

Leader of the Council

Rt Hon Mark Harper MP
Secretary of State for Transport

By Email

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Enquiries to: Josie Matthews

Tel: 01454 863851

E-mail: cecrdirectorates@southglos.gov.uk

Dear Secretary of State

Avonmouth and Severnside Enterprise Area (ASEA) Flood Defence and Ecology Mitigation Project – Interactions with Network Rail’s Severn Beach Branchline

To deliver the final section of the ASEA flood defence, South Gloucestershire Council would like the Department for Transport (DfT) to confirm its future plans to protect the Severn Beach branch line from flooding. I understand that a decision has been taken not to fund any Network Rail Partnership schemes. We would like the DfT to reconsider whether partnership funding can be made available now to protect a vital rail asset for communities and waste management, support achieving net zero, and avoid future duplication of public sector expenditure.

The ASEA Project is the most significant project of its type in the West of England’s Combined Authority history. It is a partnership between South Gloucestershire Council (Lead Partner), Bristol City Council and the Environment Agency (Delivery Partner). The project will provide 17km of new and improved defences to reduce flood risk to 2,500 homes and businesses, and by reducing flood risk will help to unlock 12,000 new jobs through enabling development in the Enterprise Area for the West of England.

The flood defence alignment is generally on the seaward side of the Severn Beach branch line meaning that it will benefit from reduced flood risk (see photo 1 below). However, there is an approximate 1.5 kilometre exception to this (see photo 2) where due to the environmental designations of the Severn Estuary, it was not possible to build a new flood defence on the seaward side of the railway, outside of the Network Rail corridor. The project secured planning permission for a continuous alignment of new flood defence in 2019 so a design for the landward side of the railway was approved, but this will leave the railway exposed to flooding and damage as flood risk increases with sea level rise.

It has always been our intention to work in partnership with Network Rail to deliver a solution whereby this section of flood defence would be built to also protect the rail line into the future. This would be immediately to the seaward side of the Severn Beach railway line, inside the Network Rail corridor (see Figure 1). Discussions and a survey of the railway commenced in 2016 and the ASEA project notionally allocated £4,036,598 from within the overall ASEA budget as partnership funding to Network Rail to deliver the defences on the seaward side of the railway, although it is acknowledged that costs are now likely to be higher.

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The flood defence would therefore provide benefits associated with the ASEA project whilst also contributing towards the protection of Network Rail assets in this location. The Severn Beach line is part of MetroWest, a West of England Combined Authority programme of railway upgrades aimed at improving capacity and connectivity in the region. It provides an important freight corridor to the Suez Energy from Waste site. The facility takes up to 370,000 tonnes of waste per annum by train from six boroughs in West London (Brent, Ealing, Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow and Richmond upon Thames), in addition to Bristol. The line is considered Critical National Infrastructure and supports the UK's aspirations for Carbon Net Zero.

The project had assumed this work would be undertaken prior to 2030 but has recently learnt that the DfT has decided not to fund any of the Network Rail partnership schemes in Control Period 7 (April 2024 – March 2029).

As Lead Partner, South Gloucestershire Council would like to request that the DfT reconsiders investing in a partnership project on the Severn Beach branch line, either through a Partnership Funding allocation, or directly through Network Rail's CP7 Resilience budget. To maintain the ASEA project programme and deliver the wider project outcomes, it would be advantageous to an indication by the end of March 2024 – this is the default date for defence construction on the landward side of the railway as part of the ASEA project. If the decision was taken at a later date to retain the Severn Beach branch line, further public money would be needed to build a defence on the seaward side of the railway, which is likely to more than double the cost. Network Rail are currently producing a paper to support the case for funding, costs are anticipated to be £10-12 Million, with £4 million already available through the ASEA Project.

I look forward to hearing from you on this matter.

Yours sincerely



Cllr Claire Young
Leader of the Council

- cc. Rob Cairns, Managing Director, Network Rail Wales and Western Region.
Francis McGarry – Network Rail Investment Director Wales and Western.
Daniel Round – Network Rail Head of Strategic Planning for Wales and Western.
Martin Taylor – Director of Engineering and Asset Protection, Network Rail.
Julie Gregory, Senior Development Manager, Network Rail
Huw Merriman MP, Minister of State (Rail)

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Photo 1 – Lamplighter’s Marsh. New earth embankment in front of railway as part of ASEA Project.



Photo 2 – Aerial view of existing railway with saltmarsh on the left and Enterprise Area on the right

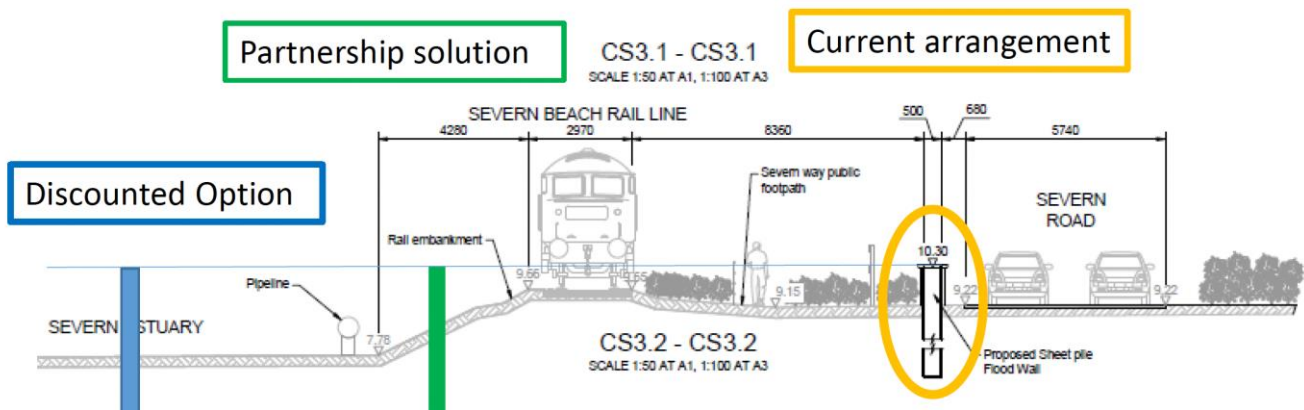


Figure 1 – Cross section showing options for flood defence. The Severn Estuary option is discounted due to presence of environmental designations. The Partnership solution needs funding through Network Rail which has been rejected. The current permitted design would leave the Severn Branch Line undefended.