

Public Passenger Transport Briefing

"Melksham & Devizes" Constituency including Bradford-on-Avon, Melksham, Devizes

Prepared by Graham Ellis, 12th October 2024

Background - what is public transport

* Transport produces major direct and indirect carbon emissions and is one of the most difficult sectors to reduce

* By combining common passenger journeys into a single piece of public transport we can reduce the carbon footprint per journey, and reduce the need for infrastructure to cope with an ever growing number of small capacity (private) vehicles many of which are making the same journey at the same time, and need to be stored at journey's end when not in use.

* Public Transport usually runs from National Public Transport Access Nodes (NaPTANs) and to be effective these need to be at the right places for people's journeys with services running to other NaPTANs that people require, at the time people wish or need to travel, reliably, at a price they can afford. The NaPTANs and the transits between them need to be safe, should be comfortable / enjoyable, should have sufficient capacity, should be networked, and should have information readily and understandably available. Time spent in public transport should not be wasted time, but rather should be useful for the users as they wait and travel. NaPTANs and transits should be accessible to all, including those who for age, health, cost or choice reasons cannot use private transport, and also accessible with chattels such as luggage, bicycles, assistance and other animals, prams, pushchairs and families. NaPTANs need to be easily accessible from their immediate catchment.

* Public transport costs money to provide and the finances of providing it and making it the choice of people to use must add up. The wider economy of the benefits of public transport to the neighbourhood served must somehow be brought into the money sums for the optimum overall equation

* Public Transport is NOT the answer to all travel needs. Personal travel and transport from walking, cycling and scooters including those with electrical assistance form part of the picture, as do private vehicles for journeys for which communal public transport is impractical - low flows, time dependent, difficult chattels, infectious travellers for example.

* In this modern information age, the need to travel at all can be reduced using electronic solutions that bring the destination to the source – e.g. working and banking from home. And travel plans can be better made to meet multiple objectives on a series of joined journeys.

* Use of public transport performs a health and social wellbeing function too with exercise as a side effect from NaPTAN access, and interaction with other people helping with mental health and reducing people being housebound at great expense to society and the taxpayer.

* In the UK, that majority of public transport journeys are by bus, with train journeys coming in second - those are typically longer journeys so the distance travelled by both modes is about the same. Long distance coaches are also significant in places, and for the longest journeys airline flights hold sway. There are a few pockets where geography dictates ferries. Access to the the NaPTANs for these longer distance services is by other connecting public transport, or by private vehicle either with a driver (taxi or kiss and ride) or parked up near the NaPTAN for the duration of the traveller's time away.

What do we want to achieve?

An efficient "green" public transport network that people will use effectively as a matter of usual choice for as high a proportion of journeys as is reasonably practical

So how do we achieve that? Where are we now?

We have systems and regulation that are around from the last century, and infrastructure that in many cases dates back to the century before. Many of them have proven excellent over time (a few questionable) but many need significant revision to make them fit and set us up for the rest of this century.

Setting up new systems of modern necessity takes time and our new government is looking at both bus and train regulation and has promised changes and is in process of defining those elements.

* **We must not just wait for new systems to be in place.**

- **We must inform our politicians and transport and related specialists** as to what we want and need, and also provide them with evidence we will use it when provided.

- **We must work to develop changes within the current systems** too, to avoid a gap / decay over the next several years while new systems are developed, and to have a string system and user base in place for when changes come

- **We must accept and understand that an outdated system which has cheap and convenient familiar elements may need to be modernised away.**

- **We (the interested community members) must encourage, advocate, help and inform the public and businesses about the benefits of public transport**, and the politicians and the specified and providers about the opportunities open to them should they be persuaded to make changes.

- **We should be aware as we plan travel and transport ahead that an increase in population in the Melksham (and Devizes and B-o-A) constituency is planned over the next 15 years.** We should require changes to be in place to provide for the travel needs of our new residents and businesses BEFORE they move in and (!!) purchase private transport before the public options are provided.

- **We (the interested community members) must appreciate that we have excellent local professionals who know their stuff and we should (even more that we do) partner with them** - public and private sector - to provide the very best we can, advocate it and tune it for the community. Wiltshire is no longer the "black sheep", but at the same time some organisation tend to over-analyse and over-specify to the detriment of nothing being affordable or being done

- **We (the interested community members) must appreciate that the majority of passengers see a bus or train as a way of getting from A to B and don't care who runs it**, nor whether it runs at other times and how serving A and B may reduce service at C.

So - local (constituency) stuff ...

Devizes MEANS "At the dividing point" ... and from a public transport viewpoint we are at the ends of the urban areas, so some extent getting the crumbs and the services. Go-Ahead, Stagecoach, Faresaver. Add First in Bradford-on-Avon and Frome Bus and Buses of Swindon with a service in Melksham.

The constituency includes 4 unjoined railway sections

- the West of England main line near Devizes without a station
- the London to Bristol main line through Box without a station
- a single line from Chippenham to Trowbridge with sparse service at Melksham
- The "main line than Whitehall forgot" - Portsmouth – Cardiff, at Bradford on Avon & Avoncliff

Train reliability is dire. Weekend cancellation rates have been up to 25%, mostly because of a shortage of available staff. At Bradford-on-Avon there will be another along within half an hour - not a game changing problem. At Melksham, the next train isn't supposed to appear until 2 hours later and it's a serious matter - especially because it's likely to be the same train and crew going around again so that will also be cancelled. Alternative provision when a train is cancelled is sporadic and slow and we never know what if anything is being done. **This needs priority attention**

Town Bus services need to be reliable, frequent and connecting to encourage people to use them in other than "dire need" circumstances. Traffic jams in Bradford-on-Avon (I am told) cause limitations on their use, even though the hills should make them attractive. B-o-A is also a key place for encouraging residents to use a reliable clean (electric) bus. Melksham has been cut from 2 vehicle to 1, which struggles to cover all the route and sections of the old service and yet does NOT go to the Campus (too new), the Sports ground (too new) the main business area (!!) or the railway station (train service too new). **Priority attention should be given to a bus service linking these new places**, and the new housing (nothing at Rocket Road, 2 buses a day at Skylark) and Town Centre. We hired an electric bus, 9.2022, to prove a route taking all of those in and timed to connect with trains and this needs implementing; talking with developers, funding via CIL / section 106 is an option. Devizes - several town bus vehicles; I know the Lavington service (3A and 3C) but need advice on others.

Devizes (Gateway / Parkway) station is a "natural" to consider on the main London to the West Country line - considerations are whether there will be passengers, what trains would call there, whether the line would have capacity for the extra stop, whether it would abstract from other public transport ...

A re-opened railway station on the London to Bristol line at Box (there used to be 2) has not been seriously suggested. There are up to 3 buses an hour into both Bath and Chippenham. An interesting idea for a park and ride station there was mooted at one point; until the line is electric and has a local services this is really not on the cards.

Getting people on board and marketing. Information systems, including fares. Current systems complex, frightening and missing information and also out of date information. Bus service generally good, though often lacking in the evenings.

Hospital and medical access - no direct public transport (and not easy).

24x7 - good news that we have better Sunday services now. We do need evening services and also to ensure continued funding of the recent Sunday improvements.

I have NOT commented on Calne, where one ward out of four in the town is in the constituency. I would be happy to provide what knowledge I have on Chippenham (a common railhead from Melksham) and Calne

MP Asks / comments – Graham Ellis to Brian Mathew and team

- 1. Please impress on the powers that be the need for areas such as ours to be part of the public transport networks of the future rather than concentrating on bigger urban areas** (200k plus) and intercity. It is not easiest in a county of "market towns" with a low population density, but it is a misconception to suggest that we are mostly "rural" living in villages and isolated hamlets.
- 2. Please stress RELIABILITY on public transport services which is THE biggest issue with rail at present.**
- 3. Joined up town buses in Melksham and Bradford-on-Avon will make a HUGE difference and should come short term please.** Not just for rail but for the town. BUT funding an issue - good for the economy but not a good financial operator case without help.
- 4. A reliable, connected train service hourly EACH WAY at Melksham will let us raise passenger numbers.** We have risen from 3,000 to 70,000 journeys per annum (political help from Duncan Hames). But it could be 400,000 - that's the number at Bradford-on-Avon which is less than half the size of Melksham. The train enhancement requires major capacity work, but this IS on Wiltshire / Network Rail priority project list, irrespective of "Restoring your Railway"
- 5. The £2 bus fare has been a wonder BUT what happens after December?** Loss of that or ENCTS (which use HAS dropped post covid). Need to be better marketing and maintenance of affordable pricing and "24 x 7" service needs met when current schemes end.
6. Just to note - it is not relevant whether it's a nationalised or private company that runs the service provided that is in the right joined up reliable network
- 7. Please can you pop in on 25th October to the Melksham Campus Hub,** or one of your team (14:30, 18:30)?

Written by Graham Ellis on behalf of Melksham Environment Group

I am also a Town Councillor, a board member of TravelWatch SouthWest, and webmaster of the Great Western Coffee Shop online forum at <https://greatwestern.info/>

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