

Transcript – from public meeting, Trowbridge, 20th October 2021, on the subject of the through trains from London (Waterloo) to Bristol (Temple Meads) via Salisbury, run by South Western Railway which are to be permanently withdrawn from 12th December 2021.

Session co-ordinator – Chris Irwin (who is the “I” at the start of this session):

I'm going to try and remain dispassionate on this. I have a confession today, Andrew actually called me in the summer to say, in great confidence. I just want to let you know that South Western Railway after a discussion with the DfT is thinking of dropping the services.. So I asked him, was this consultation, and he explained to me it was something that I couldn't talk to other people about and Andrew, I made this point pointedly, I hope you respect the confidence that I gave you. But equally I apologise to you for not having consulted you on what I was told: it's one of those dilemmas. Well, I did do I can tell you Andrew is talk to one or two people in local authorities who you had told me, also, where, and I can tell you, and I think he hasn't come out tonight, I can tell you the response I got from local authority colleagues was dramatically opposed to what the Department of Transport was trying to get the railway companies to offer. So we talked about Western Gateway just now; WECA was deeply opposed; Wiltshire has, I think, done one of the most impressive letters I've seen, in opposition to what's happening.

Local consultation didn't take place. Consultation with stakeholders didn't take place in any meaningful way and I think we'll need to be very careful about this because clearly, this is a front line. We got a warning just now. We have to see this as a national issue. We've got local concerns about Bristol to Waterloo, Bristol to Salisbury, but this is part of a national issue and a national rationalisation..

If this one goes wrong, the Bristol Waterloo service isn't the only service that's going to suffer. I was talking earlier this week to a friend of mine who has been the driving force, a Rail Future person, driving force, behind the reopening of the Northumberland line up from Morpeth and so on.

And he said, I've been following the Bristol Waterloo thing with interest, because we've got exactly the same problem with services to Morpeth. So lose this one and we're losing something that impacts on the country as a whole.

And we need to get this right, we need proper consultation. We need transparency, and we need decent data.

Now let's just go through those things on the way and then I'd like to draw the conversation more wide.

In terms of transparency, I'm not sure Andrew it's really true, is it, to say it's muddled up with the May franchise award? The May, the May contract because when I read the FOI stuff the other day, I'm fairly sure that I saw correspondence by Graham Sutherland, the great Graham Sutherland, do you remember Graham Sutherland? (Correction: Stockbridge)

So, anyway, I, I saw correspondence in there that went back to well before May, this was being contemplated long before the contract was awarded. (Interjection from Martin: "I made that clear") Yeah, okay, so, got to be transparent about this: this is a government initiative. Fascinating thing is, this was being done of a time that the Shapps-Williams or the Williams-Shapps report was being put through its final stages. This great report that talked about a passenger oriented service, a new railway, different bits working together, all these great, marvellous things on the horizon. And here we have the, the reality, the sordid little bit of cutting back on a service that is clearly commanding enormous support in the area.

So that troubles me because it troubles me not just about this service, but it troubles me about the integrity of the DfT and of the politicians concerned with maintaining the future of public transport in this country. We've got to get this right too. If we don't, we'll all suffer, not just the people in this area, but the country will suffer. People throughout the country who depend on public transport: and you're absolutely right to raise the accessibility issue, the equalities issue. It seems to be a fundamental part of the debate. Just look at the challenges, facing anyone with impaired mobility of, any sort, of trying to make those connections at Bath, at Westbury, but alleviated by the existence of that service. And that's not just one area of legal challenge that I think we're going to be exploring in the next few weeks. I think there's another very important area of legal challenge there to be explored. If you look at the FOI material, there's a quite interesting series of references to competition and markets authority. Whether there's a breach of the competition act or not, and it raises the point quite fairly that the one area the CMA looked at when First, which has the majority ownership of South Western Railway, issues looked at in relation to its ownership of Great Western Railway, focused on the

Exeter area. But I think if you look at that FOI material with half a mind on competition policy, you'll be able to ask yourself: Hold on. How would the CMA react if they were to have their attention drawn to those papers? And I think it's a very serious question. How did it happen? That two notionally autonomous companies were getting together to talk about efficiencies which in the end don't serve the public's interests in terms of the basic things: providing a service for passengers of which we know there's demand, and indeed don't tackle the real causes of inefficiency in our rail system. Andrew, you very fairly drew attention to disruptions that took place in 2018-19 in the provision of the 159 services, when industrial disputes meant that many services on that line were cancelled and so on. But if one was looking for efficiencies in the rail system I believe, and I have some quite considerable experience now, as well over two or three decades, I believe there are ways of finding efficiencies in the system that don't involve chopping back the services that passengers use, need, want and indeed don't go forward by trying to deny the choice.

But many people would say competition in the past was seen as providing competition, giving something else as well: competition bringing efficiency in its own right. So those arguments seem to be basically flawed. So just to summarise, we've heard about the problems of connections at Salisbury. Yes, in another world where there were restoration of two trains an hour, if perhaps the disruption would be less objectionable.

But we do know from the transport focus work done on the Brighton Cardiff service at the time that it was threatened with withdrawal by the DfT when the 2009 franchise award Great Western was being made that they showed about a 30% drop off in demand had it gone ahead?

I do know from work in Sweden, in Sweden, the yardstick is about 35% loss when you make people change rather than have through trains, And interestingly Deutsche Bahn told me, only 10 days ago, that they reckoned 48% loss of traffic once you remove a connection. So there's something fairly substantial there and back to Graham's point and his aspiration of the 242,000 was it, through services... (Graham: "About 240000 journeys versus 42000") Real facts, and we really need to come clean on that one, so, connections important.

But I think there's a couple of other things that we really need to think about. In addition to the connection point, there's also the understanding of where the

flows are. Now. I would argue that if you look at what that service does at the moment, providing a link not just into London, taking up your point, an attractive part of London that's not all that accessible for people travelling up from the west through Paddington, that's a loss. But more than that, this is a significant loss in terms of connectivity at Clapham Junction, not just to the Brighton line, Gatwick, and things like that. But all (indecipherable).
(Audience: "And Woking")

I was going to say, and Woking. So those connectivity is the connectivity of a Southwest with a Southeast, identified over the years as something that is important, is in danger of being threatened. So, all these are challenges that need to be addressed properly and shouldn't be dealt in a shoddy way where there's not consultation, but there's, one's informed what's happening? Where consult... where, where the implementation is, is a rushed activity and back to what Graham suggested earlier. December 2022, rather than December 2021 will provide a time for three things. Firstly, for proper consultation, secondly the reintroduction of the twice hourly services of Salisbury back to Waterloo and indeed the advent of the metro services in December 22, which will go down as far as Westbury.

And thirdly, it will provide us with a chance to get a proper perspective on what people actually doing. Because when I've looked at the travel data, I'm certainly not clear that I can sustain the numbers you showed of 46, 48, passengers. And I think one of the reasons I can't sustain it is I look at the way tickets are sold. Tickets are not necessarily so route specific.

You know, I can buy a ticket from Trowbridge to Redhill by any route but I don't believe the data you're talking about is picking up the any route stuff. (Andrew: "installation data.") Absolutely. Yes. Now: on the loading data, I don't know. Subjectively, perhaps I've only done on a Friday for subjectively I get the feeling of through traffic on a Friday, (indistinct) It's much much heavier than 20 passengers, was it (indistinct). So, that's the question. What are these people here for? What are the railways here for? What are we paying for, we're paying for the management to be efficient about the way they run their trains, which doesn't necessarily mean cutting services, but providing services more efficiently, like I suppose going back to South West Trains, South West Railways dispute with the guards and so on. That was an attempt to do that but in the end I don't think a very satisfactory outcome for any party. Secondly while asking them to provide a service that meets the economic and social needs of the communities as a whole.

And thirdly, we're looking to them to protect our long-term interests in terms of the economic and social aspirations for the development of the South West region, And if they can't do... (Audience: "And the environment, how much will we spend going green, railways are the best option") And people with disabilities Okay? So what else? Let's go up.

So we got the environment, what else, what else we were missing out on? We're talking about people with reduced mobility to use a jargon, really important one in there. Anything else in there? (Audience: "The most amazing thing is the fare price. So yeah, that's amazing. Return to Waterloo, £46 pounds. Via Bath, about 64. That's a huge difference, it's about 18 pounds. Percentage rise, a massive increase.") (Andrew: "May I just answer that, that will still be available, albeit with a change (indecipherable).") (Graham: "Thankyou Andrew, tell us how long for please?") (Audience: "I just, I just enquired before I got here, off,-peak up to London to spend four hours in London 67 pounds for four hours. It takes almost four hours, three and a half there and back for four hours in a week.")

So, this was the argument, this with the one that won the battle back in 2004, I got to know Andrew Haines well, he's become a personal friend since that time, he's the man who's been boss of Network Rail, he's leading the transition team to the Great British Railways.

And I got to know Andrew in this town because at the time he was running South West Trains which was the predecessor company that Andrew's now working for. And he came here to a meeting I chaired for the then Rail Passenger Committee of Western England and he encouraged us as managing director of Southwest trains to fight a DFT proposal to take this service off and the reasons he gave us included the fares.

We take competition is what's reduced the fares or what has controlled fares on that line. I think it's a tragedy to me that that those lessons somehow get lost over time. So any more, any more killer points? (Audience: "Isolation of rural communities. I think there are a number of (indistinct) in and around Bradford on Avon who won't travel, simply because of the inconvenience of getting up to London and having to change trains. So, therefore, their ability to move around the country is diminished, and it's further and further erosion of that kind of cruel community isolation.")

Strong point, is anyone here from Warminster? (Audience: "I don't think there's enough concentration on the population of Trowbridge and Bradford on Avon, of 50,000 people who want a direct link into London. It's all very well to say you can go up to Melksham but it takes you the wrong way and it's been a very good service to Trowbridge and we're not concentrating enough on the direct element of it, we're talking about connections.") Has it been marketed properly? Are people in Trowbridge aware of it?. (No) And what can be done to help the marketing? (Andrew: "We can work with the user groups, with Transwilt. And you know, we have been working a lot with Transwilt. So yeah, we're very happy to{indistinct}").