

Minutes of Portishead Railway Group AGM (PRG 161)

Tuesday 6th December 2022 at the Folk Hall, Portishead.

Welcome and introductions. Chairman Alan Matthews welcomed 42 members to the AGM and introduced James Willcock MetroWest Project Manager as the guest speaker for the evening.

Apologies: Apologies were received from 7 members.

Minutes of the 2019 AGM. The minutes of 2019 AGM were approved by the committee in 2020 as there was no AGM in 2020 or 2021 due to Covid.

There was then a moment of silent reflection for the passing of committee member Norman Vanstone.

Chairman's report

PRG are pleased that we now have the DCO after 22 years of campaigning. The committee meets regularly with James Willcock MetroWest Project Manager and also has regular correspondence with Liam Fox MP who has been an avid supporter of the project.

We have been following the Longmoor Village planning application in Ashton Vale closely, to ensure that it doesn't affect any future plans for a half-hourly service.

PRG have plans to become a Severnside Community Rail Partnership Member to ensure that the stations at Portishead and Pill are improved and maintained in the future. PRG shared a stand with Railfuture at the WC&P railway event at Parish Wharf Portishead in October.

Approval of the accounts

The bank balance has remained stable with £2656 in the bank account up from £2,608 in 2021 following a donation from Harbourside WI. The membership agreed that the independent examiner, Bob Brimley, should continue. Proposed by Wendy Thorne seconded by Colin Howells.

Communications report

We have 1066 followers on Facebook

We sent out a press release when the DCO was announced. This went to 24 different publications with a potential reach of 6.2 million people. Unfortunately as the day went on, our positive quotes were replaced by more negative ones by the WECA mayor who said that the scheme still wasn't guaranteed.

Our post on Facebook about the DCO approval received: 324 likes, 57 comments and 97 shares.

Webmaster

Our web-site normally gets about 96 page views per day, but received 1,764 views on the day of the DCO approval and the high level continued for several days. It's the highest number since April 2019.

Membership

Membership has declined slightly, some members have moved away and some have sadly passed away. We still have around 450 family units, with the majority of members on email. Seven members are alive and well but not on email so we post information out to them.

Appointment of the committee

All committee members stood up to be known by the membership.

Daisy Bickley proposed that the current committee should continue: Sue Mason seconded. Agreed

The Chairman asked for a member to join the committee to represent the Pill area. At the time there was no response, but since the AGM two members have come forward to represent the Pill area.

Constitution

The constitution was put in place in 2013 and needs to be updated. Rodney Drew proposed approving the updated constitution. Terri Lester seconded. The membership approved the updated constitution.

Presentation by James Wilcock

At the beginning of the year things weren't looking good with major cost escalations and delays, but this has significantly improved since.

July 22 achieved agreement on additional funding packaged from NSC, WECA and the DfT. The original funding in 2017 was £116m but has increased to £152m, which factors in cost escalation. It was much higher but was reduced to £152m after a "value engineering" discussion to get the cost down. There was still a £35m funding gap, so NSC and WECA committed another £10m each and DfT £15m.

DfT realised the project was too big for local authorities to take all the delivery risks, as councils can't control all the risk, especially as many of the risks lie with Network Rail so DfT agreed to take the project delivery risk, which is a real result in helping the railway to reopen.

The DCO application includes 989 documents, all of which are on the national infrastructure planning website, of which circa 200 were application documents. This is an extreme number of documents. Even if one was looking to build a huge housing estate, you only need to submit circa 200 documents.

The DfT approval decision was made 3 years to the week after the DCO was submitted. Covid did interrupt the process, which delayed it by 5.5 months. There were 2 planning inspectors who were very good and very fair, we had a good examination.

There were a few people who raised concerns, including Bristol Port and a couple of landowners. The examination closed in April 2021 and we should have had a decision within 6 months. The inspectors had 3 months to submit their report, which they did within the timeframe in July 2021. The DfT deliberated for 15 months rather than the 3 months they should have taken and in that time the costs began to spiral.

There is a 6 week window which started on the 14th November where people can lodge a judicial review challenge, which must be about the process. Closing date for the judicial review is 28th December 2022.

Question about whether the person who wants a bus lane instead may lodge a judicial review.

Answer: possible but unlikely

Next stage

Section 134 of the Planning Act 2008 means we have to formally serve notice on landowners and affected parties including powers to compulsory acquire land. Notice will be in the form of letters which will go to over 1000 people who live near the line; they will also be posted on lampposts and in libraries, plus newspapers adverts in Bristol Post and Western Daily Press. Legal notices will also be available.

We need to have dialogue with people we need to acquire land from. There are not many where we need to acquire land permanently but quite a few where we need to acquire it temporarily or for access.

The railway will need to be wider than it currently is, in various places. There are some people in Pill we have to ask to install soil nails a couple of meters below their garden so the embankment will be stable.

Hard copies of the DCO documents will be in local libraries in Portishead, Pill Resource Centre and Weston library, Town Hall. These will be available to view from Friday 9th December for 6 weeks.

Programme overview - Detailed design.

NSC/WECA will scope the project and rolling stock procurement. This will feed into the full business case. Governance – Oct 2023 to May 2024 then award contracts to contractors by July 2024. This is the point of no return. Construction July 2024 to July 2026. Project opening date Sept 2026.

Detailed design

This includes:

- Reviewing changes made to reduce the scope and costs: these were carried out in 2022, with some work scaled back. Parson St junction renewal is not going to happen now
- Detailed construction methodology for each construction stage. Different for different parts of the line. The disused section of the line is easier to access and work on.
- Produce construction sequence for all the construction stages. May be over 100 people working on the railway per day at different times, so this sequencing is important to drive efficiency.
- Detailed design drawings - much has been done already but more to be done on sequencing
- Engaging with statutory bodies as there are many of them including Utility Companies, Natural England NSC Local Planning Authority
- Documents to support applications for discharge of DCO requirement of the planning conditions.

This is why the detailed design starts in Jan 2023 and will take until December 2023.

Question about train speed:

Answer: Originally trains would run at 55mph, but the curvature of the track between Bristol and Pill would mean heavy civil engineering work to realign the track, which was prohibitively expensive, so this was dropped to one train per hour at 30 mph through the gorge. Between Portishead and Pill it is straight and trains will get up to 75mph but would slow down between there and Ashton Gate.

Question: does that mean we will never have 2 trains per hour

Answer: Never say never; but it would require a lot of work in the future. It's a challenge with the level crossing at Ashton Gate. With 1 train each way per hour – 18 trains per day - we can mitigate. If that was doubled, the road at Ashton into the industrial estate would need rerouting. There may be opposition from landowners and costs escalate very quickly. This would be the biggest obstacle to overcome.

We must allow an hourly pass from Bristol Port as they have commercial rights to use the track. They have been asked if they would accept compensation to waive these rights, but are unwilling to do so.

Bristol Port is more significant now we are in a post-Brexit world with more trade with the United States.

Scope, DCO and legal work to do:

Landowner engagement, deployment of powers relating to land

Ecology enabling works – phase A Jan 2023 to June, phase B – July 2023 to March 2024

Site and ground investigation for bridge works and highways works.

Bridge designs

Ecological compensation

Highways Management

Project Management

Full business case production

Following the completion of the detailed design, market prices will be gathered for construction contracts and operation of the train service – either with incumbent operator GWR or with the DfT.

5 chapters: Strategic case. Ecological case. Commercial case. Finance case. Management

We will commence work on the FBC from Oct 2023 and will engage with DfT. FBC to be submitted by March 2024 and DfT have 2 months to make a decision – by May 2024.

Upon approval of the FBC in May 2024 it will be necessary NSC, WECA and Network Rail to complete parallel governance processes, by July 2024. Following completion of the governance processes, construction contracts will be awarded in July 2024 and construction will then commence.

Question: what if costs escalate?

Answer: That's always a risk until we get the full business case passed. But the different authorities and Network Rail really want this to go ahead. We could scope back on the freight line if costs escalate more. There is a recognition within the DfT that they took 15 months to process the DCO and there is an acknowledgement that they could have done better and this really needs to be delivered.

NSC will also offer efficiencies where we can so we don't miss any possible savings.

We are not particularly concerned as we intend to work with a collaborative and responsive contractor.

Question: about how this fits with the election cycle

Answer: We have spent over £30m to get to where we are today and it will be £40m by then so it's hard to see any political party then wanting to cancel.

Programme summary:

- Funding agreement – Dec 22
- NR detailed design contract award – Jan 23
- Phase A – Ecology enabling works on the disused line complete - June 23
- Detailed design completed and market price for construction – Dec 23
- Phase B – ecology enabling works on the disused line complete – Mar 24
- FBC submitted to DfT March 24
- FBC approval May 24
- Investment Governance Activities complete – July 24
- Construction contracts awarded July 24
- Possession of all land including using CA powers Dec 24
- Phase C – ecology enabling works on the disused line and operational line complete – June 25
- Construction complete - July 26
- Signalling commissioning – July 26
- Project opening – entry into service Sept 26

The scheme has an unusually large number of major processes and consents, but there would have to be very good reasons for any of these dates moving.

Environmental constraints:

Avon Gorge – Special Area of Conservation and SSSI so had to have years of consultation with Natural England particularly where the rare Whitebeam trees are. This has resulted in various constraints for the construction works.

We have grown over 200 now, but the rarest are the hardest to grow, and we have only been able to grow about another four. We were out collecting whitebeam fruit recently and committed to doing that over the next 5 years to grow some more trees.

Construction:

Depend on the construction methodology it's likely they would want to use a 'high output train' – picture shown.

Disused section: Haul roads and construction compounds will be needed. The existing track bed and the old ballast will be removed and new ballast will need to be laid

Freight section: Access through the gorge is difficult with only a few access points and there is only a narrow access corridor due to environmental constraints.

Roads originally were going to come under the scope of NSC, but now transferred to Network Rail.

Proposed train services

1 train from Portishead to BTM – but GWR want to interwork it with other routes.

The trains will have capacity for 270 seats, with 3 carriages

Journey time will be 23 minutes. Trains will call at Pill, Parson St, Bedminster and BTM

Trains will operate 18 hours per day in each direction from 6 am to 11.30 pm Monday to Saturday.

There were discussions about the length of platforms and DfT were adamant they only wanted to pay for the minimum which is a 3 car length. GWR and project team are still arguing for 5 car platforms – it makes a lot more sense to do now than later when it will cost much more. GWR were quite vocal with the DfT about the need for longer platforms. PRG will lobby DfT on this issue, with letters and quotes about what it means for different members of the public such as those with buggies and the disabled.

Question: There are issues when the platform is not long enough for the train, as is the case at Nailsea and Backwell. Will there be full disabled access?

Answer: yes

Q: Will there be enough rolling stock?

Answer: yes. GWR confirms that it does have enough and ours will come from the Thames Valley.

Question: As the process has been so difficult, will there be an opportunity for you to feed back on the DCO process about the challenges that you've been faced with

Answer: Some people in the railway industry are not happy with the length of time it took to get the DCO granted. We've been let down. We are unlikely to be able to feedback on it.

Question: Can we use it to inspire the youth and next generation on this?

Answer: Contractors are very good at doing this. It is in the tender documents about social value and creating apprenticeships.

The meeting closed at 9.30pm. 6th December 2022.

The date of the next members meeting to be confirmed.