



**REPORT TITLE: Rail Update and Potential Future Expansion Plans**

<b>Scrutiny meeting</b>	Gloucestershire Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee 20 <sup>th</sup> July 2023
<b>Chair</b>	Cllr. Matt Babbage
<b>Presenting Officer</b>	Rob Niblett
<b>Item Type</b>	Scrutiny
<b>Purpose of Report</b>	To provide an update on rail matters in Gloucestershire and possible future expansion plans
<b>Recommendations/ Action sought</b>	For information
<b>Forthcoming Decisions</b>	N/A
<b>Background Documents</b>	<p>Bristol to Birmingham Network Rail Strategic Corridor Study <a href="https://sacuksprodnrdigital0001.blob.core.windows.net/regional-long-term-planning/Wales%20and%20Western/Bristol%20to%20Birmingham%20rail%20corridor%20strategic%20study.pdf">https://sacuksprodnrdigital0001.blob.core.windows.net/regional-long-term-planning/Wales%20and%20Western/Bristol%20to%20Birmingham%20rail%20corridor%20strategic%20study.pdf</a></p> <p>Gloucestershire Local Transport Plan 2020 – 2041 <a href="https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/transport/gloucestershires-local-transport-plan-2020-2041/gloucestershire-ltp-2020-2041/">https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/transport/gloucestershires-local-transport-plan-2020-2041/gloucestershire-ltp-2020-2041/</a></p> <p>Western Gateway Sub National Transport Body Rail Strategy <a href="https://weston.ndm-server.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Western-Gateway-Rail-Strategy-Final-Published-Report-Brochure.pdf">https://weston.ndm-server.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Western-Gateway-Rail-Strategy-Final-Published-Report-Brochure.pdf</a></p> <p>Western Gateway Partnership Rail Vision <a href="https://western-gateway.co.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/WEST-ARP-XX-RP-TP-0001_03_Western%20Gateway%20Rail_Spreads_Reduced-compressed.pdf">https://western-gateway.co.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/WEST-ARP-XX-RP-TP-0001_03_Western%20Gateway%20Rail_Spreads_Reduced-compressed.pdf</a></p> <p>Gloucestershire Rail Investment Strategy <a href="https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2096940/gloucestershire-rail-strategy.pdf">https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2096940/gloucestershire-rail-strategy.pdf</a></p>
<b>Appendices</b>	None.
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## **Introduction**

This report sets out to update Members on rail matters in Gloucestershire and summarises ongoing schemes for improvements to services and infrastructure. It emphasises the benefits rail offers in terms of enabling economic growth and improving travel options, whilst helping reduce carbon emissions. It concludes with a suggested approach to engaging with the rail industry in an attempt to progress service and infrastructure enhancements.

Rail travel is a means to an end and not an end in itself and therefore its central role is to help meet wider societal objectives such as enabling sustainable long term economic growth, reducing carbon emissions and increasing access to education and employment. Rail journeys only account for about one per cent of journeys in Gloucestershire so there is considerable scope to improve this figure.

Whilst Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) is the 'Highway Authority' for the county it has no statutory responsibility for the rail network and provision of rail services. However, it has an important role to play in lobbying the Department for Transport (DfT), Network Rail (NR) and the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) to enhance infrastructure and services so as to increase sustainable travel options and encourage modal shift for residents and visitors and help achieve the objectives outlined above.

Gloucestershire's position approximately halfway between Birmingham and Bristol means that we need to engage with both areas to ensure we maximise benefits for the county. Conversely, it's important to make sure that the county isn't disadvantaged by the aspirations of other local authorities/organisations.

## **Policy Context**

### **Gloucestershire Local Transport Plan**

The adopted Gloucestershire Local Transport Plan (LTP) 2020 – 2041 provides the policy aspirations and context for rail. Three policies provide the context for improvements to rail infrastructure, services and stations in the county. The policies reflect the need for GCC to engage with other organisations and form partnerships to ensure that the county benefits from rail enhancements that are happening beyond our borders - notably Bristol to the south and Birmingham to the north. Both large urban areas have their own transport priorities and organisations to promote them (West of England Combined Authority (WECA) and Midlands Connect respectively).

The adopted LTP emphasises the need for ongoing investment in the strategic rail network to ensure Gloucestershire continues to strengthen its connectivity to the major growth centres of Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff and London.

The emerging Gloucestershire Economic Strategy recognises the key role transport has in enabling sustainable long term strategic growth and that development should be avoided in areas that will negatively contribute towards county-wide carbon emissions by focusing it on areas within convenient access to existing or new railway stations or high frequency bus corridors.

## **Gloucestershire Rail Investment Strategy**

The Gloucestershire Rail Investment Strategy (GRIS) 2020 details the most economically important rail routes in the county in terms of Gross Value Added (GVA) through connectivity to the wider rail network. It then recommended service and infrastructure enhancements that would yield the most economic benefit to residents and visitors alike by enabling access to training, employment and tourism etc. Increased regional and local services that connected the smaller towns to larger settlements on the Bristol to Birmingham corridor were found to meet this requirement. Faster inter city services between Bristol and Birmingham that only stop at Cheltenham don't provide the enhanced connectivity that smaller settlements with wider rural hinterlands require. These faster services are being promoted by Midlands Connect.

## **Network Rail's Bristol to Birmingham Strategic Corridor Study**

This is an important study from NR that GCC officers, along with other stakeholders, were involved in. Its main purpose was to look at how the railway could support housing and economic growth along the Bristol to Birmingham rail corridor over the coming decades. After considering a range of factors and detailed analysis, it set out a number of potential service enhancements and the additional infrastructure required to enable them to happen. The report supported the findings of the GRIS i.e. that local services linking smaller settlements with planned housing to the larger urban areas offered the most benefit with the limited capacity along the route.

## **The Western Gateway Sub National Transport Body's (WGSNTB) Rail Strategy**

This forms part of the overall Strategic Transport Plan for the STB and sets out how rail will help deliver the overall vision for transport in the Western Gateway area. The Rail Strategy sets out the need for change based on a review of policy, challenges and trends. It explores the region's vision, objectives and priorities, and develops a series of Conditional Outputs which will support the delivery of these objectives. The WGSNTB were one of the clients of the NR Corridor Study and the Rail Strategy formed the starting point for the study. GCC is a member of the WGSNTB.

## **The Western Gateway Partnership's Rail Vision**

The vision supports the wider regional economic ambition enabled through enhanced rail connectivity between West/South Wales, Bristol, the South West and the South East. Whilst the primary focus is on improving east – west connectivity, there is also consideration of the Bristol/Cardiff to Birmingham corridors which are of greater significance to GCC. The emphasis is on reducing journey times between the larger towns/cities although improving connectivity is a priority for GCC.

## **Schemes/Projects**

The following are ongoing rail schemes and partnerships that officers are involved with and range from the short term to the very long term.

### **MetroWest Phase 2 Project**

The additional Bristol to Gloucester service has now been introduced. This creates a half hourly service between the two cities. Unfortunately, the extra service doesn't stop at Cam and Dursley station. The new service has been funded by WECA. Capacity for additional/new stops on the line is limited and that has been prioritised for Yate and the proposed new rail station at Charfield which has recently secured planning permission.

NR have stated that once Charfield has been built, additional new stations on the Bristol to Birmingham corridor won't be possible without significant additional infrastructure. This is likely to involve the extension of existing passing loops or installing new ones.

In addition, one of the Bristol to Gloucester services has been extended to Worcester every hour calling at Ashchurch for Tewkesbury. GCC hasn't contributed financially to these service enhancements but officers have been involved in discussions over the past few years.

### **North Cotswold Line Task Force (NCLTF)**

GCC has been a member of the NCLTF since its inception in 2017. The partnership continues to work towards improving services between Worcester to Oxford and onto London with additional stops at Moreton in Marsh. The Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) has been completed and although the DfT has approved the SOBC they won't be contributing financially to the Outline Business Case (OBC) stage. Consultants acting on behalf of the NCLTF are now progressing phase 1 of the OBC within the existing budget.

### **Gloucestershire Community Rail Partnership (GCRP)**

The GCRP continues to successfully engage with communities throughout the county who don't normally use trains and run programmes to build confidence in using them. This increases opportunities to access training and employment as well as leisure activities. They also run rail trips to bring people together to tackle loneliness and isolation which is one of their key objectives. The Partnership has produced a number of leisure maps to encourage tourism from within and outside the county. The organisation has been successful in attracting funding from the rail industry to develop a number of projects at grass roots level.

### **Cheltenham Bay Platform**

One of the enhancements recommended in the NR Bristol to Birmingham Corridor Study is a potential bay platform at Cheltenham station. This would reduce the crossover movements carried out to access the siding north of the station by terminating services from London and Cardiff. The freed up capacity on the main line would help facilitate an additional service between Cheltenham and Swindon as well as enabling the existing Transport for Wales service to continue to terminate at Cheltenham. The bay platform would also provide additional capacity and time to process passengers from the south during busy race meetings.

The WGSNTB is contributing funding to the initial studies which are being carried out by NR. Preliminary findings suggest that a new bay platform would deliver capacity and timetable benefits and further studies will be needed to move this scheme forward. It is likely that GCC will need to contribute funding to these studies. Delivery of the scheme would require significant external funding.

### **Gloucester Area Resignalling**

Officers continue to lobby NR to bring this scheme forward from the current 2024 – 2029 projected time period. This major project would modernise the signalling infrastructure and potentially enable Gloucester to have more service calls by simplifying the current signalling system. This would need to be linked to looking at future options for the Horton Road level crossing and barrier down times.

### **Cardiff to Cheltenham Service**

Transport for Wales have been planning to introduce new rolling stock and an hourly service on the route for a number of months/years. Unfortunately, this has been delayed due to a backlog of driver training and technical problems with existing trains elsewhere in Wales. The enhanced service is hoped to start in December 2023.

### **Stonehouse Bristol Road – Restoring Your Railway**

The SOBC for a new rail station at Stonehouse Bristol Road was submitted at the end of September 2022 by Stroud District Council in conjunction with Stonehouse Town Council. This was part of the DfT's Restoring Your Railway scheme. A decision on whether to proceed has yet to be announced. GCC's preference is for a new station north of Standish Junction that could help deliver sustainable long term strategic growth over the coming decades.

### **Electrification**

Electrification between Bristol/Cardiff and Birmingham was included in a list of priorities for electrification several years ago. A NR Decarbonisation Strategy (2020) recommended all the lines in Gloucestershire for electrification but no costings or timescales were given. Electrification would yield considerable operational and environmental benefits, but unfortunately doesn't appear to be on the Government's agenda at the moment due to the high level of costs involved.

### **Cheltenham Station**

Work is due to start on installing lifts in September 2023 subject to NR signing a lease with Western Power Distribution to enable the relocation of their substation. The 'Access for All' scheme has been in the pipeline for a number of years and work is likely to take nine months.

### **Gloucester Station**

Work is ongoing to enhance the underpass and make it more accessible by removing the steps and improving the line of sight through it. This is due to be completed this Summer.

## **Summary**

The schemes outlined above highlight the importance of partnership working and engaging with organisations outside of the county boundary to maximise benefits for Gloucestershire. They also demonstrate the long timescales and funding challenges to bring rail enhancement schemes to fruition and will require ongoing input from officers.

Rail has a key role in supporting long term sustainable economic growth by increasing sustainable travel options and encouraging modal shift. Gloucestershire will experience significant housing growth over the next 30 years which will significantly increase congestion on the road network and carbon emissions, unless development is allocated where it can benefit from a viable and attractive public transport offer.

Developing a rail vision for Gloucestershire and sequential plan will be important to establish what the priorities are for GCC in terms of rail provision over the coming decades. It will set out priorities for GCC investment in developing the business cases for the infrastructure improvements. The emerging Economic Development strategy will help inform this process along with the future review of the LTP.

The allocation of funding to progress rail schemes to support GCC's objectives will also need to be done in conjunction with producing a county-wide development strategy via the Gloucestershire Statement of Common Ground (GSOCG). GCC will be competing against schemes from across the region /country, so having a robust business case will be critical to obtaining funding from the Government and NR to deliver these projects.