

The Railway is coming!

Portishead Railway Group (PRG) has become aware of some widely circulated misinformation regarding the railway reopening. Consequently, PRG has produced the following clarifying statements to provide an accurate picture of current progress for the general public:

All the funding for the Portishead railway has been secured

Local and regional funding is required for the railway to proceed; the bulk of the funding is provided by a financial agreement between North Somerset (NSC), Bristol City, South Gloucestershire, Bath and North East Somerset Councils, and the West of England Combined Authority (WECA).

Each of these bodies has made a substantial financial commitment and some of this funding has been in place for many years.

However; to assemble the total necessary 'pot' of money, a significant level of funding is also required from Department for Transport (DfT), necessitating undertakings from NSC and WECA before DfT would agree to provide its share of the funding. Final agreement of the total funding package was reached during 2022. The following table sets out the agreed local, regional and central government shares:

Funding Source	Amount
West of England Local Growth Fund	£18.87 million
West of England Economic Development Fund	£49.53 million
West of England Councils contributions	£4.41 million
NSC additional contribution	£5.86 million
WECA Investment Fund	£5.86 million
DfT contribution	£31.90 million
NSC additional contribution (July 2022)	£10.00 million
WECA additional contribution (July 2022)	£10.00 million
DfT additional contribution (July 2022)	£15.58 million
Total	£152.01 million

The total funding package had to be agreed before further progress with the railway reopening could be made. PRG has closely observed the financial agreements process and is satisfied that the total funding package could not realistically have been assembled much quicker.

Significant progress has been made in making the railway a reality

Because of the length of the currently derelict line (Pill to Portishead), reopening the railway had to be handled in accordance with the Planning Act 2008; this mandates an extensive, legally-based process known as a Development Consent Order (DCO).

Preparations for submission of the DCO application were commenced by the previous NSC administration in 2017. The current NSC administration took over the task and, after much further work the 27,000-page DCO application was submitted in 2019.

The DCO assessment process, administered by the Planning Inspectorate and overseen by DfT, supposedly takes about two years. The Covid pandemic caused unavoidable delays but throughout the DCO process, numerous enquiries and objections from interested and affected bodies, and from the public, have had to be handled in a transparent manner.

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In addition, major environmental matters have had to be addressed, in particular the protection of rare species that inhabit parts of the route through the Avon Gorge, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Until the necessary environmental protections were agreed, and the required permissions from the Department of the Environment were in place, the railway could not progress further.

The DCO process took three years and in November 2022, all of these multiple issues were finally resolved and DfT granted the DCO. Without the DCO, the project could not progress further, regardless of action or inaction by an involved Council. PRG Committee has maintained close observation of the DCO process and is satisfied that it could not realistically have been completed any quicker.

What is happening now

Obtaining the DCO was a vital milestone for the project, allowing the railway to proceed to the next stage: Detailed Design. Many think that building the railway is a simple task. It is not; it is very complex, including the complete re-build of the Pill to Portishead section, enlargement of the cutting at Pill to provide a platform that meets current regulations, gauge-clearance work within the four tunnels, and the environmental protections in the Avon Gorge, and much else. There is very significant preparatory work to do within the Detailed Design phase.

Network Rail (NR) operates the Governance for Railway Investment Projects (GRIP) process, which contains the following eight stages:

1. Output Definition
2. Feasibility
3. Option Selection
4. Single Option Development
5. Detailed Design
6. Construction Test and Commission
7. Scheme hand back
8. Project Close Out

GRIP Stages 1 to 4 had to be completed in order to secure the DCO. Network Rail is currently conducting the detailed design (GRIP 5) on behalf of the DfT, not on behalf of any local or regional Council. To assist the design process and to obtain the detailed costings required for the Full Business Case, NR has just let a £6million supporting contract to VolkerFitzpatrick.

At the end of the Detailed Design phase, the Full Business Case will be produced. Only then can the full construction contract be let (GRIP 6), with train services planned to commence in late 2026, following acceptance by the DfT of the re-built railway (GRIP 7). Formally closing the project (GRIP 8) usually takes place after services have commenced.

For over ten years, there has been unity of purpose from all political parties to reopen the line to Portishead. All of the involved Councils have played a part in reaching the current positive position, aided by Dr Liam Fox MP whose actions over many years within Government and Parliament in support of the Portishead Railway project, including fostering and maintaining cross-party backing, helped pave the way for the recent decision-making. PRG is convinced this unity of purpose will continue as the project heads towards construction and the return of trains to Pill and Portishead.

Portishead Railway Group
24th February 2023