

Record of Meeting on 14 July 2021

By Zoom

Present

Graham Ellis	<i>Vice Chair</i>	John Hamley	
Judith Gradwell	<i>Treasurer</i>	Lee Fletcher	
Kevin Hayes	<i>Admin Secretary</i>	David Phillips	WC
Roger Witt	<i>Minute Secretary</i>		
Pat Aves	<i>MTC</i>		
Mark Harris	<i>MWPC</i>		

Apologies

Peter Blackburn	<i>Chairman</i>		
Tom Price		Peter Chidley	
Peter Tapscott		Steve Plummer	
Margaret Willmott		Eddy Watts	

Abbreviations:

<i>CCIF - Customer and Community Improvement Fund</i>	<i>MRUG – Melksham Railway User Group</i>
<i>GWR – Great Western Railway</i>	<i>SNTB - subNational Transport Bodies</i>
<i>LEP - Local Enterprise Partnership</i>	<i>TWCIC - TransWilts Community Interest Company</i>
<i>MTC - Melksham Town Council</i>	<i>TWCRP – TransWilts Community Rail Partnership</i>
<i>MWPC - Melksham Without Parish Council</i>	<i>WC – Wiltshire Council</i>
<i>ACoRP - Association of Community Rail Partnerships,</i>	<i>WWRUG-- West Wilts Rail Users Group</i>
<i>-now CRN, Community Rail Network</i>	

The meeting followed the Annual General Meeting

1. Minutes of the Last Meeting

The minutes of the last meeting on 27th May were agreed

2. Hub Update

A canopy is being erected over the outdoor seating area. The café is being very well run and is gaining custom from surrounding businesses, which supplements patronage from station users which have not yet reached pre-covid levels. They are now advertising for a part time, paid, helper.

3, Rail Service Update

There are few changes to the service from May but on Saturdays there is a later train north from Westbury. The morning service (0859) runs through to Weymouth on Saturdays, as does the first Sunday morning train. From 7th August the Saturday return service is enhanced with a 1654 departure which connects at Westbury with the 1835 service to Melksham. In addition, there is a later return service from Weymouth at 1828 which connects with the later train to Melksham. A day trip to Weymouth on Saturdays is thus very convenient.

The service has not been very reliable of late for a number of reasons.

Since the meeting it has been announced that compulsory reservations on trains will be discontinued making it much easier to book tickets on line.

4. Bus Services

These are back to normal although loadings are often poor. Discussions are ongoing with WC about getting the town service to serve the station. WC seem to be favouring a demand responsive service but this would seem to be in conflict with developing government strategy on bus services, Lee Fletcher has produced an update on the talks around the new bus strategy and this is attached to these minutes.

5. Forthcoming Events

It is hoped that support can be given to local events this year but no definite dates are as yet available.

Melksham carnival will not take place this year.

Imber bus is running on 21 August but there will be access to Imber by car on that date.

It is planned to run the Santa trip this year on 5th December subject to agreement with GWR.

6. Treasurers Report

Grants have been received from MTC and MWPC. There is money available for publicity and promotion materials.

7. Other Matters

WC are consulting on two possible local cycle routes with responses required by 18th July. An opinion was expressed that the proposals were not satisfactory as they used a busy main road rather than the canal towpath which forms part of a National Cycle Route.

MTC are undertaking a "Priority for People" survey.

The Neighbourhood Plan is now completed but work will commence shortly on preparing the next update.

8. Date of next Meeting

15th September, venue to be notified but will probably also be on Zoom.

9. Websites for Reference

- MRUG www.mrug.org.uk

- **TransWilts** <https://transwilts.org>
- **Station Hub** <https://melkshamhub.co.uk/home>
- **GWR** <https://www.gwr.com>
- **Railfuture** <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Severnside+Branch>
- **Coffee Shop** <http://www.firstgreatwestern.info/coffeeshop/index.php>.
- **Neighbourhood Plan** <https://www.melkshamneighbourhoodplan.org/copy-of-housing>
- **Faresaver Buses** <http://www.faresaver.co.uk/>
- **Frome Buses** <http://www.fromebus.co.uk>
- **Travelwatch SW** <http://www.travelwatchsouthwest.org>
- **Community Rail Network** (was ACoRP) <http://communityrail.org.uk/>

- **Trans Wilts leisure Leaflets** <https://transwilts.org/2020/09/29/transwilts-walking-and-cycling-leaflets/>

The meeting closed at 21.10

OPTION 24/7 WILTSHIRE BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN MEETING WITH WILTSHIRE
COUNCIL
TUESDAY 13 JULY 2021

Firstly, on the Bus Service Improvement Plan, we discussed a number of specific issues.

- WC already in talks with Demand Responsive Transport Providers. WC have already won some DfT funding to improve DRT services in Pewsey Vale, and Option 24/7 are working with local groups there to include their ideas in our proposals. There is clearly potential and willingness to look at doing similar elsewhere in Wiltshire. Downside is that they may also be looking at bringing it in for situations where the locals have consistently said for years that they want a conventional bus link, such as at Melksham Railway Station for example.

- WC looking at various options for bus priority such as traffic lights etc.

- WC have had preliminary meetings with bus companies, and they report that all are willing to accept the new system and work together to make it succeed.

- On the simplification/commonality of fares front, apparently the DfT are looking into developing a national "back office" capability, to try and make it easier to harmonise all the different bus companies fare systems.

- Bus/Rail integration is likely to be a top priority, reflecting how high a priority for the DfT it is in the Strategy. The debate will be on how exactly we go about achieving it, and whether the level of ambition that will be required has truly been realised yet.

In terms of the BSIP goals generally, there was broad agreement to be ambitious in taking them forward. The reality is this is hardly surprising - After all, who doesn't want better services, cheaper, easier to understand fares, more bus/rail integration etc.

Of course, what people really want to know is how all of this will translate into practice, and so we did spend part of the meeting discussing that to an extent.

The biggest question most people have is how the amount of funding announced so far will be able to achieve all of the goals of the strategy when spread over all those local authorities? The answer of course is that it won't.

What the Treasury have said to the DfT is that if they want a similar funding settlement every year going forward, then they will have to show that the initial money is being spent wisely. Therefore, the DfT have told each local authority that among all their general aspirations, they need to come up with a "Big Idea" that will quickly get lots of people who don't currently use the bus to come flocking to it. The plan is to put all of these "Big Ideas" together in a presentation to the Treasury in order to secure the ongoing funding to fully roll out the BBB Strategy going forward. They are more than happy for Option 24/7 to provide some inspiration on this from a Wiltshire perspective.

The working assumption is that ongoing central government funding will be forthcoming, and with this in mind, they put forward how they see things rolling out over the first 5 years of the new system:

In Year 1, you can expect to see the following:

- The "Big Idea" (see above)

- The reversal of at least some of the more contested and controversial service cuts of the previous decade

- A concerted effort to integrate rail and bus services

In years 2 and 3, we are likely to see WC review each service group and area in turn, with a view to seeing how bus services can be improved, enhanced and better organised into a coherent integrated network. This is where Option 24/7 can be most effective, feeding in and ensuring that what passengers want is the key driver in this process, and also organise the kind of community blitz publicity model that we rolled out to gain massive growth from a standing start with the TransWilts Rail services.

It will be Years 4 and 5 where we will start to see bus infrastructure and priority measures rolled out, as such schemes are likely to spend the earlier years in the planning stage. They also believe that it may take until this stage before a coherent integrated ticketing and fare system across the network becomes a reality.

Beyond the first 5 year period, it is best to see two distinct strands emerging service-wise. On the one hand, there is always likely to be funding made available to keep evening, Sunday and vital rural bus links on the road, as the government doesn't want the kind of negative publicity that the previous slashing of such routes unleashed upon them. On the other hand, it is at that point that the DfT will expect to start seeing additional services on Interurban Corridors and routes that would normally be commercial begin to stand on their own two feet after an initial period of seed funding. A good parallel would be the Blair government era where initial DfT Kickstart funding put service 49 Trowbridge-Devizes-Swindon and service 55 Chippenham-Calne-Swindon on the road, both of which are still with us today.

In terms of Option 24/7's future ongoing role, they are happy to continue to have regular BSIP-shaping meetings with us - the next will be on Thursday 12 August - and once we reach the Enhanced Partnership Plan stage where a lot of the initial meat starts being put on the BSIP outline bones, a forum will be set up with groups like ourselves, the council, bus operators and other key stakeholders represented on it that will steer and revise the BSIP going forward into the years ahead.

There may also be a possibility of Option 24/7 going a step further than that and taking on a co-authorship role with WC on the Bus Service Improvement Plans going forward. However, Option 24/7 would need to be fully constituted and have transparent processes for how it gathers and reflects the views of passengers before that could be considered, which is something that we would all have to sit down and have detailed discussions and planning to make a reality.

We also discussed how important it will be to develop ambitious Decarbonisation policies. WC are open that they haven't really got off the starting blocks with that yet, but are happy to consider an Option 24/7 proposal. I have been having talks with local groups and various Town councils about the possibility of setting up a Zero Emission Pilot route, all of which have been very positive.

Finally, WC noted that we currently have a growing national bus driver shortage that is very much apparent in Wiltshire, right the way across the industry from bigger operators such as Go Ahead Salisbury Reds, through to smaller ones such as FromeBus. They believe this can only be resolved through a clear DfT strategy to address this, and until that is forthcoming, this may impact on what can be achieved in the short term.

Best Regards
Lee Fletcher