2017, 7.30pm at the Folk Hall, High Street Portishead. This is slightly later than usual so the accounts have time to be audited.