

WEST DORSET WESTERN AREA TRANSPORT ACTION GROUP (WATAG)

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MINUTES OF WATAG AGM 21 – 27th JANUARY 2022 at 6.30 p.m.

Present (23): Stuart Banfield (Beaminster), Tim Christian (DCT), Cllr Kelvin Clayton (DC - Ward Member for Bridport), John Collingwood (Bridport), Bob Driscoll (WATAG chair), Sally Falkingham (Maiden Newton PC), Richard Gagg (Operations Manager - First Wessex), Ian Gray (WATAG), Nick Hurrell (SERUG), Julie Leah (Charmouth PC), David Marsh (Thorncombe PC), Gavin Maxwell (Bridport), Bob Owen (South Wessex CRP), Chris Noon (Char Valley PC), David Redgewell (South West Transport Network/RailFuture Severnside), Tony Reese (47 Friends), Anne Sankey (Lyme Regis), Philip Sankey (Lyme Forward), Billy Shearer (WATAG), Guz Tidy (Loders), John Vanderwolfe (Upper Marshwood Vale PC), Martin Warne (Bothenhampton&Walditch PC), Kevin Wheeler (First Bus).

Apologies : Colin Divall, Anna Dunn, Chris Everidge, Sheena Fox, Liz Haines, Anna Lovell, Simon Newport, Alan Williams.

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. With no physical meetings, it had been a quiet year. A donation of £50 was given to Yeovil Railway Centre for use of their Zoom facility. £189 was spent on producing printed timetables (offset with a £20 donation); other expenses (including the website) came to £68.05. During the year, WATAG received £250 from Dorset County Council for general running costs. The opening balance of £536.31 had decreased to £ 499.26 at the end of the year. A copy of the Accounts can be provided on request.
3. **Election of Officers:** Chairman. Bob Driscoll had indicated his wish to stand down as Chairman but was willing to remain on the Committee; Guz Tidy offered herself to take over (alongside the Treasurer role) and this was supported by John Collingwood and agreed by the meeting. The Chairman had reported that Anna Lovell, a founder member of WATAG, was retiring from the Committee on health grounds. He proposed that the rest of the present committee/advisory group should continue. Chair & Treasurer: Guz Tidy; Minute Secretary: Philip Sankey; Correspondence & Admin: John Collingwood; Newsletter and Website: Billy Shearer; other members: Colin Divall, Bob Driscoll; Ian Gray, 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.

The meeting was opened for general discussion.

Richard Gagg introduced himself. He had only been four days into the job but felt he had a good team. He acknowledged that current difficulties (COVID/driver shortage) meant they did not get everything right but they were doing their best. He believed in an “open door” policy so hoped people would contact him with complaints, suggestions etc. He would let WATAG have the contact details.

The Chairman read a statement from Simon Newport of Yellow Buses with comments on the current situation. The Chairman read a statement from Simon Newport of Yellow Buses with comments on the current situation.

”The current BRG funding scheme from the DfT is not working for Yellow Buses and a number of other medium sized bus businesses who have all requested more funding. Unfortunately, this does not look like it is forthcoming.

Our passenger numbers prior to and after Christmas have been around 65% of what we carried in 2019. Since the Christmas period we have continued to operate a Saturday service due to staff availability issues. This is around 83% of the 2019 mileage figure. From April onwards the plan is to run a Saturday service Monday to Friday with some other changes to get our mileage figure down to around 75% of 2019. This will match the best we think we can achieve with patronage levels and provide a sustainable stable base to move forward with in the future when passenger numbers start to grow again. We think that from April onwards over the next 12 months that passenger numbers will recover to maximum of 75% of the 2019 number. So many peoples travel patterns have now changed so fundamentally and the impact of Government warnings to avoid public transport for 2 years has a long lasting effect.

On a positive note our open top services seemed to bounce back quite well last year and with the Golden Tours operation we will be running 12 in the conurbation. We think this continues to be a growth area of the industry.”

Sally Falkingham asked when school buses would be reopened to the general public. They were the only services that Maiden Newton had. The separation of children was a government directive because of COVID. Richard hoped that that services that were open pre-pandemic would revert to that status, as there would be a need to maximize patronage (as Simon Newport had said). He would be in touch with the Dorset Travel team to introduce himself and would raise the matter with them. Other communities also mentioned were Thorncombe (David Marsh), Shipton Gorge (John Collingwood) and Lodors (Guz Tidy). DCT operates some PlusBus services but journeys need to be pre-planned and pre-booked.

Bob Owen gave an update on the South Wessex Community Rail Partnership. They have had to sort out setting it up as a CIC first but will hopefully be able to appoint an officer shortly. He mentioned station improvements at Weymouth and felt it would benefit from a Friends of Weymouth station. Space precludes a full interchange but the WATAG area would benefit if the X53 could stop at the station.

Nick Hurrell asked about Rail-Bus integration. The Group had worked on this for both Axminster and Dorchester/Weymouth. Crewkerne with a more limited bus service was more difficult to arrange. Bob Driscoll reminded us that “Lyme Regis” (via Axminster) and “Bridport” (via Dorchester or Weymouth) were rail destinations. Despite the label, tickets were valid for travel from the connecting station to any point on the X51/X53. They were also highlighting the inconvenience of the recent temporary timetable, the two hourly frequency west of Salisbury and the need to change trains at Salisbury for London. The withdrawal of catering from these longer services was seen as a further disincentive to using the trains.

Julie Leah described the situation at Charmouth. Those continuing their education at Exeter College found the bus very early (by the time it had gone via Lyme) and the only train left the students with time to hang around in Exeter. She also referred to the ideas that she and Belinda Bawden had been working on for a community bus in Lyme Regis/Charmouth. She hoped this would combat social isolation for those living in outlying areas or uphill from the village centre. Bob Driscoll said that Kelvin Clayton, a Green Party Dorset Councillor from Bridport who had been with us earlier, would be a useful ally.

BSIP – Dorset Council had referred to this in their report (attached and made available on Chat at the meeting). Tim Christian said we awaited government decisions. The pot had shrunk to £1.4 million. Would they spread it thinly to all authorities or select a smaller number of ‘projects’? David Redgewell said that Dorset (and Somerset) support local buses far less than a number of other South West authorities. He felt that WATAG should raise this at the Dorset Council budget meeting to argue for more (and gradually increasing) support from local funds. David Marsh felt that BSIP focussed on the urban centres and that there was little for rural areas. Chris Loder our MP and the East Devon MP both sit on the Transport Select Committee. It was noted that a recent issue of WATAG News had highlighted the differences in approach by Devon and Dorset, Perhaps other comparisons could feature in a future issue.

Guz Tidy asked anyone who wanted to come to a Committee Meeting before deciding to join us to contact her. David Marsh said he might be interested if it remained on Zoom. She thanked everyone for their attendance and participation.

The AGM concluded at 8.21 pm

Chair’s Report for the WATAG 2022 AGM (27 January 2022)

A very warm welcome to you all at this, our 21st AGM since the formation of WATAG. This is the second AGM held remotely, and we haven’t met in person since our AGM and GM in January 2020.

In spite of Covid-19 and the constraints imposed, these last 12 months have seen much activity – certainly in terms of correspondence and surveys/ questionnaires that we have been involved with, so... here goes:-

In March, Government announced its **National Bus Strategy**, with a paper entitled **Bus Back Better**, that required all Local Transport Authorities – in our case Dorset Council – to prepare a **Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)** by the end of October, and to bid for a share of a £3 billion pot of money. We gave Dorset Council (DC) our views, which they acknowledged, and there were 3 ‘stakeholder engagement’ meetings, where DC and its consultant – WSP – gave us presentations on their plans. DC’s BSIP bid was sent to DfT at the end of October. It can be seen on the DC website.

The next step in the process is the creation of an Enhanced Partnership with the main bus operators. This has started, and we attended a presentation by DC and WSP last week. The deadline for submitting an agreement is the end of April. We are assured that all the Dorset TAGs will be consulted throughout the process.

As far as RAIL matters are concerned, there have been a number of developments in the last 12 months. Both GWR and SWR have conducted surveys/ consultations, the GWR mainly dealing with ‘customer satisfaction’ and the SWR on its plans for the timetable commencing December 2022. Also, a new ‘Wessex Community Rail Partnership’ has started, basically covering the Heart of Wessex Railway between Westbury and Weymouth, which we hope to be involved with, where appropriate. Meanwhile, continuing with GWR, there was a major rail replacement programme that closed the line south of Yeovil for the whole of November. Sadly, the opportunity was not taken to provide additional capacity on the line, so it remains single between Yeovil and Maiden Newton, with no passing places.

One excellent piece of news was the opening of an 'access ramp' allowing wheelchair access to the northbound platform at Dorchester West. This opened in October, attended by our MP Chris Loder, and I wish to pay tribute to Sally Falkingham, of Maiden Newton Parish Council, who has fought tirelessly for this, since it was first mooted in 2008; she and her colleagues at Friends of Dorchester West station deserve thanks for their persistence.

SWR has recently introduced a temporary timetable on its Weymouth/ Dorchester, and Exeter routes, just on Mondays to Fridays. We had already raised concerns – prior to this announcement – about the withdrawal of on board catering on long distance services, and reducing the Weymouth service to hourly Monday to Friday. These further reductions are most alarming and we sincerely hope that temporary *means* temporary!

As far as BUS matters are concerned, First Wessex (FW) launched a brand new open-top double deck service between Bridport and Monkey World for the summer period. We understand it was popular (in good weather at least!) and we believe FW plans to operate it again this year. We do know that FW has major problems in driver retention and this has led to cancellations and reductions in the timetable. FW had planned to withdraw its Jurassic Coast Sunday service, when the winter schedule started in September. However, they decided to operate an X53 between Weymouth and Lyme Regis until Christmas, then withdraw. After discussion with our colleague Alan Williams, a reduced Sunday service of 2 trips each way between Weymouth and Lyme Regis is in operation from 23 January until at least the end of March, with Alan underwriting the cost. We must thank Alan for his generosity, and I urge everyone to use the service if they can.

Our 'bête noire', the Bridport/ Beaminster – Crewkerne/ Yeovil inter urban strategic route, continues to exercise more of our time than any other individual issue. I regret that, whenever we make a suggestion that might improve the current timetable, and make it more attractive, the stock response from Dorset Travel is that everything now depends on the success of its BSIP. I ask anyone who uses this route to write to their County Councillor and Parish Council to press the case for improvements.

Dorset Community Transport (DCT) and Bridport Town Council have relaunched the no. 7 Wednesday and Saturday 'Bridport Circular' with a revised timetable; this now includes the Wanderwell Estate in Bothenhampton, which hasn't had a conventional bus service since the 44 was withdrawn due to grounding issues with the new DDA compliant vehicle.

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While we have been unable to hold face-to-face meetings, we have been issuing the WATAG News, which is aimed as providing relevant and – we hope – useful information on public transport matters. I wish to thank Billy Shearer, who is also our Webmaster, for this. 7 editions have gone out so far, and your views and ideas are welcome.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you all for your support, and in particular the WATAG Advisory Group (AG) for their help and for keeping me on the straight and narrow. I would like to pay a special tribute to Anna Lovell, who is stepping down as an AG member, due to health issues. She was a founder member of WATAG and its predecessor, and has always given good counsel.

And finally, there's lots to do, and we would welcome fresh ideas – so please consider joining our AG!

Bob Driscoll 27 January 2022

Dorset Council Officer Report **Bus Service Improvement Plan**

The BSIP is now being considered by the Department for Transport, and we are expecting a funding announcement to be made in February.

In order to deliver the Bus Service Improvement Plan, a formal partnership must be in place between Dorset Council and local bus service operators. Through engagement with local bus operators, we have prepared a draft Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme in line with the Transport Act 2000 and any subsequent amendments. We have followed guidance issued by the Department for Transport to create a 'shell' agreement which sets out how we will work together with local bus operators and allows specific scheme details to be added once funding has been identified.

The Council has launched a consultation for statutory consultees and local interest groups on the draft Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme and has invited WATAG to provide a response. The consultation will run from Monday 24th January 2022 to Monday 21st February 2022.