

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Strategic Transport Group held
at County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Wednesday, 5th February, 2020 at 10.00
am

PRESENT: County Councillor D. Dovey (Chairman)

County Councillors: S. Woodhouse

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Wendy Barnard	Democratic Services Officer
Roger Hoggins	Head of Service - Strategic Projects (Fixed Term)
Richard Cope	Passenger Transport Unit Manager
Christian Schmidt	Transport Planning and Policy Officer
Mark Hand	Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways and Flood

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Grahame Nelmes	Abergavenny Action 50 Plus
Dick Cole	Abergavenny Civic Society
Phil Inskip	Severn Tunnel Action Group (STAG)
Cllr. Patrick Molyneux	Gloucester CC and Forest of Dean DC
Brian Mahony	Friends of 65 Bus
Wendy Jackson	Forest Economic Partnership
Richard Lemon	Transition Chepstow

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:

Ted Hand	Magor Action Group on Rail (MAGOR)
Rosemary Corcoran	Friends of the 65 Bus
David Flint	Severn Tunnel Action Group (STAG)
Paul Turner	Magor Action Group on Rail (MAGOR)
County Councillor A. Easson	

1. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

2. Bus Services in Monmouthshire:

a) Friends of the 65 Bus - Presentation

The Strategic Transport Group received a presentation from Brian Mahony, Friends of the 65 Bus, to share the Group's experiences that culminated in the reinstatement of the 65 Bus service. The Chair acknowledged the work and commitment of the team. The presentation slides were circulated. following the meeting. Following the presentation, questions and comments were invited:

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A Group member asked if there was evidence of growth since the reinstatement of the service. Whilst there is no specific evidence available, new ticketing machines have been installed that will enable passenger data to be shared. Anecdotally, it is believed that passenger numbers have increased, but there is always room for improvement; if timetabling issues can be resolved, there will be better opportunity for growth.

A question was asked about the costs and subsidies; checking if this is at the expense of other services. It was explained that the service costs £100,000 per year. If it was withdrawn, it would cost £75,000 to secure alternative services for school contracts and the Grassroutes service. The net cost therefore is £25,000 (equivalent to £500 per week).

The Passenger Transport Unit Manager confirmed that the new bus was purchased via a Welsh Government grant (to encourage and develop rural/community bus services). The new bus specification is Low Emissions and offers a nicer passenger experience. It was confirmed that there has been passenger growth noting that the more passengers use the service the less subsidy is needed. The Group was reminded that the service is “not for profit” and solely to sustain its own operating costs. It is hoped to carry out more marketing work with the Friends of the 65 Bus. A bid for infrastructure in the next financial year, if successful, will enable provision of improved timetable cases and bus shelters.

A Group Member also welcomed the success of the 65 Bus noting that such services need to be sustainable, of good frequency, relevant to citizens’ transport needs and reliable. It was suggested that an Uber-type App could eventually replace paper timetables.

A question was asked about services for tourists and walkers, noting that there are reduced services on weekends (Half service on Saturdays and no service on Sundays). The need to connect with trains in Chepstow was also highlighted. It was responded that MCC is currently commissioning a review of all aspects of public transport in the county to better understand issues. Work is also in progress with Transport for Wales on an app that will allow passengers to book tickets as the bus is in motion. The Facebook Group is an effective means of distributing information but more members need to join. Regarding future use of apps, it was pointed out that there is poor mobile phone/4G signal along the Wye Valley so paper timetables are still of great use.

It was queried if the service would ever be put out to tender, and suggested that services in other similar areas are not as reliable when run by commercial operators and in much more competitive circumstances. It was confirmed that the 65 service was offered for tender with only one, very expensive tender submitted. It was clear that MCC could operate the service at less cost.

The Head of Service, Strategic Projects (Fixed Term) explained that the example of the 65 Bus will be used as part of the study commissioned to look into public bus services in the county especially in the context of the Council’s priority to improve rural public bus services, linked to Welsh Government’s priority to reduce car use. It was acknowledged that there are interchange issue with buses, and buses/trains. The Group was reminded that when changes are made there are always consequences affecting other services.

Information was provided about a planned Wye Valley study to promote public transport and road safety in villages.

b) Withdrawal of the Severn Express

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It was confirmed that the Severn Express is still running with an added peak-time morning journey from Chepstow, arriving in Bristol City Centre at 08:45. The Severn Express will no longer serve Cribbs Causeway or Aust, but will instead run direct from Chepstow and Bulwark to Bristol via M48, M4 and M32.

A new hourly service (X14) will connect Chepstow and Cribbs Causeway.

- c) National Express Coach Services: how it fits with public transport generally and comment on the withdrawal of services from Monmouth

The Officer noted that National Express (NE) coach/Megabus services provide links to other areas, airports and cities. The Newport hub is well used. The withdrawal of the Monmouth NE service is due to insufficient usage. The Officer is prepared to speak to NE but felt it was unlikely they will reinstate the Monmouth stop. This point will be picked up in the public transport review. It was commented that a number of residents used the service to get to Birmingham so this is a significant loss for the town. Local bus timetables need to be looked at as ongoing connections to other towns are being missed.

Concern was expressed that NE services from Chepstow could be jeopardised due to traffic congestion in the town.

- d) X3 service changes

Concern was expressed that the 7.25am X3 has been removed from the timetable. The Officer was unaware of the change and it was agreed to check with Stagecoach. Examples of the impact included Coleg Gwent students not able to get to classes on time and employees not able to get to work. It was considered unacceptable that the last bus back to Abergavenny from Cwmbran is 4.25pm.

It was suggested that Stagecoach could be invited to present their approach to a future meeting.

- e) Proposed MCC Bus Strategy

A new Bus strategy is being written that will include data from the commissioned public transport study.

3. Transport Grants

The Transport Projects and Programmes Manager explained how grants are allocated by Welsh Government for Active Travel. The County will receive core allocation of £235,000 for scheme development and smaller schemes which can be spent across key settlements.

Additionally, the authority is entitled to submit bids for 3 more Active Travel schemes. It is proposed to submit bids for packages of schemes relating to:

- Caldicot Town
- Monmouth Town
- Usk Town Centre

With regard to the Local Transport Fund Grant, bids have been invited for existing schemes plus one new scheme. A continuing scheme is Monmouth/Wye Bridge Junction (3rd Lane), for which the materials were bought and are in storage then no funding was awarded for this financial year. Consequently, a further bid will be submitted. Funding is also sought to contribute towards the Chepstow Transport Study.

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Ultra Low Emissions Fund where bids are invited for Electric vehicles (the detail is non-specific, and unclear if it includes charging points) by 14th February 2020 which may be difficult to achieve. The fund used to purchase the 65 Bus is not now available unfortunately.

The Cardiff City Region Transport Authority is submitting bids to the Metro Plus Programme to extend the benefits of the Metro to areas not benefitting from the rail franchise.

MCC has submitted a bid for Severn Tunnel Junction (STJ) Station upgrade to include funding to deliver the car park extension, footbridge extension, safer access routes and better passenger facilities. Additionally, MCC will be proceeding with the missing elements of the footpath between Undy and Rogiet to also link with the STJ project.

Information was provided that there will be a Metro Phase 2, and bids will be submitted as follows, and in priority order:

- Further development of Magor Walkway Station;
- Abergavenny Station Interchange and Improvements;
- Chepstow Station Interchange and Improvements;
- Chepstow – Newport Bus Corridor ,
- Chepstow, Monmouth and Abergavenny Bus Corridor

Bid outcomes should be available by 31st March 2020. It is likely that there will be part funding awarded and decisions on priorities may have to be considered in due course.

There is also a regional grant for supporting bus services and the enhancement of community transport for all councils; Monmouthshire CC is the lead authority.

More information will be provided when available. Questions were asked as follows:

- It was asked if there was any scope to add a cross border element to Active Travel bids referencing the possibility of opening the Tidenham Tunnel to Chepstow (some match funding for a cross border project may be available). It was explained that Active Travel bids are limited to three and currently Chepstow is outside of the three projects identified. Whilst it was recognised that the core allocation is quite committed, a note was made of the idea and also it was suggested that this could be added into the Chepstow Road Study engagement process.
- An update was requested on the proposed Llanfoist Bridge. Also, a request was made to consider arrangements to enable students to cycle safely to the redeveloped King Henry VIII School, and to encourage residents generally to use Active Travel routes. Active Travel routes for the new school will be funded from core allocation. The authority is seeking funding for further development work. It was noted that a new Active Travel Officer has been appointed. It was explained that the integrated maps will have to be reviewed this year. Regarding Llanfoist Bridge, it was confirmed that discussions are still in progress with Natural Resources Wales.
- There was no update on the towpath at Gilwern; this query will be passed to the Active Travel Officer.
- A question was asked about Magor Walkway Station, and the potential to alleviate the parking situation in Rogiet by 30% as passengers would be able to walk to the station. It was reported that it has been difficult to gain support from Welsh Government for the Grip 3 study and queried if there are other avenues for match funding. It was confirmed that under the Metro Phase 2, Magor Station is the main scheme but partners are needed to work with us. Network Rail is conducting a Metro enhancement framework study and the authority

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has made clear that Magor station is a key project to consider. If the project is shortlisted, development funding would be committed.

- A further comment was made about the need to extend the car park at STJ as there are significant problems with parking not least at the School. The authority is trying to deliver a 150 space car park. Grand Union Trains could deliver this scheme but it will also be added to Metro enhancement framework study.
- The Officer clarified that the £235,000 for Active Travel is for all Monmouthshire and is core allocation (guaranteed for scheme development and small schemes). This amount is separate from schemes that are for submission of bids.

4. Rail Stakeholder Engagement

The Chair welcomed Nichole Sarra, Stakeholder Manager (Borders), Transport for Wales (TfW) who explained that there are now 5 Stakeholder Managers with the role of encouraging stakeholder engagement and then providing feedback to the planners. The following points were made:

- December timetable change: A timetable workshop with stakeholders was held in November. This was followed by a report in January. Transport for Wales has committed to run workshops twice yearly. The next one will be in mid-March 2020 with a view to better connectivity and services.
- Rolling stock: the majority of Class 170 trains are now in service.
- Stations: A programme of deep cleaning is in progress due to be completed by the end of March. The Station Improvement Plan for 2020 and 2021 is expected. Regarding the Grand Union Train proposal (possible start in May 2021) it was asked if TfW trains can connect into/out of the London trains at Severn Tunnel Junction in May 2021. Currently there are one and 2 hour gaps; Grand Union will have 2 hour gaps. There will be a problem in connections due to a clash at Cheltenham with the existing GWR service. This change would save 50-100 cars coming down from Lydney. These points will be passed back to the train planning team.

In relation to train/bus connections at Chepstow, TfW attended Transition Chepstow to hear the issues and it was acknowledged that a multi modal approach is necessary. TfW is committed to looking at Chepstow train services to provide an hourly service by 2022 with improved connectivity. It was suggested that TfW runs the bus and train services; this point will be fed back.

A Member raised the issue of the need for better connections from Lydney to Bristol. A third river crossing between Lydney and Sharpness was mooted to provide a rail link to Bristol and London.

The accessibility problems with Abergavenny Station were discussed, noting that the delaying factor is the signals. Network Rail, DfT and TfW provide assurances that the scheme is progressing but the action group request timescales. It was explained that significant investment is planned for the station and work has started on cycle storage, Access for All design and the signal siting. Nichole agreed to provide an update on timescales at the next meeting (or earlier, if the information is available).

A question was raised about the potential for easement to the routing guide. If passengers are travelling from Caldicot to Bristol they can go into Newport and double back to Bristol Parkway to Bristol Templemeads. Passengers are not allowed to double back from Lydney via Gloucester or Cheltenham to Bristol to provide the quickest service to Bristol. By allowing this,

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would add 13 additional services a day between Lydney and Bristol with no additional trains, services or stops. The Member was asked to forward the relevant information to Nichole.

A point was raised about comparative costings, as people in rural areas are having to pay much higher fares quoting the £33 fare from Abergavenny to Ystrad Mynach and the £11 fare from Newport to Ystrad Mynach. Abergavenny also has the greatest increase in people using the trains. It was responded that it is quite complex with historic detail. TfW is aware of the issue.

Reference was made to pocket timetable (No.3). Passengers travelling from Fishguard, Milford Haven and Pembroke are shown connections to London and Bristol.

Travellers from Lydney, Chepstow and Caldicot are only shown the connections to London and not Bristol. It was requested that the connections are added to the timetable as described.

Phil Inskip presented information on local/national station usage. This is good information when campaigning for improvements. Historical information was provided that the Department for Transport has not used the statistics when arranging the last two franchises and to determine the level of trains; concentrating on growth and the perception of decline. The Arriva franchise was let on 0% growth but, in actuality, there had been 7 years growth. Passenger usage of the Chepstow line had grown by 130%. This presented a problem for Welsh Government because the funding was based on 0% growth so the block grant had to be used for additional train services. 54 additional trains have been funded this way to meet increased demand. Councils have also equally invested including two councils that bought their own trains where Welsh Government pay for their operation.

The Chepstow line was not improved because it was not situated where a council had funded rail improvements. Secondly, as it was not in the convergence zone, it was not eligible for EU match funding. On all other lines, the number of trains have increased. The Arriva franchise reduced the number of trains without being in breach of the franchise. Regarding the GWR franchise, the DfT did a study about sustainable railways and growth. Growth was thought to be 75% but in 2020 it is 120%. Three parts of the country where growth is expected to be highest is between Peterborough and Doncaster, Manchester and Liverpool and STJ and Bristol. Despite being identified as one of the top lines for growth, the GWR franchise saw STJ trains to Bristol halved regardless of years of growth and the DfT's own report. The official report of privatisation gave the reason that the support of £1.65billion to BR in 2002 would reduce to £1billion but by 2006 was increased to £5.4billion. When the two S. Wales franchises were let, the Treasury and DfT were in financial difficulties so growth figures were ignored.

The Chair thanked Phil Inskip for providing the Group with this explanation recognising his invaluable contribution for future strategy.

5. Local Issues

The Head of Service, Strategic Projects (Fixed Term) provided an update on the Chepstow Transport Study, noting that the study is a cross border collaborative project. Welsh Transport Appraisal Guidance (WelTAG) Stage 1 is complete and Arup has been commissioned to undertake WelTAG Stage 2. An initial meeting has been held. Many recommendations arose from WelTAG 1; the three main ones being a By-Pass, Improvements to public transport and a new junction to the M48.

Some funding has been received, or is expected, from Welsh Government, Welsh Office and Gloucestershire CC. The study has been funded (£275,000) and Monmouthshire CC is

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underwriting part of it. It is anticipated that funding will be required for additional study work as the study progresses. There is a 12 month timescale.

Other studies include:

- Welsh Government has commissioned a study on High Beech Roundabout in Chepstow this financial year with a purpose of reducing traffic congestion.
- A Chepstow/Newport Corridor study has been commissioned by Welsh Government and Transport for Wales to look at transport issues and improvements in the South Monmouthshire / Newport area.
- Highways England has commissioned a study to look at the 2 road crossings of the Severn.
- South East Wales Transport Commission has organised a study arising from the cancellation of the M4 Black Route.

The following matters were raised by the North Monmouthshire Area Committee:

- Inappropriate parking at Nevill Hall Hospital: It was explained that there is a problem with the buses travelling through the congested hospital circular route with an example given of a bus being stuck for an hour due to obstructing cars. An update was provided that a meeting is arranged with Officers, Stagecoach and the Health Board.
- Health and Safety issues for track workers relating to open flush toilets on the trains: The Transport for Wales (TfW) representative was asked to feed this information back.
- New trains will not include toilet provision: The Transport for Wales (TfW) representative was asked to feed this information back.
- Parking issues at Abergavenny Railway Station: The Transport for Wales representative confirmed that these issues are already identified and highly rated for improvement.
- Removal of the early morning X3 bus service: This matter was raised earlier in the meeting.
- Bus routes in Llanellen not being gritted: This matter has been passed to the relevant officer.
- Ongoing issue regarding lack of a bus stop at Park Road in Abergavenny to replace the Lower Frogmore Street Bus Stop removed as part of the now completed pedestrianisation scheme. It was reported that the design has been approved by Welsh Government. It was commented that this project needs to be completed as early as possible. No timescales are available, but a decision on funding is expected by April. Additionally, the recommissioning of the Penypound bus stop should be resolved soon.

Regarding reconfiguration of Strategic Transport Group meetings, feedback was provided from the North Monmouthshire Area Committee where it was suggested that there could be sub groups to focus on local areas e.g. North and South of the County. It was suggested that a separate meeting with the Chair, Councillor Woodhouse and the Head of Service, Strategic Projects (Fixed Term) could be arranged to discuss options.

6. Forward Work Plan

- Update on GovTech
- Consultation on the Chepstow Study (WeITAG Stage 2)
- Reconfiguration of meetings
- Wye Valley Road condition: The Head of Service, Strategic Projects (Fixed Term) provided an update that resurfacing work is scheduled for this year. More details will be sought and reported back in due course.

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- Renewal of speed safety signs at Larkfield to the motorway roundabout. Welsh Government will be looking the area as part of the High Beech Roundabout study
- Bus station infrastructure in Monmouth
- Monmouth town centre: Concern was expressed that there is a proper plan for diversion of bus services when the planned work starts.

7. To confirm the notes of the previous meeting held on 11th September 2019

The notes of the previous meeting were confirmed as a true record.

8. The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 29th April 2020

The meeting ended at 12.45 pm