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Amey



PRESS RELEASE

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Wiltshire stations to have trains every ten minutes both ways

A packed public meeting in Chippenham last week heard how plans for MetroWest Bath & Wiltshire would give much more frequent rail services to reduce road congestion and minimise the impact of new housing

Proposals for frequent local rail services connecting towns across Bath, Wiltshire and Somerset could unlock housing for 50,000+ new homes within walking distance of existing and new stations, for a cost of less than £50M for the whole area.

‘The disused platforms at Chippenham and Westbury would be brought back into use, Melksham station upgraded with a new passing loop, and junction improvements made elsewhere’, said Nathan Sealy of rail engineers Amey, ‘Amey is already delivering the South Wales Metro, and the lessons can be applied to Wiltshire and Bath.’

Councillor Richard Clewer, Leader of Wiltshire Council, said, ‘We're going to need to get people thinking, “I can use the train because I'll get there on time and I'll get some work done.”

‘And when more people are using the train we can open another station, and then get the buses working so we bring people from the villages to a single point to get them into the town centre.

‘What we need is an ability to say, “This is the most logical place to build houses, it's got the most sustainable transport, this is where we should do it.”’

The conference began by noting that the Government's latest policy for rail is for Great British Railways to unite track and train to make it more responsive to the needs of local areas, and ensure the railway delivers for local users and communities, rather than focusing solely on the national level.

Meanwhile the Chancellor has revealed new plans for more houses near commuter train stations to kick start economic growth, and ensure that when developers submit an application for acceptable types of schemes near commuter transport hubs that the default answer to development is, 'yes'.

Kevin McGinley, Development Director, Network Rail Group Property stated that last year, Network Rail delivered around 4,000 homes, which would put it in the top five UK housebuilders if the organisation could be classed as a housebuilder. Now Network Rail Property and London Continental Railways are being combined into a new development company to deliver 50,000 new homes on railway land over the next 10 years. He said there was a shift to a more proactive approach to redevelopment around stations and partnerships with local authorities were key to unlocking potential, 'Think win-win, especially with public sector partners.'

Jenny Raggett, Director, Transport for New Homes explained that 350,000 people live in the Bath/Western Wiltshire/Frome area. It is equivalent to a city the size of Cardiff, so the area deserves an integrated transport system. The current public transport is infrequent and often slow. A metro with frequent modern trains to connect the whole area would be revolutionary.

Meanwhile the number of people moving to the area is growing fast. Somerset now has a target of 3,900 homes per annum; Wiltshire 3,475 homes p.a; and Bath and North East Somerset 1,470 homes p.a. 'The price to pay for not improving rail is high – more traffic, more car-dependency, more spend on extra road capacity and more sprawl. We risk blocking local economic growth.' Elsewhere, new local railway services and stations recently opened, E.g the Dartmoor Line and Northumberland Line, have far exceeded their original passenger forecasts. MetroWest Bath & Wiltshire is a real transport project to embed into Local Plans.

Nathan Sealy, Head of Systems Engineering, Amey described how the new South Wales Metro had been created from 19th century rail lines built to get coal from the valleys to the docks in Cardiff Bay. It now has 4 Metro trains per hour. Rail use in the Cardiff Capital Region is set to grow by 144%, and investment in larger towns such as Pontypridd and Caerphilly is creating jobs. Line speed has been increased by using passing loops and double tracking. Stations have been improved and new lightweight 'tri-mode' trains introduced. And the upgrade is continuing.

He then made a confession: he lives in Melksham less than 2.5 miles from the station, has worked in Swindon for 20 years in the rail industry - but never regularly commuted by train. The reason is that the very limited service is not compatible with a normal working day.

He said, 'For people to be able to rely on the railway for their commute, you need a minimum of 2 trains an hour. A true Metro comes when there are 4 or more trains an hour – then people can just “turn up and go”.' The existing network is constrained by the long-distance services to London and by freight. The recent Network Rail Strategic Study for Wiltshire primarily focusses on long-distance passenger journeys (primarily to/from London) and doesn't adequately consider the opportunity or the demand for local services. New stations could be funded by housing developments in their catchment area.

A MetroWest Bath & Wiltshire could be created for £20-30M. The rail infrastructure is almost all there already. A handful of low-cost interventions would unlock the capacity needed: reinstating the west-facing bay platform at Chippenham; junction remodelling at Thingley; a passing loop on the Melksham branch; reinstating a platform at Westbury; and a new passing loop and platform at Frome. The last three items are already in the Network Rail Strategic Study for Wiltshire.

Geoff Hobbs, Director Public Transport Planning, Transport for London (TfL) then gave examples of how the very high quality of public transport in the Capital is achieved. London has a Mayor, whose London Plan sets housing targets for boroughs based on available land and transport connections. The Transport Strategy's key objective is changing the modal mix to 80% of trips by walking, cycling and public transport. Developers and planners use an online system to measure the Public Transport Access Levels for any new development. Schemes with low scores are not granted. To gain permission planning obligations are agreed ensuring service planning / timetabling is undertaken, and road, bus and rail infrastructure improved as necessary.

TfL integrates operations, stations, stops, stands, fares and ticketing across the whole of London. Funding comes from a mixture of business rate supplement, Housing Infrastructure Fund, Community Infrastructure Levy, tax increment financing, Section 106 payments, workplace parking levy, road user charges, property income, and land value uplift.

Ed Leahy, Director, Create Streets showed how an approach of Gentle Density development could be applied to Chippenham, to build the same number of homes as the current plans - which need a new £75M distributor road - but on less land.

Land take will be reduced from 350 hectares to 120 hectares. Almost all the new homes will be within 2.5km of Chippenham Station and half will be less than 1.5km away. 125 new shops and amenities. The number of new and existing homes within 10-minute walk of countryside will double. Land for car parking will more than halve. The density will be 40 to 60 dwellings per hectare – the same as already exists in central Chippenham.

The money that would have been spent on the new road can be spent on town amenities, active travel and public transport, a process called Vision Led Planning.

Jon Sandford, National Lead Transport, Homes England explained that Vision Led Planning aligns with the latest government policy. There are three ways to access what we need: for them to be close enough to walk to; to require transport; or to be able to access them electronically. Homes England is the government's body to aid delivery of large developments, and it is now investing funding towards places, and less in capital intensive major highways. Recent planning appeal decisions such as at Pickerings Farm in Preston where Taylor Wimpey has delivered 1,000 new homes have confirmed the shift. Other similar projects are underway.

Homes England is supporting new building where density is appropriate to the place, and most necessary things are within walking distance, with educational, health, social and commercial facilities provided from the outset.

Brian Q Love, Chief Executive of ConnectedCities, introduced Ebenezer Howard's idea of new walkable garden cities in the countryside linked together by rail lines to create a ConnectedCity, in which all amenities are within at most 30 minutes by walking and rail. Applying the approach in Wiltshire, there are two such cities: Greater Chippenham and Greater Trowbridge. By building only within the 1 km radius around the existing stations and old ones reopened, over 50,000 new homes could be accommodated.

The White House Business Park, for example, would have a new station, with homes for an additional 15,000 people nearby. Walking and cycling routes to the stations would be protected by glass canopies generating electricity to pay for themselves, and in Trowbridge and Chippenham these could be used to link the stations to their historic town centres.

Dan Oakey, Head of Regional & Welsh Development at Great Western Railways gave examples of five new stations GWR has opened in the past few years. In Marsh Barton, 80,000 journeys were made in the first year, with 82% of these being passengers new to rail. Plans for six new stations on MetroWest in Bristol are well underway, including Brabazon to service 6,500 new homes, a 19,000 capacity arena and a university campus. Oakhampton Interchange Station is currently under construction and due for completion in Spring 2026.

His guidance was: think about the train service first and foremost; be led by growth; stations need to be designed with the customer in mind; involve the train operator from the start; and consider how operational costs are to be covered.

Alex Lawrie, Vice Chair of new train operator Go-op that has plans to run extra trains from Taunton to Westbury, explained that four of these per day would also run on to Swindon via Melksham. Connections would also be made to Weston Super Mare and Southampton. Most towns in Somerset and Wiltshire have train stations already, but they often have

limited services and don't connect well to each other. Poor connectivity has contributed to the low-productivity, low-wage economy of the South West.

The rolling stock they are proposing to use is pairs of carriages which have recently been in operation in Wales, and there are plans to both increase the number and move to battery power.

The last presentation proposed that a MetroWest Bath & Wiltshire Stakeholder Action Committee with representatives of local and regional government, Western Gateway, Swindon & Wiltshire LEP, Network Rail, rail operators and deliverers, plus developers and stakeholders move the project forward. A Strategic Outline Business Case would be developed to secure funding. To deliver new housing and development with the improved transport a Development Corporation would probably be required.

Finally Councillor Richard Clewer summed up the afternoon by saying that the current planning system and 5-year land supply rules make strategic rail-focused development difficult, but Mayoral Combined Authorities are on their way, and they will have the ability to deliver integrated transport/planning at required scale. Cross-boundary cooperation will be essential given the economic geography of the area.

He ended by saying, 'It's complex. It's really challenging stuff. But that is what's going to deliver the change by bringing people with us. Because if you tell me, I can't use my car any more, I'm just going to get really angry because I've got no other way of getting out of my home, my village, at the moment to get anywhere else. We've got to make this easier. We've got to bring people with us.'

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