

Minutes of Portishead Railway Group Members AGM (PRG134)

Tuesday 5th December, 2017 7.30 Folk Hall Portishead

1. Welcome and Introduction – Chairman, Alan Matthews welcomed the 47 members in attendance to the AGM and introduced our guest speaker James Willcock, MetroWest Phase 1 Project Manager.

2. Apologies for Absence – There were apologies from 15 members.

3. Minutes of the last meeting – accepted

The accounts for the past year and agenda were distributed on every seat. The accounts have been independently examined and show a surplus of just under £60 for the year. There has been very little movement. Debbie proposes that they were accepted, Bob Grimler seconded and those present voted to accept them.

4. Chairman's report

The Chairman thanked the committee and he provided a summary of the years activities:

March

- A diesel passenger train came down the line.
- A MetroWest press release caused a phone call from ITV to say that the cost of the line had almost tripled in value, to an estimate of between £145m and £175m.
- A few days later a meeting of the four West of England councils were told about the price increase.
- Joint transport meeting 4 days later said trains may now only run once an hour to Portishead.
- PRG committee representatives met with Liam Fox.

April

- Chris Grayling said he was trying to sort out the issues with the Portishead line.

July

- PRG questioned why we needed a development consent order, but were assured that we need it.

October

- PRG met with James Wilcox, Project Manager, as we do regularly, to explore progress.
- Stage 2 consultation on the proposed scheme began.

November

- Stakeholders meeting took place where it was confirmed that work should go ahead but the trains would only run once every hour as this would help to lower the cost
- Government released a transport document in which our line is mentioned. Alan was filmed again with regards to the above statement.

December

- Stage 2 consultation of the proposed scheme has now taken place.
- 1007 people have commented on the consultation

5. Election and Appointment of the Committee

Each member of the committee introduced themselves to those present. All agreed to stand again. Mike Travers proposed and Gareth Hughes seconded that the committee be re-elected. Agreed.

Colin Howells proposed Mike Travers as our Independent Examiner. Alan Matthews seconded.

6. Webmasters report

Webmaster Paul Gregory started the website 12 years ago this month. There have been 364,000 page views over the twelve years. Over the last 30 days this has averaged about 172 views per day. It peaked on the 29th November with 871 visitors and there were 580 yesterday. We have about 100 pages with the favourites at the moment being maps and news pages.

We wanted to have a members' zone but we have a problem with the software at the moment and so we are looking for a replacement that will do what we want it to.

7. Secretary's report

Facebook page reaches a lot more people than it is possible to by a meeting. There have been 1115 likes of the Facebook page, but some posts are reaching up to 2000 people. We appear to be getting a lot more engagement recently. The only nay-sayers are those who believe that the line will never happen. We do respond to most of questions and comments put to us.

There are other sites in Portishead and Clevedon which carry more negativity, which we occasionally respond to. We have found that most people want the line to open: they just don't understand why it can't be by next week.

8. Membership report

We have 532 members so we have increased membership. In the summer we had a tidy up of the membership and made sure everybody on our list still wanted to be a member. We gained email addresses where we could. 26 people are not on email. When the group began email had barely started.

114 people, including some in the room, have been supporting the group for more than ten years and 30 have been members since year 2000.

Peter Maliphant showed graphs as to where members come from: 74% are from Portishead, but this percentage has actually dropped despite membership increasing as the number of members from the Bristol area has quadruped and from elsewhere has nearly doubled. We do have one member each in Australia, USA and Guernsey.

9. James Wilcox update.

The local train network is really quite poor and MetroWest is about putting that right. Proposing a mix of lines to Severn Beach and Portishead running hourly services. Problems with the M5 have really driven home the need for the railway – it will also bring social and well being benefits.

Finished Grip 3 with Network Rail only to find at the last minute that the costs were so much higher than expected and it became unaffordable. So the project was split it into stages A, B and C.

- Stage A: Severn Beach and Bath corridors to stay the same.
- Stage B: Deliver an initial rail passenger service to Portishead.

- At the moment not progressing anything on Stage C which is 2 trains an hour to Portishead, as we know this is currently unaffordable.

'Hourly plus' means extra trains at rush hour, but this is not a huge difference only an extra 2 trains a day. Hourly is 18 trains a day, 'hourly plus' is 20 trains a day – so 4 peak time trains in the morning and the afternoon rather than 3 trains otherwise.

Cost benefit ratio is still very strong as still £3 of quantified benefits for every £1 invested, but if you look at wider benefits it takes it to over 4:1.

Scheme would be worth £264m to the local economy in the first 10 years and will create 514 permanent new jobs. It will bring an additional 50,000+ people within the area.

The railway will provide journey times of around 23 minutes, slightly slower than originally planned but still much quicker than it is to drive – and won't erode over time as new roads do as they fill up with traffic. Therefore investment in the line is a very good long term investment.

Need for a DCO

The reason it needs a DCO is because it requires an extra 2km of new track. The fact the line used to be there doesn't count. On the bad side it requires a lot of technical work and detail to reach the evidence-based bar that is set by the DCO as it is the same process as needed for a nuclear power station.

The positive is that it is a process that brings everything together in terms of planning and 'land assembly'. Still a lot of land needs to be acquired to construct the scheme: some on a permanent basis, quite a lot on a temporary basis, with quite a lot of 'land rights' still required. E.G. Pill station is in a cutting and the platform needs to be wider and longer and have a ramp, but in order to do that we need to cut away some of the earth, but at the top of this are people's back gardens. In order to underpin this we need to put in 'soil nails' and acquire land rights. Without the DCO these would have been separate processes which would have been inefficient.

Consultations

Stage 1 consultation in 2015 was very successful

Stage 2 finished yesterday and the response was unprecedented at over 1000, usually projects get 50 or 100. It will take some time to analyse them. Although most were fairly concise and said they accepted the scheme, 350 went into some detail of their thoughts, some of whom will be directly impacted, so these will take some time to go through and address.

The consultation has taken a multi-channel approach which means there should not be anyone who doesn't know about it. This has included:

- Full page ad in the Guardian.
- Local paper ads
- Mail drop to 5000 individual addresses.

The works

5km Portishead to Pill; 9km Pill to Ashton Junction. All comes under the DCO submission.

First section is Portishead, works including realignment of Quays Avenue to allow a multi-modal station with interchanges with walking, bikes, buses, taxis, cars and parking and on street bus stops.

Pill Station includes new platform, access ramp and earth works, forecourt and car park. Quite a lot of work at Pill as while things are there nothing can be kept, including demolition of the old station house.

Avon Gorge has 2 SSSIs and is a special area of conservation which creates its own challenges. Also some really rare trees growing in the gorge including 7 different variety of Whitebeam, the rarest of which there are only 30 species in existence in the world all in the gorge and quite close to the track.

The positive of trains being reduced to 1 per hour is that the amount of track works will be reduced and the track wall now only need to move a few centimetres rather than over a meter as would have been necessary to increase train speeds to 50mph, now they will stay at 30mph.

Ashton Vale Road

The level crossing will remain operational as train now hourly. Previously Network Rail were going to have to acquire and demolish property in order to get different road access, but for the hourly scheme traffic is manageable, with just a few road alterations and a change to traffic signals to a dynamic controls and a pedestrian access.

Cycle Network and Public Right of Way

There will be disruptions during construction. The path will be shut for up to 18 months with diversions through Pill, but ultimately there will be bridle way extensions including one under the M5.

Other minor work

Minor work to bridges and structures along the disused railway. It is one thing to get a single train up the line, but 18 hours a day the infrastructure would not be up to it. It is also not safe enough for a passenger train service as foliage needs to be cut back.

Construction

The disused line is a bit of a dream job as you can put a fence around it and it has easy road access. The freight line is the reverse of that as it has very poor highway access and we'll need to create new highway access in 2 places including at Pill.

Difficulty that it is a live line and the Port has access. Looking at 2 blockades when the line can't be used in August 2020 and 2021, then a lot of weekend working.

Facts and figures

There is a lot of infrastructure on the line:

12 under bridges and 14 over bridges plus 3km of retaining walls, 4 tunnels and 3 viaducts. 2 bridges need major work including one in Pill others need less work but it is still a lot in total

Timeline

The next 6 months will be crucial. Outline business case needs to be completed so that a funding bid to the DfT can be submitted by 22nd December. People are literally working night and day on it.

Aim to get the DCO in by June/July. Then expect DCO timescale to take about 18 months. We don't submit it and become passive; we will still have to feed a lot of information in. Planning inspectors will crawl all over it to decide whether it is in the public interest to build the line and to acquire the land.

Grip 4 is a shorter Grip stage which will be completed by mid next year.

Grip 5 is very detailed and will be happening in parallel with the DCO. Finally we will finalise the procurement of the scheme and drawing down the money in 2020 and appoint a contractor. Expect build to start in Spring 2020 and finish about August 2021 and then there will be testing.

Expected opening date Dec 2021.

Costs

MetroWest Issued a press release on how much the project will cost. The cost has had a lot of scrutiny since March. Mott Macdonald came in as an independent cost examiner to look at all the costs. Expected cost £116m takes into account all the land, risk, future inflation, construction and planning costs. It is a big number but in the scale of a 14km railway project it is not that much.

Q&A with attendees

Q1. Why will people leave their cars and use the train?

A1 There are 2 different markets: the peak commuter market and the leisure/off peak market and this latter has grown massively over the last few years. In the morning out of all commuters we only expect to get 10% of the commuting population but that's enough to fill the trains. The Ebbw Vale line using the same model soon quadrupled after it was opened and another line soon trebled.

Q2 Parking charges? Will people park in surrounding areas?

A2 Considering a residents parking scheme or a specialist order to help the first 18 months

Q3. Has a circular bus service been considered?

A3 Bit too early to look at this in detail.

Q4. You say it will bring £264m to the area how?

A4 from time savings and efficiencies to the job market. People who will have more productive time rather than being stuck in traffic.

Q5. How has the timeline been decided? Bothered that it's still so far away. Worried that it still has to get into control period 6. If the DCO is signed off does this mean it will definitely go ahead. What if the government changes?

A5 Still many steps to go through including a judicial review and we've had to take these interdependencies into account. Won't happen any earlier than Dec 2021

Q6. Worried about funding, how is the funding gap being filled?

A6. This is our most pressing issue. At the moment we have £58m, NSC have promised another £6m and the other councils have pledged another £6m each. The rest we will be asking for from the government under essential infrastructure projects and the DFT but we think that we have a very strong business case. In the budget the DFT announced a number of different funding streams, but that will need that to be concluded from April next year.

Q7. Will the trains take bikes?

A7 Yes

Q8. How will the passenger line operate alongside the freight trains and are there enough tracks at Bristol? And will the trains stop at Parson St and Bedminster?

A8. Traditional alignment between BTM and Parson Street was lost many years ago and has been built on, but for an hourly service we don't need that alignment. The train pathing is all done through a Network Rail model. The next big network timing changes are in December 2018 and

NR have very sophisticated modelling that we have been using. It has also driven the infrastructure requirements such the line speeds and

Q9 When can we have half hourly trains?

A9 The half hourly project is a completely different scheme. For the hourly service the rail does not need to be upgraded; to take the trains to 2 an hour at a 50mph will require major work as the track is very narrow so the track would have to be straightened out which would mean the track has to be moved by up to 1.5m, which would also affect the loading on the bridges. At the moment we will not do that work as we don't need this to be done.

Q10 What is an under bridge?

A10 They support the railway track as they were build to maintain access for landowners.

Comment that it is always four years time until the line is opened but now we can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Meeting concluded at 9.30pm.