

Minutes of Portishead Railway Group members' meeting. (PRG 149)

Tuesday 16th April 2019, 7.30 Folk Hall Portishead

1. **Apologies for Absence** – Apologies from Alan Matthews, Peter Maliphant and Paul Gregory
2. **Minutes of the 2018 AGM** - approved, proposed by Colin Howells, seconded by Brian Hunt. There were no matters arising.
3. **Update from meetings and correspondence**

PRG postponed the members' meeting from March until now because we had no news, then last Monday morning the phones started ringing with calls from the media after the announcement that the Department for Transport (DfT) had promised the outstanding £32m. The media wanted to speak to us as we are non-political and the politicians are in purdah due to the upcoming elections.

- Alan did the radio interviews
- Peter did BBC and HTV
- Website went mad with 2,531 visits on the Monday and 1,138 on the Tuesday, this beats the previous record of 2,377 on 11 March 2013 which was when line clearance was first started.
- Colin spoke to the town council and reassured them that it's good news although there is still a lot to be done. He also wrote a piece for the North Somerset Times.

We have never been this far ahead before, however it is always four years ahead and that's still the case. Someone has written to the Bristol Post today asking why, now the money is available, can't work start tomorrow.

Update – timescales, funding, DCO process and future programme

Dave explained why track opening is still four years away. Full details are on PRG website, in summary:

About a year ago we realised there would not be enough funding in local coffers so the only way the project was going to be fully funded was through a central government contribution. Some of the committee met with Dr Fox and followed it up with a letter. Tim Bowles, Nigel Ashton and other WECA members have all had meetings with Chris Grayling. We do not have that access. Chris Grayling sent a letter suggesting everyone work together. PRG maintained central government was only source of the remaining funding and had an article published in Railwatch to this effect on Tuesday 2nd April.

On Monday 8th April the remaining funding of 31.9m was pledged by the DfT. It will have come about by pressure from all the different organisations so no one should claim sole bragging rights.

Q. Do we know of any projects that don't go ahead when they have got to this stage?

A. No

Q. We haven't seen any announcement from DfT that the funding is there, what if it's withdrawn?

A. No announcement will have been made probably because of purdah, but there should be once the elections are over. Once the announcement such as this is in the public domain it's almost unheard of that it is then withdrawn.

It's important that everyone should understand why it will still take four years. Railway reinstatement is governed by planning permission just like everything else. The Planning Act 2008 set out a protocol to spend public money on projects known as Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, and these projects have to have a DCO signed off before it can go ahead. Our track falls under it because more than 2km of track needs to be built.

The DCO is to be sent by MetroWest to the Planning Inspectorate who will make representation to Chris Grayling. As part of that MetroWest need to submit a full funding statement, which couldn't happen until all the funding was in place. We expect the DCO application will be submitted in June or July this year, but there is still a lot to do. There have only been 2 railway applications of this nature before but they have been far simpler

Q. I'm disappointed that the DCO hasn't gone in already, as we were under the impression that it should have gone in last year

A. Agree it's frustrating, but we needed the funding before it can go in. It is also delayed now because there should have been a meeting on the 5th April of WECA, NSC and MetroWest but they couldn't meet because of the elections. Now they can't meet until at least the 31th May.

Q. Does the station site at Quays Avenue have planning permission?

A. It is part of the total package of work that's under the DCO

Q. Are you concerned that NSC will be a bit slow in undertaking this road work?

A. No, because once it's under the DCO it will be part of the package of work to be done

Q. Who has the authority to submit the DCO?

A. NSC has to send it in but the DCO application is being put together by the MetroWest project team.

Why the DCO is so important

Obtaining a DCO is the equivalent of obtaining planning permission in any other sense. MetroWest has the responsibility for preparing the DCO; NSC has the responsibility for authorising the submission.

It takes a standard 18 months for the DCO to be processed, the same as it was for Hinkley C as all the same documents need to be submitted. It could be a slightly longer or shorter process but this is very rare. So assuming it is submitted in June/July we should expect an answer in about January 2021

Q. What will the large MetroWest team do for 18 months?

A. Probably answer questions from the Planning Inspectorate.

How might it unfold from here?

Much of the track through the gorge is an SSSI and there needs to be access to and from the track. Service roadways need to be built and little or no work can start before the DCO is signed off except perhaps some of the road works if that is seen as advantageous. However the railway work will take about 21 months, so it seems that the roadworks can be carried out in parallel and why would NSC commit further funds before they need to?

The following rough outline programme is the sort of timescale we should expect.

- Assuming the DCO application is received by The Planning Inspectorate at the end of July, a decision could be reasonably expected in Q1 2021
- Contract start up time: up to 6 months - to July 2021
- Building time – 21 months with 4 months testing time
- So 49 months in total. Trains could therefore be running by end of Q2 2023 but more realistic end of Q3 or Q4 2023.

Q. With regards to the funding, what if there is then found to be a shortfall in that money?

A. Knowing the risk profile, we think the funding will be relatively comfortable as Mott McDonald have stress tested it. This is of course not the total money and the other money spend is a risk.

Q. If GWR are the franchisees in 4 years time will they be planning the times in now

A. Yes, this is why 'nationally significant' is so important as some of the Portishead trains will be running on part of the mainline between Bristol and Taunton, so the timetables need to be stress tested now.

Q. So the services on this line will be included in the franchise?

A. Yes.

Q. Are people in the MetroWest team in discussions with the planning team already?

A. Yes, they have been for 3 years. The only 2 options the planning inspectorate has are: instant rejection or study every document. The project team won't want it to be rejected, so they want to get that level of detail right as the Planning Inspectorate are tasked with going through it with a fine tooth comb. It won't be 100% accurate in every aspect, but there cannot be glaring errors so the amount of checking is extraordinary.

The spec will not change now so extra stations etc cannot be added in at this stage as it has to be pinned down for the DCO. However once reinstatement is complete then modifications may be able to be made based on actual passenger usage.

Q. Is the timetabling fixed in the DCO?

A. We don't think so as the DCO is about the infrastructure, so the timetabling should still be able to be discussed. However there are only a few mainline timetable slots available. Network Rail is responsible for all timetabling.

Q. Is the cost benefit analysis included in the DCO?

A. It will be priced into the DCO in terms of one train per hour, even on that basis it is expected to make a healthy profit even in the first year.

Colin explained the two parts of the MetroWest project Phase 1a, and how we are Phase 1b. The letter saying that NSC and WECA have to work together, means that any profit from 'our' line will help to decongest other parts of the local rail network.

Treasurer's report

£2,747 in the bank. Funds remained static but we have never been here to make money.

Membership – 1 new member on PayPal maybe after the PRG article appeared in Railwatch.

Facebook – The last post about the funding did really well with 4,523 people reached and 1,496 engagements. This is in contrast with the previous post which reached 630 people.

Journalists are also watching our site as our enquiry from HTV came via the Facebook page and also one from Gordano Living.

Webmaster

2531 views was the highest we have ever seen in one day and exceeds the 2377 we had about 5 years ago when the track was cleared. In total we had over 4000 visits to the website over 3 days from Monday 8th April to Wednesday 10th. This is in contrast to just 31 views the day before the news broke.

AOB

Wendy spoke about her role as Membership Director of Railfuture.

Next Members Meeting: Tuesday July 2nd 2019, the Folk Hall