

To – Dan Okey, GWR and a director of the TransWilts CIC.  
From – Graham Ellis, Melksham in a personal capacity – graham@sn12.net  
Date - 16<sup>th</sup> October 2023

First two pages – cover letter  
Following pages – detail  
Also available – evidence to support each item (on request)

Hi, Dan,

Good to speak with you last week with a view to looking forward for the Swindon - Westbury line and service, and the stations on the line with consideration of them all, but an especial consideration of Melksham which has no other service.

Please find (below) my document reviewing the service ... there's so much there and I have a strong evidence base I could correlate to make up into a report worthy of a PhD thesis that would break email boxes!

I have suggested a dozen reasons our service use is being held back, and there are some that should be fixable to make a substantial difference. I have also listed ten things we've really got going for us - some in use and some latent. I have also gone back to the 14 aspirations I listed in 2017 and see some achievement on many of them. They were all good aspirations; writing a similar list today, those not completed remain good for the most part; I would add a handful more to address some of the new issues such as service reliability and the lack of local welcoming community involvement which could bring massive dividends if successfully addressed.

We spoke last Thursday. On Friday, services fell apart at about 5 p.m. and passengers for the 17:36 reported not getting home until 10 p.m, and seeing rail replacement buses provided from Swindon via Stroud but nothing (and no information) towards Westbury. On Sunday, the first train from Westbury got to Melksham at 08:35 (on time) but there terminated to the surprise of the passengers on board. It returned to Westbury as the 09:40, then ran as the 10:46 to Swindon. Again, little information, no rail replacement transport offered; people 2 hours late to work. Looking back at 4 weeks of Mondays to Fridays, just 163 of 180 timetable trains have run. I'm sorry to have to report this, but until the service becomes reliable you and the supportive community are going to struggle to (re)gain trust in the trains. A target of 175 running, with alternative provision to get people "home" with an hour of when they should get there, seems reasonable and marketable. I'm sorry the frustration comes out there; in the continued absence of a reliable service, you will continue to struggle to grow passenger numbers. It's still awful, and people cannot travel on excuses - they need trains!

So - apart from reliability, what do ordinary people need? A "Community / Rail" welcome to the service. The TransWilts CRP has done excellent work in the long term arena (though that really wasn't a major intent when we set it up), and in reaching some difficult groups, but over the last year has lost both its director in Chippenham and its director in Melksham and it's not visible in the community of passengers nor wannabe-passengers. Our local friends groups feel scared off; so much that could be done, and there are willing and capable volunteers - be that through the CRP or through station groups if welcomed back.

What is happening at TransWilts now? Who is the chair, what are the plans for the future? How can the community help? What are the plans for the properties at Melksham where weeds are growing, and the room at Westbury which always looks to be in the dark when I pass through?

In eight weeks time, we can commemorate the 10th year of the restoration of a useable service - and it's improved of late to an all year, all day service with the extra evening trains. Can we take that as a "reboot" opportunity? I personally am willing to put effort in as I have done for many years - and in spite of issues raised, we have done pretty well.

We have achieved so much in ten years. We can do so much more, and I look forward to it, for the next decade.

Graham

Graham Ellis - graham@sn12.net  
48 Spa Road, Melksham, SN12 7NY  
01225 708225 or 07974 925928

- \* Melksham South Ward Town Councillor
- \* Webmaster, Coffee Shop Rail Passenger Forum
- \* Acting Chair, Melksham Transport User Group
- \* Option 24/7 rep for Melksham
- \* West Wilts Rail User Group (Committee)
- \* Ukraine2Uk Webmaster and Facebook Group Admin

**Train service - a status update  
personal thoughts (though evidence based)  
Graham Ellis, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

**Swindon to Westbury  
via Chippenham, Melksham and Trowbridge**

**Management Overview document**

Covid decimated rail travel and passenger numbers, but numbers have bounced back. This return has not been even, though, and one of the lines where the return has been least has been the "TransWilts" line from Swindon to Westbury via Chippenham, Melksham and Trowbridge. But what have we going for us, what have we achieved and what are the issues to be addressed?

A bit of history - in 2013 services stepped up from 2 to 8 each way per day, experimental at first but then permanent. We grew meteorically from 18,000 to 248,000 journeys per annum, from 3,000 to 75,000 to / from Melksham but then growth levelled off - initially because the single carriage train was jam packed at peak times and we couldn't grow further. Other issues (see below) have inhibited a resumption of that meteoric growth; call it a period of stabilisation if you wish.

**Here is what I wrote in 2017 (when I was Community Rail Officer)  
with notes of what has been achieved since:**

- \* Untapped markets identified for southbound trains (Melksham times about 08:14, 17:03, 23:03)
  - we have a 22:54; 33% achieved
- \* Untapped markets identified for northbound trains (Melksham times about 08:54, 17:45, 21:36)
  - we have a 21:36; 33% achieved
- \* Later northbound train desperately needed on Saturday
  - Now 20:06 not 18:35 off Westbury; need later still; 50% achieved
- \* Need for extra capacity (i.e. longer and / or more trains)
  - 1 carriage trains replace by 2 or 3 carriages; 100% achieved
- \* Need for extra capacity (Melksham Station road approach and other safety issues)
  - minimal progress
- \* Desire for earlier Sunday train that runs all year

- Yes, all year 08:11 round trip from Warminster; 100% achieved
- \* Better address Swindon and Chippenham to Warminster, Salisbury, Southampton and Airport
  - Warminster and Salisbury a little better; 10% achieved?
- \* Connections from Frome and Weymouth and also to Exeter and West of to be addressed.
  - these have got worse!
- \* Dilton Marsh issues - now with many residences close by, but still an odd service
  - Big recent improvements; 66% achieved
- \* Desire for clock-face and hourly services to allow the train to be always available as natural travel choice
  - Still required - 0% achieved
- \* Connectivity from Melksham Station to town for those not driving to the station or having lifts
  - Still required - 0% achieved
- \* Marketing for visitors to the area to get more passengers onto quieter services
  - Minor work done - 10% achieved
- \* Resolving fare perversities left over from olden days - e.g. day return Chippenham to Salisbury
  - Some addressed - 10% achieved
- \* Continue marketing travel options to residents; each town a different case
  - Very limited work done - 10% achieved

**We have a great deal going for us:**

- \* All day, every day train services (A)
- \* Usually wonderful local staff and managers we can talk to (B)
- \* Safe trains, capacity to grow passenger numbers, sensible fare levels (C)
- \* Incorporation in national rail (GBR) systems and plans (D)
- \* Long term support from Local Plan and local transport plan and Wiltshire Council and neighbourhood plans(E)
- \* Powerful Community Rail / Wiltshire drive for development (F)
- \* Community Rail reach to harder to access people (G)
- \* Established and Accredited Community Rail partnership (H)
- \* A market ready to be encouraged (I)
- \* Stations friends and other latent volunteer groups (J)

## **But here are some suggestions as to where our growth has been constrained**

- a long list but each of them is worth a thought. No solutions in this list - let's learn the whole picture before looking towards what could be done for the future.

- \* Reliability of service (1)
- \* Poor mitigation (2)
- \* Lack of marketing and local involvement (3)
- \* Loss of park and ride market at Melksham (4)
- \* Introduction of penalty fares (5)
- \* Commuter nature of previous traffic (6)
- \* Thinness of service (7)
- \* Coldness of station (8)
- \* Lack of station access (9)
- \* Lack of bus integration (10)
- \* Lack of local tourism (11)
- \* Connection failures and limited through services (12)

## **Looking to the future:**

- \* Growing communities (i)
- \* Environmental concerns (ii)
- \* Local rather than long distance growth (iii)
- \* Better capacity / infrastructure (iv)
- \* Mass transit (v)
- \* Public sentiment (vi)
- \* The wider UK picture (vii)

There has been a pause in the underlying meteoric rise we saw from 2013 to 2018 - not quite a stop to take stop and gain breath, nor campaign fatigue, but a definite pause even underlying the changes of covid and the consequential social and society changes.

## **The evidence I do not have ...**

- \* What is the situation with leases at Westbury Station and Melksham Station Yard?
- \* Who is the chair and what are the ongoing plans of the TransWilts CRP
- \* What are the latest / current stats including detail of passenger flows?

The evidence I do have suggests potential (from a base of 250,000 journeys, 75,000 of them to or from Melksham) over the next 5 years with current service level of 450,000 journeys with 200,000 of them to / from Melksham. In my view To reach that potential, most of these short term proposals need to implemented within the short term to (re)turn us to a welcoming, reliable, joined up service that resumes growth

### **Proposals - short term**

1. Do something about service reliability
2. Do something about better alternatives and information if it DOES go wrong
3. Revise Melksham station future / welcoming
4. Revise Melksham station future / parking
5. adjust times so that connections work
6. local visibility of services
7. Bring community rail back to general local communities
8. A Town bus to serve Melksham Town

### **Proposals - medium term**

11. Additional station access at Melksham
12. Additional peak services
13. Regional bus / train ticket and information interchangeability
14. Better disabled facilities at Trowbridge

### **Strategic potential - long term**

21. Additional capacity for increased train service to hourly each way
22. Through services to wider destinations
23. Electrification / Zero Carbon
24. Redevelopments at Cooper Tires, Ushers, Langley Park, etc
25. Consideration for additional stations and restoration of spurs

### **Noting wider external factors:**

31. Environmental
32. Regional Growth
33. Growth of leisure / move to working from home

Graham

Graham Ellis - graham@sn12.net  
48 Spa Road, Melksham, SN12 7NY  
01225 708225 or 07974 925928

- \* Melksham South Ward Town Councillor
- \* Webmaster, Coffee Shop Rail Passenger Forum
- \* Acting Chair, Melksham Transport User Group
- \* Option 24/7 rep for Melksham
- \* West Wilts Rail User Group (Committee)
- \* Ukraine2Uk Webmaster and Facebook Group Admin

-- GE / 2023.10.16 / graham@sn12.net -  
Please ask for evidence base on any issue.