

Place Theme Group 1 July 2021

Update on Transport Issues

Introduction

This note provides a brief overview of various aspects of transport where there have been developments since the last meeting of Place Group. In addition to the items below it is anticipated that Government will publish its Transport Decarbonisation Strategy before the summer recess.

Williams/ Shapps Review – Rail White Paper

In May the much delayed outcome of the Williams Rail Review (conducted in 2019) was published in the form of a Rail White Paper. The review concluded that the rail industry had lost sight of its customers; that the industry suffered from fragmentation, with no clear accountability and a lack of strategic direction; and that the system of passenger rail franchising was no longer workable.

The White Paper proposes a new industry structure, with the creation of Great British Railways (GBR) – a public sector body which will be the ‘guiding mind’ for the railways. GBR will set a 30 year vision for the industry, own and control the infrastructure, set the timetable for passenger services and set most fares. It will procure train services through concession contracts.

Private sector operators will compete to run the concession contracts. The provision of trains through private sector leasing companies will be unchanged, and the freight sector will also continue as at present.

The White Paper advocates simpler fares structures, and a faster transition from paper-based tickets to electronic purchase and validation. Greater flexibility in season tickets has already been introduced, reflecting the trend away from traditional 5 day commuting; this trend had been apparent for several years and has accelerated as a consequence of the Covid pandemic.

The White Paper will require primary legislation and hence will take some years to implement fully. However, the dramatic reduction in patronage during the pandemic had already resulted in franchises becoming unsustainable, and hence operators have been moved on to operational contracts with the Department for Transport taking the revenue risk.

Train patronage in the South West has been gradually building up towards pre-Covid levels. This re-growth has been somewhat faster than some other parts of the country – partly because of higher levels of education and leisure travel in the South West and lower dependency on commuting.

Highways England A303/ A358 improvements

The judicial review into the Secretary of State’s approval of the A303 Stonehenge Tunnel orders was held on June 23-25 and the outcome is awaited.

The programme for construction of the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester dualling has been outlined. Site clearance will start in September 2021 and completion of the scheme is envisaged by mid 2023.

Development of the design for the A358 dualling is ongoing, and consultation on the proposals is planned for late 2021.

Highway England has consulted Sub-National Transport Bodies on the next priority for improvement of the A303/A358 corridor, following the above three schemes. The LEP has indicated its preference for dualling of the A303 Ilminster Bypass to be the next priority.

Peninsula Transport Sub National Transport Body

Peninsula Transport has received another round of funding from the Department for Transport to progress the development of a Regional Transport Strategy. They will be consulting of a High Level Vision during Summer 2021, and work is ongoing on a range of work packages including an Economic Corridors Study, a Carbon Transition Strategy and a Rail Strategy. The LEP has recently participated in a stakeholder workshop on freight issues.

A presentation on the LEP's Blueprint for Clean Growth was given at the recent Peninsula Transport Board meeting.

Place Group members may want to respond individually to the consultation on the High Level Vision.

Levelling Up Submissions

A number of the Round 1 Levelling Up Fund bids submitted by local authorities were for transport projects, and letters indicating LEP support were provided in each case.

Bridgwater - The project involves capacity enhancements at two key junctions – The Cross Rifles roundabout and Dunball Roundabout. The other element of the scheme is the provision of cycling facilities, to create safe walking and cycling provision between the town centre and Dunball, as part of the route linking Bridgwater with the Gravity site at Puriton.

Cullompton - This bid relates to the delivery of a new town centre relief road for the town of Cullompton, Devon. The road scheme will remove a substantial amount of traffic from the Town Centre and provide a free-flowing exit from junction 28 (M5 motorway), addressing a safety risk arising from lengthening queues extending down the off slip onto the motorway. It will also provide improved walking and cycling routes to the proposed railway station.

Exmouth - Completion of the Dinan Way distributor road which will remove heavy goods vehicles from the town centre, improve air quality and provide better access to the commercial developments in the east of the town. The project will also involve creation of an enhanced interchange and mobility hub adjacent to the recently upgraded railway station, providing an upgraded gateway to the town centre, and public realm improvements between the railway station and town centre.

Okehampton - provision of a parkway station on the eastern fringes of Okehampton, close to the A30 trunk road. The additional station, together with a surface car park and bus interchange, on the eastern fringe of Okehampton will not just to cater for Okehampton residents, but also for those from a wider catchment area on West Devon, Torridge and North Cornwall.

Plymouth - The improvement of the Woolwell to the George section of the A386 Plymouth Northern Corridor will remove a bottleneck on this key transport route. This section of the northern corridor regularly sees congestion in the morning and evening peak periods, with queues stretching back to the previous junctions.