

Record of Meeting on 17 March 2021

By Zoom

Present

Peter Blackburn *Chairman*
Graham Ellis *Vice Chair*
Mark Harris
John Glover *Cllr MWPC*
Richard Gamble *WC*
Richard Cowell *WWRUG*

Roger Witt
Peter Chidley
Lee Fletcher
Geoff Elwell
Kevin Hayes

Apologies

John Hamley *Secretary*
Pat Aves
Peter Tapscott
Shirley McArthay

Paul Johnson
Sophie Martin
Phil Grocock

Chair TWCIC
TWCIC
WC

Abbreviations:

CCIF - Customer and Community Improvement Fund
GWR – Great Western Railway
LEP - Local Enterprise Partnership
MTC - Melksham Town Council
MWPC - Melksham Without Parish Council
ACoRP - Association of Community Rail Partnerships, -now CRN, Community Rail Network

MRUG – Melksham Railway User Group
SNTB - subNational Transport Bodies
TWCIC - TransWilts Community Interest Company
TWCRP – TransWilts Community Rail Partnership
WC – Wiltshire Council
WWRUG-- West Wilts Rail Users Group

The meeting held a short period of silence in memory of John Hamley's wife, Alison

1. Minutes of the Last Meeting

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed

2. Hub Update

A reduction in the rates liability has been agreed, saving some £2000 p.a.

There has been some income from the car park. As Transwilts is registered for VAT, the VAT on the car parking charges can be reclaimed.

A shed is available for the storage of tools for working on the planters and other tidying up of the station and a water supply should also be available.

Wi-Fi has been installed in the Hub and the code will be release after opening.

There is a meeting on 18th March to tidy the site ready for opening on 29th March, initially for take away only.

3, Line and Service Update

The status on the northern access is to be ascertained. MWPC have requested a contribution from the developer of the site north of Dunch Lane but it is not yet known if this will be forthcoming.

There are few changes to the service from May but on Saturdays there will be a later train north from Westbury, likely to be a portion off the 1815 service from Weymouth. The morning service (0859) will also run through to Weymouth on Saturdays.

Current service performance is good although loadings are reduced, particularly on peak services.

4. Re-opening Public Transport

There will be generally encouragement to use public transport once travel is generally permitted although advice is likely to be to make short journeys initially.

Lee Fletcher outlined the provisions of the new Bus Bill which will lead to the greatest change in bus services since deregulation in 1986. He referred to a previous exercise for the Melksham area on similar lines to those proposed, Option 24/7, which was not successful at the time. A document relating to this is attached to the minutes.

5. Station Upkeep Volunteers

At present no volunteers are permitted to work on the station, or even be on the station unless travelling

6. Web Site and Social Media

Graham Ellis asked that anyone willing to assist with the web site contact him.

7. Coordination with Other Groups

WWRUG not very active at present due to average age of members and restrictions on meetings. Likely to investigate use of Zoom for meetings.

TWSW weekly webinars/meetings well received. Possibility of 1 hour session on Bus Bill. Melksham Community Groups Network, organised by MTC, has a first meeting on 18th March.

8. Any Other Business

A question was raised about a standard for minimum road widths on new developments to allow use by buses. Subsequent research has found that "Manual for Streets" recommends a minimum width of 6.0 metres and a document published by Stagecoach, a major bus operator, advises a minimum of 6.2 metres.

Graham Ellis is to investigate the use of Open Bus Data to provide real time bus information.

The meeting closed at 21.00

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.travelwatchesouthwest.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/>

**A historical look at Option 24/7 and its relevance to the way forward
on the Bus Bill**

Back in the mid-2000s we at what was then the Save The Train Campaign and the Melksham Rail Development Group combined sound business case principles with what both current and potential passengers told us they wanted, in order to create the most credible proposal possible for an appropriate TransWilts rail service.

As we all know, it was a long haul to get there, but in December 2013 we finally got that appropriate TransWilts rail service, and when the first full set of passenger figures came in, the value of our approach was fully recognised as it became clear that our projections were far closer to those numbers than the official consultant's projections had been. Our follow-up plans, along with a lot of volunteer hard work from all involved, built up the significant early rises in those passenger numbers to such an extent that Mark Hopwood himself referred publicly to it as "the TransWilts Success Story".

With the TransWilts rail service safely established, we turned our attention in the mid-2010s to applying similar sound business case principles and knowledge of customer needs and aspirations to the local Wiltshire bus network. This was initially done through a combination of Graham's work on a more balanced distribution of vehicle resources that were at that time deployed in cut-throat competition between First and Faresaver on the main interurban bus services that ran through Melksham, and my own research into Quality Contract Schemes, which were the embryonic version of what would become the method of Bus Franchising that was introduced as an option in the Bus Bill legislation of that period.

This work, and the proposals put forward around this time by Wiltshire Council to make substantial cuts to the public transport budget which would in turn have caused consequential significant cuts to local bus services, came together to form the catalyst for the original Option 24/7 proposals. These aimed to provide a better, more efficient bus network more tailored, as with the TransWilts rail proposals before, to what both current and potential passengers told us they wanted. This in turn would initially deliver the budget savings that Wiltshire Council required without the need for cuts to local bus services, while in later years the subsidy requirement would continue to fall as a result of the more passenger-focused network delivering sustained increases in passenger numbers.

The Option 24/7 proposal also set out a number of principles to be adhered to, relating to such subjects as:

Network Design

Punctuality and Reliability

Integration with other modes such as Rail, Cycling and Walking

Fair, easy to understand and integrated Fare Structures that link to each other, such as through Rail and Town Bus designation

Accessibility

All of this would be overseen by local public transport committees, with equal weight given to local authorities with their planning and funding responsibilities, operators with their operational and commercial expertise, and crucially, passengers, the local community and their representatives.

We put the best possible team together for the negotiations with Wiltshire Council, comprising of Graham, Peter and myself, along with bus industry expert Natacha Tagholm. Between us, as well as our rail experience we had:

Business and community experience

Council experience

Bus company experience

Travel planning experience

Political experience

I had also received expert training from senior officers involved in live bus franchising schemes from Tyne & Wear, and Greater Manchester.

Although negotiations with Wiltshire Council were cordial and professional, it became clear over our several meetings that we had a number of differences on approach that ultimately proved too difficult to bridge, and they decided that did not want to proceed with implementing the Option 24/7 proposal at that time.

Now in 2021, the DfT have produced a bus strategy that contains everything that our Option 24/7 proposal did, but with two key differences. The first is that Wiltshire Council can no longer simply decide that the proposal is not for them, as the strategy makes clear that this is the way things must be done from now on. Furthermore, access to both current and future streams of funding will depend on full adherence to the strategy.

Summary of what Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) and bus operators must do to access COVID-19 Bus Services Support Grant from 1 July 2021 and transformational funding from April 2022:

- By the end of June 2021 LTAs will need to commit to establishing Enhanced Partnerships under the Bus Services Act or the LTA should begin the statutory process of franchising services. Operators in those areas should cooperate with those processes.

Those LTAs who do not have access to franchising powers at present, but consider that it is the best route to adopt in the interest of passengers and that they have the capability and resources to deliver it, should progress with the implementation of an Enhanced Partnership alongside applying to the Secretary of State for access to franchising powers.

- By the end of October 2021 each LTA will need to publish a local Bus Service Improvement Plan. Each plan will need to be updated annually and reflected in the authority's Local Transport Plan and in other relevant local plans such as Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs)
- From April 2022, LTAs will need to have an Enhanced Partnership in place, or be following the statutory process to decide whether to implement a franchising scheme, to access the new discretionary streams of bus funding. Only services operated or measures taken under an Enhanced Partnership or where a franchising scheme has been made will be eligible to receive the new funding streams.

Under Enhanced Partnerships, bus operators will have more rights and a higher level of input than under full franchising. However, when it comes to LTAs and bus operators delivering what they sign up to or being held to account, then passengers will notice very little difference between the two schemes. This is because the requirements of the Bus Service Improvement Plans will be exactly the same for both, and because Bus Service

Improvement Plans will need to explain exactly how passengers, the local community and their representatives have been involved in formulating all aspects of the plan, including network design, in order for the plan to be considered valid.

The second key difference is that unlike the original Option 24/7 proposal which focused on using existing resources in a better and more efficient way, this time there will be genuine new funding available, which will allow both new bus services to be introduced and existing bus services to be enhanced as well.

Most of this new funding will be released after April 2022, after the final stages of moving to an Enhanced Partnership or full franchising have been put into place. However, some will be released in the early stages of the process, partly to help train local authority officers in how to implement an Enhanced Partnership or Franchising scheme.

This is where we in Wiltshire will have a key advantage, as both the Option 24/7 and Wiltshire Council teams had to learn how to implement these kinds of schemes in order to be able to progress the original negotiations. Graham, Peter and myself will be returning to move the new Option 24/7 strategy forward, and key members of the Wiltshire Council team remain in post today as well. When we begin fresh talks on how to formulate the Wiltshire Bus Service Improvement Plan together in partnership - as we are about to formally request - then this will give us a head start on finally giving our area the bus network we have all always aspired to, as part of a wider truly integrated public transport and active travel network fit for a brighter post Covid-19 future, and ready for the challenge of the Climate Emergency ahead.

Make no mistake, this is the most pivotal moment in the history of the bus industry since deregulation in the 1980s, and a once in a generation opportunity to move on from where that led our bus network to where we truly want to take it. If YOU want to join our active team, then please sign up to the Facebook groups @Option247 or @MelkshamRUG or visit <http://option247.uk/> and <http://mrug.org.uk/>

Lee Fletcher