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██████████  
Executive Director, Economy, Environment and Infrastructure  
Gloucestershire County Council Shire Hall  
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30<sup>th</sup> September 2024

Dear ██████████,

### **Emerging Draft Stroud District Local Plan - Proposed Sharpness Allocation - Rail Evidence**

Thank you for your email of 16<sup>th</sup> September to myself and ██████████ at GWR, seeking our views on the Strategic Outline Case (SOC) produced by the promoter of reopening Sharpness Branch Line to passenger services. Please take this as a joint response from both ourselves and GWR.

You will recall from our response to you of 27<sup>th</sup> November 2023 that we, as a rail industry, had concerns about the Sharpness proposal relating to potential for a Very Light Rail (VLR) service, a lack of detail on a funding model and a lack of strategic fit with previous industry studies that GWR, Gloucestershire County Council and other relevant parties have contributed to. Whilst the SOC seemingly discounts VLR as an option for further investigation, the other two points of concern remain.

Having reviewed the SOC, it is very clear that there is no strong financial case for any of the heavy rail options considered, with operational costs outweighing revenue in all scenarios. This is without factoring in capital expenditure costs, which would be significant if the preferred South Chord option were to be taken forward. There are also some important omissions when considering the economic case. The document notes that further work is required to look at operational issues at Gloucester to understand how services could be fitted into the timetable. Addressing this may well require further infrastructure, which has not been factored into this SOC. Signalling changes have also not been included in the appraisal.

With no identified funding strategy, other than seeking to add the scheme to the national Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline, and bearing in mind the current economic situation, it is difficult to see a scenario in which any of the heavy rail proposals would be a viable proposition. It should be worth noting that the current national pipeline is oversubscribed with projects that do deliver viable solutions to challenges.

We recognise the contention raised by the SOC that the rail network in this area is constrained in its ability to serve local communities along the line of route through the provision of new stations. This is due to well understood capacity constraints that require considerable long-term investment to unblock. We aspire to do this, but adding additional services to Sharpness in the interim will only exacerbate matters, taking up limited capacity and making it harder to deliver more established aspirations. As the SOC does not include sample timetables, it is difficult to assess the viability of the rail services that have been considered and how impactful they would be on available capacity.

The SOC's assessment of transport options ranks bus service improvements as having a stronger case

than rail. There would seem to be an opportunity to explore whether an improved bus service from Sharpness/Berkely to Charfield, calling at the new station there, could help meet the transport needs of the proposed development. With the now well proven success of GWR's 'bus branch line' concept, there is potential to provide an integrated public transport solution that provides good connectivity to the rail network, without the cost and complications of a rail service directly to Sharpness. We would be happy to explore options further with the promotor, noting that GWR cannot fund new bus services itself.

Yours sincerely,

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

**Industry Programme Director - West of England**

Copy to:

[Redacted] Great Western Railway  
[Redacted] Network Rail