

Public Transport in Wiltshire

A time of Great Risk and Great Opportunity

Over a dozen question and issues – and this is just a first draft looking **only at rail for WWRUG** on 18th September 2024

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(First) Great Western Railway contract to operate trains has a break point the government can exercise without penalty next spring and will almost certainly do so. Other contracts (SWR / First and MTR, Cross Country / Arriva) also have break points.

Who will operate passenger trains and make decisions into the future?

What interest will the contractors have in the meantime?

The Government talks of providing less operating finance for the railway and also of providing a more reliable service. Present resources work on a day of average demand when nothing goes wrong or is having engineering work done, and staff are volunteering to work overtime. Such days are rare.

One model of how to do this is to cut back on services and lines which are less used, as per the model of Beeching and Serpell. Cut the cloth so that it can be reliable on the heavy flows of mass transit. The second model is to provide resources on the existing network to make the same services reliable and attract more passengers who we "know" want to travel

Which model will be followed?

The current fare system is complex and perverse between operators and is widely touted as needing simplification. There are some laughable historic issues - buying two tickets for two halves of the journey cheaper than buying just one ticket, and "peak" fares charged on quiet trains such as the very early ones like the 06:32 from Melksham to Bristol, but off peak on the 17:00 back.

A number of quietly introduced changes such as reduced railcard discount, LNER changes that eliminate "off peak" so all trains are at "any time" fares and the Bristol area swipe system, the removal of Groupsave from the 09:10 (next train 11:31).

Will fare simplification be used to encourage passengers, or to increase income?

Will fare simplification reduce the need for the human face to sell the more complex tickets or tickets to the fearful / unknowing, with a **knock on reduction of staff** as a consequence to inform, welcome, serve teas and coffees, help passengers on and off trains, be on hand during disruption, etc?

The "Restore your Railways" program is cancelled. In Wiltshire, aspirations have included Devizes Gateway, Corsham, and Wilton stations. The Network Rail report on rail in Wiltshire talks of providing a loop near Melksham, a 4th platform at Westbury, and other enhancements for the future where the system is creaking at the seams.

What is to happen with future developments?

There is a question mark over STBs (SubNational Transport Boards) which plan travel facilities - road and rail and services across the region. We have Western Gateway and Western Peninsular. Much authority given to mayoral and unitary authorities.

How will a planning and implementation system for relatively local areas work for regional matters and across border, especially for rail where average journeys are longer than by road / bus?

From the previous government there were plans for major housing and thus population increase in Wiltshire (and across the South West). The new government has doubled targets in counties like Wiltshire and Dorset.

How will the public transport system cope with all the extra people?

How will it be climate friendly?

How will national infrastructure issues be melded in?

There is a backlog of overdue maintenance, climate change is making for more major weather events that close or damage infrastructure, and mean that trackside vegetation is growing quicker, and safety concerns and risk and cost aversion make it much more long winded to deal with such matters

What are the plans to catch up and stay on top of these issues?

Open Access operators are to be retained and perhaps encouraged, and indeed First Group have appointed a very experienced member of their team to oversee their open access into the future.

Is a possible model for the future based around a base government run system with a far higher number / proportion of open access operations?

The Rail industry is supported by a large number of private contractor and consultant organisations, many with an international reach. There are a very great number of experts or specialist staff in these organisations. And you can add to that the specialist staff employed by the TOCs

What will happen to these organisations – will they be needed, nationalised, still contracted?

Will we potentially see a loss of highly skilled staff at the very time that we need more expertise rather than less?

It can be argued that certain franchises, such as Chiltern, which ran for a long period of fifteen years allowed the railway to be developed long term away from the 5 year election cycle.

I note that the Labour manifesto plans are light on net zero and on electrification

How will strategic long term development be dealt with under government control with an eye to the next election?

Will funding and development be lead by the requirements of the ballot box for 2029?

Rolling stock is mostly owned by private companies - Angel Trains, Evershot and Porterbrook, and also Hitachi. It is in their interest to lease out their trains throughout a very long life, and to maximise their income by building only very limited new trains too maintaining a shortage of stock

What are the plans for the future of rolling stock provision?

I was on a "turbo" the other day and the sign at the door gave me 25 different contact points for further information about services. There is no one easy point to find out about things rail, let alone total journey. The Government is looking at combining Transport Focus, elements of the Office of Rail and Road, and the Rail Ombudsman.

Will the new body have teeth?

Will it be accountable and accessible?

Will it adequately represent and correlate passenger inputs?

Will it be independent / with no conflict of interest?

Passengers don't start or end their rail journeys at the station. They travel to the station on foot, by cycle, by car (parking there), dropped off there by private car (kiss and ride), by bus, and by taxi.

What are plans for integrated travel and making the complete journey?

What are plans for station facilities to make stations welcoming?

We have a whole plethora of information systems around.

How are those to be integrated and passengers aided in the move over?

Much information is supplied "Open Access" and made public through third party tools such as
Real Time Trains,
Open Train Times,
Recent Train Times,
On Time Trans,
Tracksy,
and also JourneyCheck.

What future is planned for data for these systems?

Note - very much a question for our "Coffee Shop" forum as to our future data feeds.