

## **Local Transport Plan 4 – Wiltshire.**

### **Draft consultation response from Graham Ellis (details at base)**

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on Wiltshire's Local Transport Plan 4.

Overarching principles are an important framework and for the most part good and well stated. Specifics are thinner than I would like to see, and the whole therefore needs to be read in conjunction with other policies and documents. I also note that the total document is some 350 pages, put together by a professional expert team remunerated for the work and at best all I can do is raise some questions / concerns that may help you tune the document. I do look forward to working with you to implement improvements in local transport AND regional and through transport too for the benefit of users, current and future, the community and the environment.

#### **The headline.**

I applaud the principle of avoid - shift - improve - support although starting with "avoid" puts a negative word first and foremost - Ouch! How about Analyse - shift - improve - support?

Shift INCLUDES "avoid" anyway where it is logical to move away from current practise, and "Analyse" encourages us to work out what we are doing before we start avoiding it for the sake of avoidance. We do need to be careful that analysis doesn't become or indeed remain an end in itself - we do need to move on from the analysis to actually shifting to implement the desirable improvements, and then to tune and support them to make sure they are working, working well, understood and used to bring planned (or unplanned?) benefits and from which we learn and adapt further.

#### **On "Local"**

This is a Wiltshire plan for transport for then next 15 years or so. But I understand that we are looking for public transport in the region to be passed to a new Mayoral authority. This is very recent news and I worry about changing a long term plan over the news of current weeks - but how will the whole of this document apply in the future? What come in from Somerset, Dorset, BCP and (as I write) I think the jury is out on whether Swindon joins us.

I have sympathy with the LTP4 drafters as the document for consultation was written prior to the "Mayor of Wessex" business, but never the less I am concerned and wonder how (for example) policies effective for Poole or Weymouth will colour decisions local to Chippenham or Melksham.

There is sense in planning transport especially across a wider area; the major flow from Melksham is to Bath which isn't in Wiltshire and isn't in Wessex either - the question has been raised and thought about but "who's in charge" remains a concern and do we risk considerable transport schemes being dumbed down by committee rather than specified by an inspirational local view.

It is also noted that Wiltshire is in the centre of England, and whilst we are looking at local travel in this policy, we also have substantive flows of people travelling through our county. And it's the nature of best public transport that a single provision takes the related flows along the same corridor and make "mass" use of them. For example - Chippenham to Bath which is local shares a railway line and probably a train with London to Bristol which is NOT local.

### **On future population**

The local plan looks at significant housing development in Wiltshire. In round terms 2000 homes in Melksham, for example. But again very recent news after LTP4 has been drafted is an 80% uplift - suggesting 3600 homes which is an extra population of approaching 9000 rather than 5000.

This a concern as we hit the tipping point of gridlock (a few extra vehicles leads to a lot slower journey) and we are close to that tipping point already. One cheer (not 3) for electric cars - there is a danger of us replacing a queue of "dirty" vehicles with a queue of clean ones, but a queue never the less which stifles the efficient and economy as people wait to move around, and leads to more and more space needed to park up vehicles and maintain and monitor that space.

It is also an opportunity. I note that Wiltshire, again, has key town strategies for Salisbury, Trowbridge and Chippenham and then a dramatically different layer for "Market Towns". Salisbury has 23 (now increased to 30) electric buses planned for 2026. Melksham - over half the size - had zero and a single vehicle on the town bus route, trying to do everything and doing much of it pretty poorly - one bus a day from the Town Centre to Holbrook Vale an just two picking up in Skylark, Below the level of being useful to more than a handful of people.

I am minded of my campaigning for improved train service in Melksham. When we had 2 trains each way per day, we had around 3,000 journeys per annum to and from The town by rail. "3000" may sound like a big number, but it's just 5 arrivals and 5 departures a day. Taking Swindon as an example, there was just one round trip opportunity per day. We are now up from 2 to 9 train round trips per day, with between 35 and 40 passenger round trip opportunities - 450% train numbers but 2500% passenger numbers (75,000) and trains that were carrying fresh air are now carrying lots of passengers. Analyses (my first aim principle ;-)) suggests that optimum is 16 round trips and with a reliable services the passenger numbers would exceed 300,000. Growth is not limitless; there is no call for a "London Underground" frequency.

The same principle MUST be applied to buses, and the Salisbury example is a good starting point or seems so. The same principles should be applied to larger market towns too. Town buses bringing people into the town and connecting with other buses and trains onwards. We have an opportunity to apply these principles now as houses are built. The Local Transport Plan should emphasise the provision of mass public transport, combining the flows to make them efficient and frequent and providing them before new residents feel the need to purchase additional private vehicles.

Geometry tells me that a doubling of population (and Salisbury is less than twice the population of Melksham) results in a maximum journey length of just 1.4 times. So Melksham would not be looking at 30 vehicles (Salisbury) down to 15 bases on population, but perhaps down to somewhere between 5 and 10. The algorithm is a complex one as more people are closer to the centre, and both Salisbury and Melksham are not circular development because of flood plain issues.

Melksham and perhaps some others need to be considered strategic

### **On dormitories**

Land for employment is not being increased in the same way that land for housing is - certainty here in Melksham. There are major flows from Melksham to a number of towns around, and as our population grows that suggest a disproportionate growth of routine travel to work. This is not entirely a one way street - modern remote working reduces the number of commutes per person with many working from home, but we are still within societal change. Some jobs must be done away from home, and some managements require heavy office attendance. Home working for many established employees can work well, but learning from remote peers can be problematic in the medium to long term.

Key bus and train routes between settlements, the "Connected cities" approach, buses and trains running all day (and evening) every day are waymarked in the LTP. Good to see the adoption of both inter-town and local services on the same broad corridor to meet the differing needs - Chippenham to Bath is a good example where the increase from 2 to 3 buses per hour has provided the impetus for one express and two "round the houses". It makes not only for better quality travel for people going longer distances, but also a need for fewer buses and drivers on the route. Hourly Chippenham to Bath taking 45 minutes (x31) can be run hourly on 2 vehicles, but taking 75 minutes (231) takes 3 vehicles. The principle of fast and slow makes sense at the level of use and service we are now seeing. Note D1 and D1x too.

### **How the bus network is specified**

Yet another recent change since LTP4 was drafted. The bus network of routes and timetables has for decades been specified by commercial operators

competing with each other for profitable business, with the local authority (WC) stepping in to buy services that it wishes that are socially necessary and it elects to buy. It's actually much more complicated than that but it leaved crevices between "commercial" and "supported" routes, minimal integrations, even "bus wars". Enhance Partnership and Bus Service Improvement Plans help paper over some of the cracks of this system, but it's changing. New Government, mayoral authorities, needs reflecting on LTP4.

Under the new system, the network will be overarched by the mayoral authority as a network giving the opportunity to have a single integrated plan for what are currently "commercial", "supported" and rail. We have many superb expert operators locally and it's planned that they will still run the buses but under franchises; somewhat ironic as in rail, franchises are ending and operation is by a nationalised body. Our mayor (who will it be?) could run the buses again in the future back to Western National - but I would rather we don't go that route; local skilled management with an incentive to look after the passenger and also the purse strings makes sense.

"Analyse - shift - improve - support". Good. Big shift coming and need reflecting in LTP4 - if LTP4 is relevant to it in just Wiltshire.

## **S2.4**

"This measure focuses on support for enhancing the frequency of rail services, introducing new direct routes and therefore improving connections between different lines and stations. This policy would support and prioritise improvements which seek to make rail travel more convenient across Wiltshire. The Western Gateway Rail Strategy sets minimum aspirational frequencies of two trains per hour for intercity services, at least one train per hour for regional services, and one train per hour for local services."

The Western Gateway aspiration is a minimum - clarify please to one train per hour IN EACH DIRECTION and please confirm that LTP4 is in support of that minimum. Stations at Melksham, Dilton Marsh and Pewsey currently fall below the minimum service level. Portsmouth, Southampton, Salisbury, Bath, Bristol, Newport and Cardiff are all cities and so the Portsmouth to Cardiff service is an intercity one. It currently runs once an hour and I note the aspiration in two

There should also be an aspiration for service reliability.

### **Relating to other plans and strategies**

LTP4 should be taken as just one of a number of documents in addition to studies such as Network Rail / GBR development plans, Western Gateway sTB proposals including their SiP which is currently out for consultation, etc. Additional rail capacity, with a fourth platform at Westbury and a loop or doubling through Melksham is noted, as are parallel aspirations to those in LTP4 though not necessarily repeated.

The NPPF, Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan elements also reflect as they should on the LTP4. As do BSIPs and EPs on bus provision.

### **Footnote – the Author**

Graham Ellis, retired, former IT trainer and hotelier in Melksham. In my working time I was President of the Melksham Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Community Rail Officer at the formation and growth of the TransWilts Community Rail Partnership.

I am currently a Town Councillor in Melksham, stepping down at the May 2025 election as I somewhat wind down, and that will let me concentrate on transport interests; I am acting chair of the Melksham Transport User Group, and a board member of TravelWatch SouthWest. I also run an active online public transport passenger forum ( <https://www.passenger.chat> ) covering the Thames Valley through Wessex and WECA to the South West of England.

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