

railfuture

Sevenside Branch Newsletter No. 42 Autumn 2019

Contributions to the Newsletter are welcome and should be sent to the Branch Secretary, Nigel Bray.
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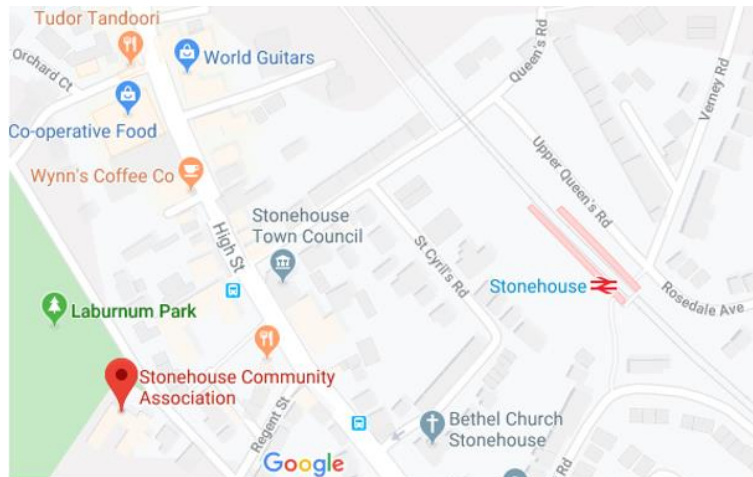
More information about campaigns is available on the Railfuture national website.

Branch meeting at Stonehouse, 16 November 2019

The next meeting will be on Saturday 16th November at 2 pm in Stonehouse Community Centre, Stonehouse GL10 2NS to promote and energise Railfuture Sevenside's campaign to reopen Stonehouse Bristol Road station.

The Community Centre is about five minutes' walk from the existing Stonehouse station on the Gloucester- Swindon line. Tea and coffee will be available at the meeting; there are also cafes in the High Street nearby.

If coming by train from the Gloucester direction, leave by the exit from Platform 1 and turn left, passing an interesting historical railway information



board. At the T-junction, turn left into Queens Road under the railway bridge. At the bottom of the road, turn left into High Street with the Town Council offices on your left. Cross to the other side of the road and walk along the footpath which is immediately to the right of the Wool Pack public house.

If arriving by train from the Stroud and Swindon direction, the quickest walking route is via the stepped path from the Gloucester end of Platform 2 to Queens Road, then left towards High Street as above.

To reach the Community Centre by car, turn from High Street into Regent Street and then take a concealed right turn immediately after a hedged wall into Laburnum Walk.

Unfortunately, rail passengers from the Bristol direction will have an indirect journey via Gloucester or Swindon. The same is true at present for Stroud and Stonehouse people trying to reach jobs, education and other attractions in the Greater Bristol conurbation. We need a Stonehouse Bristol Road station not only to meet these transport needs but also to serve the adjacent industrial estates and the Stroudwater Business Park. It could also encourage sustainable tourism from Bristol and beyond to the Canal Visitor Centres at Saul Junction and Stroud.

News from the Railfuture Severnside Chair

Branch Chair John Hassall wishes to thank all who helped with the Railfuture stand at the WSRA Steam Fayre, Norton Fitzwarren on 3rd and 4th August.

On 26th September he attended a talk by Railfuture President Christian Wolmar at Yeovil Railway Centre, arranged by Salisbury—Exeter Rail Users Group. Christian described the history and progress of Crossrail. Although criticising the project for being late and over budget, he paid tribute to those who worked on it.

Notes on Rail Delivery Group Bristol Rail Show, 10th July 2019

Chris Irwin, who is a Railfuture Vice-President but representing Travelwatch SouthWest, attended this event, as did Nigel Bray. The meeting of about 15 invited delegates and several Rail Delivery Group (RDG) officials, held at the Watershed, Bristol Harbourside, was chaired by John Thomas, RDG Director of Policy, who told the attendees that the rail industry in Britain employed about 240,000 people, either directly or in the supply chain and in 2016 moved about £30bn worth of goods. He said that, despite substantial growth in passenger numbers since privatisation in the mid-1990s, public trust in the product (train service quality, punctuality and customer care) and price was still low.

The meeting held a minute's silence for two track workers who were killed by a train near Port Talbot on 3rd July 2019.

After John Thomas and a colleague outlined the bullet points of RDG's response to the Williams Review, he invited suggestions for reform of the railway industry.

The need for change

Chris Irwin asked what the "significant change" RDG was seeking hoped to achieve. "How do we identify what passengers want? What I suspect they want is a seamless journey."

Geoff Brown (Cornwall Council) said passengers were not too concerned about having slightly faster journeys. They wanted to be sure that their train would arrive at their destination at the time quoted in the timetable.

More competition on InterCity routes

The meeting seemed indifferent to this idea. John Thomas considered that competition would benefit only a limited number of markets.

An independent organising body in charge of the industry.

One view was that such a body would never be completely free from political influence because the importance of rail to the economy required some degree of decision making by the Exchequer. In reply to a suggestion from John Thomas that Network Rail might assume this role, Nigel Bray said NR was remote from rail users and in his experience not overblessed with knowledge of railway geography.

Neil Butters (Bath & North East Somerset Council) considered that having to manage rail operations would be too great a cultural change for NR, which he said was an engineering organisation. Chris Irwin commented that the weakness of NR was that it did not have enough engineers and needed to have their expertise on its Board. He deplored the fact that the law did

not permit UK local authorities to bid for rail franchises, even though pro-rail authorities in the South West could make an excellent consortium for a new GW franchise.

Devolution of decision making for local train services

This was generally supported by those present and produced a number of suggestions. Bristol City Council from the meeting. Bristol City Council favoured both regional and sub-regional devolution but stressed the need to define the sub-regional area, e.g. would it just encompass WECA or extend to Gloucester and Taunton? Its delegate said that where devolution had failed in the past, it was because the devolved authority did not have fund raising powers but had instead to bid for funds from central Government.

Geoff Brown said Cornwall Council aimed to have an integrated public transport system in the county with one ticket covering both rail and bus elements of a journey.

Chris Irwin criticised the recently formed Western Gateway sub-regional transport board for producing a “mishmash of underdeveloped thinking” resulting in misplaced objectives prioritising Chippenham- Malmesbury (which had no railway) as a major strategic corridor in preference to Reading- Taunton and Swindon- Southampton. He said local politicians had very different horizons (the next election) from the very long planning processes for rail.

James White (West of England Combined Authority) said improvement of local rail services needed simpler processes for easier delivery than by the protracted GRIP procedures. He believed Combined Authorities needed to have precept raising powers to fund public transport enhancements; WECA currently did not have such powers.

Two delegates said that incentives for behavioural change to produce modal shift would be easier to deliver through a local rather than a national body. A local authority would have the commercial intelligence to identify routes where subsidising the cost of season tickets could encourage more people to travel by rail instead of driving.

Fares

Bristol City Council’s delegate said that many long-distance rail fares were uncompetitive with air. Despite the exhortations to people to fly less because of climate change, he doubted whether rail could attract many passengers from Bristol to Scotland while the price differential was so large.

Freight

John Thomas said he believed electrification was now back on the Government’s agenda. RDG would shortly publish a report on decarbonisation. Electric haulage of freight would be a challenge because wiring of freight-only branches at the origin and destination of the traffic was difficult to justify.

Neil Butters said freight would benefit from junction improvements such as grade separation.

Nigel Bray said Gloucestershire’s Local Transport Plan 3 had a “can’t do” attitude to rail freight. The County Council had removed safeguarding of the sidings at Ashchurch army base, the only active rail freight facility in the county, which it wanted to redevelop for housing. Any “independent organising body” for the rail industry would need to act against local authorities which discouraged rail freight.

Chris Irwin said the Government needed to use planning guidelines to encourage local authorities to keep rail freight facilities. He understood that building materials for HS2 were likely to be conveyed by 200 lorries a day from South Wales to the former cement works at Westbury; they might even be forwarded to the HS2 work sites by road. He believed such an outcome represented a failure by both Government and the rail industry. DB Cargo was closing its traincrew depot at Westbury after losing the Mendip stone contract to another operator, which would need to recruit drivers. This lack of continuity was bad for the industry.

Report of Railfuture National Conference, 21st September 2019

Entitled *Every Passenger Matters*, the conference was organised by Railfuture Directors Wendy Thorne and William Whiting. It was held at St. Michael's Church Centre, near Bristol Parkway station. In the Chair was Stephen Brookes MBE, Rail Sector Champion for the Minister for Disabled People.

GWR was represented by Matt Barnes, one of its Regional Development Managers. He said his brief was to enhance the passenger experience at stations. In one recent four-weekly period, GWR had dealt with 15,000 Assisted Travel bookings. Assistance could even be booked for unstaffed stations. He added that the Office of Rail had recently required all TOCs to publish an Assisted Travel Policy.

Customer surveys had identified an 85 % satisfaction rate with GWR Assisted Travel but he believed that people with "hidden disabilities" such as anxiety were among the 15 % who were dissatisfied. Platform changes sometimes created conflict with staff from people with hidden disabilities but GWR hoped to improve staff awareness through training.

The next GWR stations to receive step free access between platforms would be Theale, Weston-super-Mare, St. Erth and Cheltenham. (*The last mentioned already has ramped access but lifts will be added- Ed.*) In some other cases, the Harrington hump, pioneered at the Cumbrian station of that name, might be of more benefit than a lift, especially at small, one platform stations. GWR's Minor Works programme has made small improvements to access such as repairing footbridge treads. Mobile On-Train Assistance staff would be deployed to assist passengers at unstaffed stations.

GWR was involved in Network Rail's Dawlish Sea Wall project and hoped to get improvements such as a waiting room on the exposed down platform at the station. Safer walking routes to and from stations were needed, eg at Cheltenham, where passengers leaving from the main exit currently had to walk through a busy taxi rank. At Gloucester a new exit from Platform 4 had been opened in 2018 giving direct access between the station and Gloucestershire Royal Hospital. Hitherto the shortest route between station and hospital had been via a dingy subway with steps; this would itself be widened with step free access when the station forecourt is redeveloped in 2020.

The downside entrance at Weston-super-Mare had been closed in 2015 because of anti-social behaviour but was now accessible following the introduction of a ticket gateline. Orange lettering on station information screens was being replaced with white on a black background as more friendly to visually impaired people.

I asked Matt Barnes whether GWR would support the installation of bus departure screens at Gloucester station and train departure screens at the bus station. He replied that he would forward the suggestion to Dan Okey, the relevant Regional Manager but saw no technical

obstacle because a café close to Cheltenham station already had a train departure screen. My question was prompted by Philip Colls, who has written to the GWR Station Manager at Gloucester and the Operations Manager of Stagecoach West.

Richard Gibson, Communications Manager, Cross Country Trains, which sponsored the Conference, said his TOC offered Journey Care, the equivalent of GWR's Assisted Travel. Journey Care could be booked up to 20.00 on the day before travel and was not only for disabled people but also for mothers with prams, older people with heavy luggage etc.

He and Lorna Brown-Owens, Access and Inclusion Manager, Network Rail, answered a number of questions from the audience. In reply to a call for more capacity on XC services, Mr. Gibson said this needed to be addressed to the politicians. "TOCs cannot dictate national transport policy." Asked why some 125 mph trains had been withdrawn and were stored in sidings, he said that they were not fully accessible.

Chris Brown, from Railfuture Lincolnshire Branch, said Lincoln station was due to have a new footbridge in connection with a transport hub but Network Rail had insisted that the lift had to be capable of withstanding a 70mph collision from trains entering two bay platforms nearby. He pointed out that both bays had a speed limit of 15 mph and that a train running at 70 mph would have derailed long before it reached the buffers. Lorna Brown-Owens replied that there must have been a good reason for a project to have been "value-managed out."

In the afternoon session, Jon Harris, Integrated Transport and Accessibility Manager, West Midlands Trains (WMT), described the Station Neighbours scheme he had developed when working with Gloucestershire County Council a few years ago. The idea was to make comfortable venues available to rail passengers outside station staffing hours. One such was the Imperial Hotel, opposite the main entrance to Stroud station. WMT was encouraging Community Transport providers to see rail passengers as a market for their services, e.g. by improving unloading bays for the minibuses at stations.

David Smith asked why Stroud station still lacked step-free access between the platforms. Jon Harris replied, "It is a Listed building, so a standard Network Rail footbridge would not be suitable. Also, there was not enough footfall at the time of bidding (for Access for All funding)." He added that it might be worth raising Equalities issues, e.g. the proximity of sheltered housing, which could help the case.

Cecil Sanderson suggested more use be made of shared taxis instead of leaving a car all day in a station car park. Mr. Harris replied that London Northwestern Railway (a division of WMT) planned to pilot a scheme at Tring, where onward public transport from the station was poor.

Group workshop sessions

The final part of the Conference consisted of group workshop sessions to suggest priorities for improvements, issues not already mentioned and barriers to travel by rail.

I was in the Blue group, which considered that longer and more frequent trains would resolve many of the problems of accessibility because disabled persons are the worst affected by train shortages and shortfalls in capacity. The group also called for more "whole system thinking" and accurate, more timely information.

Not covered by the main part of the Conference but identified by the Blue group was the sharing of consistent good practice; and bad anomalies whereby disabled passengers boarding at a

station with a stepped footbridge may have to double back a considerable distance on the return journey, e.g. Pewsey passengers having to return via Reading or Westbury to access the opposite platform. Also, staff needed to be empowered to make decisions in the best interest of passengers.

Barriers to travelling by train for mobility-impaired people included a perception by some people of the railway as a hostile environment and a lack of awareness of what the industry could offer in terms of assistance. Worry about whether a ticket would be valid, particularly in Penalty Fares areas, tended to increase negative impressions, as would concerns about personal safety, especially at night. Other workshop groups cited bus substitution and the gap between trains and platforms as barriers to travel.

Stephen Brookes closed the Conference by saying that the rail industry should provide what passengers want, not just what the industry wanted to provide.

Slides from the speakers can be viewed at <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/conferences/>.

Nigel Bray

News from Pewsey Vale Rail User Group

Dawn Wilson, Chair of PVRUG, which is affiliated to Railfuture, recently wrote to our Branch Chair John Hassall to outline the Group's aims, which include:

- Lobbying for a late evening service for Pewsey allowing for connections from the north in a day and a theatre visit of an evening. This could be trialled on Fridays and Saturdays to start.
- Better connections to Bath and Bristol for those working there to arrive by 9 am and leave around 6 pm. Also a late service for concerts and more daytime trains for shoppers, connecting via Westbury if necessary.
- Pushing for implementation of a two-hourly service, moving to an hourly service, to also add value to the Great Way West tour route.
- More bicycle spaces at Pewsey station.

“We have been running for one year and work closely with our neighbours at Great Bedwyn, with TransWilts and Graham Ellis. So far, we have had a meeting with Network Rail re the new December timetable and written to our Unitary Council about their failure to acknowledge Pewsey and Bedwyn as commuter stations in their last Core Strategy document. We are now lobbying Wiltshire Council for a demand survey to inform GWR to improve commuter services west from Pewsey”, she said.

Next Railfuture Severnside newsletter will be number 43 in New Year 2020.

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