

Devizes Gateway Station – Update (16 Nov 21)

As stated in the previous update provided to the Area Board meeting on 6 September 2021, the Strategic Outline Case (SOC) for Devizes Gateway was submitted to the Department for Transport (DfT) at the beginning of November.

The SOC is the first stage in the DfT's business case process and sets out the case for change and the strategic fit (how the project would further local priorities and wider government ambitions). It also includes more limited information on the other four required elements of business cases: economic; financial; commercial; and management.

The development of the SOC has involved close working with local partners including Danny Kruger MP, Devizes Development Partnership (DDP), Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SWLEP), Great Western Railway and Network Rail to develop a strong and robust case.

As part of the above process, the DDP undertook extensive stakeholder engagement and communications activities to support the development of the SOC. A Stakeholder Engagement Strategy was developed and as part of this, three online demand surveys were carried out in early 2021 with residents, stakeholders and young people across the Devizes Community Area and the eastern villages of Wiltshire (Pewsey, Bedwyn, Kintbury to Hungerford). Overall, the response from engagement was positive and supportive of the new station.

Some of the key findings of the SOC are summarised in the following paragraphs.

Devizes is the most populous settlement in Wiltshire without direct access to the rail network. This results in a number of significant challenges and issues including:

- Poor public transport connections to key destinations.
- A lack of rail access constraining local economic growth, and employment, tourism and educational opportunities.
- A dependency on carbon intensive travel modes.
- Delays and congestion on the local highway network.
- Planned housing growth forecast to put an additional strain on the highway network.

Key destinations such as Bristol/Bath, London, Newbury and Reading important for employment, education, business and leisure purposes, are currently difficult to reach by public transport from Devizes, limiting opportunities for local people especially those without access to a car.

Devizes provides a key service role within a wider rural area and has a number of large employers across a range of sectors, including advanced manufacturing, food production and the service sector. However, the current lack of rail connectivity acts as a deterrent to businesses who might expand or consider Devizes as a potential location.

Devizes has great tourism potential sitting as it does midway on the route of the Great West Way between London and Bristol in the heart of rural Wiltshire, and on the edge of the North Wessex Downs AONB and the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site. In addition, there are a number of regeneration plans underway to improve the town's tourism offer including: regeneration of Devizes Wharf to include an 80-bed hotel; refurbishment of the

Grade 1 listed Assizes Courts to be the new home of Wiltshire Museum; and development of a new Country Park beside Devizes Castle. The provision of a rail station would better enable Devizes to take advantage of these factors by providing improved connectivity for national and international visitors.

Education, apprenticeships and employment opportunities particularly for young people in the Devizes area are currently negatively impacted by poor public transport connectivity. Better access to the rail network would open up these opportunities and would strongly align with the Prime Minister's identification of education as the country's top priority in the wake of the pandemic.

There is a significant dependency on the private car in the Devizes area with Census data showing that over 71% of residents use a car for commuting purposes. Given the relatively poor local public transport network, this is unsurprising given that the private car is generally a much quicker mode of travel to and from key destinations. As a result, however, Devizes experiences traffic congestion at peak periods and this is forecast to worsen with the delivery of planned and proposed growth. Moreover, the designated Air Quality Management Area in Devizes is as a result of traffic emissions. Providing better access to the rail network would help reduce car dependency and traffic levels thereby reducing congestion and air pollution. In doing so this would improve the environment for active travel and be a positive step in achieving carbon net-zero targets.

The proposed station would be sited around 3.5 miles from Devizes Town Centre at a site near Lydeaway on the Berks and Hants Line (although other potential station sites are also available). It would be integrated into the local bus network, and is proposed to be connected directly to Devizes Town Centre via an express shuttle bus. Improved active travel links to the town would also be considered as part of the development of a Devizes Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan.

Overall, the SOC puts forward a strong strategic case for a Devizes Gateway station; it will help to improve transport connectivity, reduce car usage, and assist with the Government's ambitions to reach net-zero and level up communities (the SWLEP's Rail Strategy estimates that the station would have a £6.56m annual Gross Value Added impact). The proposal has widespread support across not just the local area but the wider region. The SOC also shows that the station is viable from an operational (train service) perspective.

If the SOC is approved, the DfT will provide up to 100% of the Outline Business Case (OBC) costs - the next stage in the business case process. In stating this, however, the DfT has emphasised that local contributions will be taken into account when considering whether a scheme proceeds to the next stage. Therefore, the £34,000 committed by Devizes Town Council to the development of the OBC is very welcome.

The OBC identifies the preferred scheme option and includes a detailed business case where further consideration will be given to design, planning, access and consultation matters.

In the event the submission is not successful, the development of a strong SOC will enable Wiltshire Council to more readily take advantage of other funding opportunities as they arise.

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