

# WEST DORSET WESTERN AREA TRANSPORT ACTION GROUP (WATAG)

website [www.watag.org.uk](http://www.watag.org.uk)

## MINUTES OF WATAG AGM 20 – 28th JANUARY 2021 at 7 p.m.

**Present (23):** Nadeem Ahmad (Bridport), Chris Addis (Bothenhampton & Walditch PC ), Tim Christian (DCT), Cllr Simon Christopher (Dorset Council), John Collingwood (Bridport), Colin Divall (WATAG), Bob Driscoll (WATAG chair), Anna Dunn (Chideock PC ), Sally Falkingham (Maiden Newton PC ), Ian Gray (WATAG), David Marsh (Thorncombe PC ), Gavin Maxwell (Bridport), Simon Newport (Yellow Buses), Chris Noon (Char Valley PC), David Redgewell (South West Transport Network/RailFuture Severnside), Helen Reed (NORDCAT), Tony Reese (47 Friends ), Anne Sankey (Lyme Regis), Philip Sankey (Lyme Forward), Billy Shearer (WATAG), Guz Tidy (Loders), Chris Turner (Beaminster TC ), John Vanderwolfe (Upper Marshwood Vale PC),

The chairman explained that the meeting was taking place via Zoom and was the first public meeting since January 2020.

**Apologies :** Andrew Ardley (SWR), Kevin Batchelor (Buses of Somerset), Sheena Fox (Beaminster), David Heckles (Damory), Anna Lovell (WATAG), Carol Sim (First Wessex), Alan Williams (WATAG).

1. **Chairman's Report:** Bob Driscoll reviewed the main events and developments during the previous year. The report is attached.
2. **Financial Report:** The Treasurer reported the balance of funds. We had received a refund for the cancelled bookings at the W.I. Hall. Bridport Town Council have now assumed responsibility for the hall and the committee agreed that the final £25 which had passed to the Town Council should not be reclaimed as the Committee had enjoyed the use of rooms at Mountfield free of charge. During the year, WATAG received £250 from Dorset Council for general running costs. The opening balance of £372.74 had increased to £ 536.31<sup>1</sup> at the end of the year. A copy of the Accounts can be provided on request.
3. **Election of Officers:** In view of these uncertain times, the Chairman said that although he is looking to pass on the role, it was not an appropriate moment to change. He proposed that the present committee/advisory group should continue. Chair: Bob Driscoll; Treasurer: Guz Tidy; Minute Secretary: Philip Sankey; Correspondence & Admin: John Collingwood; Other members: Colin Divall, Ian Gray, Anna Lovell, Tony Reese; Billy Shearer, and Alan Williams. The chair asked for further members to join the Advisory Committee but there were no volunteers. Existing members all agreed to serve again for the current year. Webmaster – Richard Edwards wished to stand down from this role because of other commitments. The Chair expressed WATAG's thanks to him for his work and said that Billy Shearer was willing to take over.

The meeting was opened for general discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> This figure excludes £128.00 (approx.) for the printing/ artwork of the WATAG Bus Times leaflet, which will be accounted for at the end of 2021

Chris Turner expressed our thanks to Billy for all work behind the scenes and for agreeing to take on the website.

Sally Falkingham reported that the full timetable was still in operation on the Heart of Wessex line. She had identified shift workers at both Yeovil and Dorchester Hospitals who relied on it. There was however a 'use it or lose it' message from First GWR. Planned improvement works were taking place overnight but the timetable will be affected from 15-19 February when there will be replacement buses between Castle Cary and Weymouth.

David Redgewell raised the issue of disabled access at Dorchester West for trains towards Bath. The funding was in place in 2008, but he hoped it would not be lost as some DfT funding is time limited. He wondered whether the forthcoming closure would give a window to get the work done. Simon Christopher would follow this up if WATAG sent details.

John Collingwood asked about the restoration of a link on the old Maiden Newton – Bridport railway line. Sally reported that a link to the bridleway (avoiding the station platform) was under construction. Russell Gough, the officer in charge (who is also a Maiden Newton Parish Councillor) expected completion in March. Maiden Newton PC would be discussing the rail idea next week. She thought they would support it but not offer any finance.

David Redgewell stressed the importance of the scheme having support from Chris Loder MP and Dorset Council to put in a bid.

Tim Christian reported the DCT services had continued to operate. Service 7 has run since they took it over in October. They were attracting some regular users. They were noting which journeys they were using and there may be adjustments when the service is reviewed with the Town Clerk.

David Marsh expressed the thanks of the communities served by the 14 & 688 that DCT had been there to provide access to Axminster and Chard throughout.

David Redgewell stressed the importance of flagging up the needs of key workers and for essential journeys (including now to vaccination centres) with the operators. The government expects the overall levels of service to be reduced (to 65% currently on rail). Allocation of Covid Recovery Grant could be more political so lobbying may be required to keep services going.

Sally Falkingham reported that future funding for Maiden Newton & Beaminster Country Cars from Dorset Council was still under review. They were the last remaining scheme and currently have been very busy taking people for vaccinations at Bridport. David Redgewell stressed that the government required access services to vaccinations to be prioritised with funding via the CCG (contact the vaccination 'lead') if necessary.

Simon Newport gave a bus industry perspective. Yellow Buses were carrying about 20% of the usual numbers so the government is effectively covering the other 80%. They are not making a profit so investment in vehicles etc. is at a standstill. The government has been slow to pay out as it has to be based on actual data. "Social distancing" is likely to be with us for some time (?September). They are planning for school services resuming (provisionally 8 March), adding to the Sunday network at the end of March and gradually increasing from their Saturday service level (83%) but 'staycations' may not take off until later (?May).

David Redgewell asked whether they had people going to vaccination centres. Simon had had enquiries but Dorset was not allowing free pre-9.30 travel for vaccinations.

Anna Dunn asked whether it was necessary to prepare material afresh for the many consultations on which people are asked to comment, Colin Divall agreed that there was overlap and when drafting material for the committee often reworked material for the specific questions. He will be particularly interested in the outcome from Dorset Council's Climate & Ecological Emergency consultation.

Councillor Simon Christopher said he was happy to raise transport matters and asked that these should be sent to him by e-mail. Councillor Ray Bryan now had two other lead Councillors, Nocturin Lacey-Clarke and Cherry Brooks, to support him and he allocated specific issues to them.

Chris Turner reported that they had suspended the Saturday CB3 after 19 January (until Easter) but this would be reviewed in the light of government advice as lockdown is eased. The route benefited from the reimbursement for concessionary passes by both Dorset and Somerset. He thanked his team of volunteer drivers and clippies without whom they would not be able to keep going.

Helen Reed said NORDCAT still had school and Kingston Maurward work (with reduced numbers) but that shopping trips were suspended but those for hospital and other medical appointments were continuing [this was working by them asking for a contribution on the same basis as car schemes and they have been to "the far side of Bridport". Bookings/enquiries to NORDCAT on 01258 473154].

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending and asked them to reflect and feed in views about the pattern of future meetings. Chris Turner suggested quarterly but David Redgewell thought that planning for a post-covid transport system might start around Easter time so it might be opportune to meet then. The Chairman agreed that we were entering a new world and he hoped that service and co-operation would be key features.

The AGM concluded at 8.21 pm

**Chair:**

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## Chair's Report for the WATAG 2021 AGM (28 January 2021)

A very warm welcome to this, our 20th AGM since the formation of WATAG. And, of course, our first to be held remotely! Little did we realise, when we all met at the WI Hall in Bridport on 23rd January last year for our AGM and General Meeting, by the time of our next scheduled meeting in March life would have changed forever, with social gatherings forbidden, and everyone discouraged from using public transport, except as a last resort. As a result, we have not had any public meetings for a year.

Normally, this report is a précis of our meetings, with highlights, from the previous year. Obviously not this time, so I will concentrate on just a couple of the major issues.

The first one is undoubtedly the Yeovil – Bridport transport corridor that has taken up so much of our time in the last few years, the history of which you will be familiar with. The timetable imposed by Dorset Travel in April 2019 had not been successful, and carryings had reflected that. First Wessex then announced last January that it was losing money on the route and would be withdrawing its no. 6 from May 2020, except for its Beaminster School contract. In the event the withdrawal took place in March, as Central Government had asked bus companies to operate just a Saturday service due to the drop in numbers travelling as a result of Covid-19 and government advice. As the Yeovil – Bridport service only runs Monday to Friday, FW took advantage of that request to withdraw early. Buses of Somerset on the other hand continued its part of the no. 6 route, so there was a period where buses would arrive in Beaminster from the north, with no onward connection to Bridport, and vice versa. Fortunately common-sense eventually prevailed, and we must thank Alex Carter MD of Buses of Somerset for agreeing a revised schedule with Dorset Travel that allowed shoppers a morning out and back trip to Bridport, and likewise to Yeovil in the afternoon. This ran from 15 June 2020 until the current timetable that was introduced on 07 September. Whilst this is a vast improvement on previous timetables, we are still in correspondence with Dorset Travel to amend the timing of the last bus from Yeovil so students at Yeovil College can use it.

Regarding Dorset Travel, you will be aware that we, along with 7 other Transport Action Groups were set up originally by Dorset County Council. There are now 5 in total, and we used to have a meeting of the TAG Leaders twice a year, chaired by Dorset Travel. These have been suspended due to social distancing rules, and we have not met since November 2019. Since then, dialogue between Dorset Council and the TAGs seems to have stalled. We know that Cllr Ray Bryan, who holds the Portfolio for Transport, has been considering the future “Terms of Reference” for TAGs, so we hope for clarification soon. Meanwhile, we will continue with our remit to maintain and improve public transport within our area, and we must be grateful that our MP Chris Loder has stated that public transport is one of his priorities.

So, what else have we been up to?

- In May, we responded to ‘The Decline of Rural Buses – A Joint Inquiry by the County All Party Parliamentary Group and the County Councils Network’, and used the Yeovil – Bridport corridor as our case study.
- In July, we responded to the Western Gateway Draft Strategic Transport Plan.
- This month we have responded to the Dorset Council Climate & Ecological Emergency Plan consultation.
- As there have been no meetings, we have started issuing a WATAG Newsletter; so far we have issued two.
- As in previous years, we have produced a leaflet showing principal bus services in our area. These have been made available at TICs, although at present they are closed, so distribution is a problem.
- There are two current consultations to which we intend to make a response. The first is another “rural transport” <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/future-of-transport-rural-strategy-call-for-evidence> the deadline for which is 16th February. I hope as many of you as possible will take part – we can provide the link. The second is Dorset Council’s Local Plan, for which the deadline for responses is 15 March.

Finally, many of you will have heard, or read, about the “Bridport Community Railway & Renewal Corridor”, which has featured recently in the local press, and envisages a revitalised transport corridor between West Bay, Bridport and Maiden Newton. A number of us were invited to the zoom presentation and were very impressed. We have decided that WATAG will support the plan, and feel it works well with Dorset Council’s zero carbon aspirations.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you all for attending and your support, and in particular the WATAG Advisory Group for their help and for keeping me on the straight and narrow. We need ‘new blood’, so please come forward if you would like to join the Advisory Group.

Bob Driscoll 28 Jan 2021