

TransWilts Community Rail Partnership

Stakeholder Update – 24th May 2014

contact details at end of document



Introduction

The TransWilts Community Rail Partnership - with key community, business, rail industry, local government and LEP partners was formed in 2010, formalized in 2013, and admitted as an ACoRP member in April 2014. "The TransWilts Community Rail Partnership (TWCRP) aims to achieve positive, sustainable and imaginative development of the TransWilts (Swindon to Salisbury) railway in ways which also benefit the places it serves, including enhancement of services to meet the current and future travel requirements of those places" - from constitution.

Historic service and changes

With the aid of an LSTF (Local Sustainable Transport Fund) grant from the Department for Transport, Wiltshire Council have contracted First Great Western to run an improved service on the Swindon to Westbury section of the line. The section from Chippenham to Trowbridge, serving the town of Melksham (population around 24,000) previously had just 2 trains a day - southbound at 06:29 and 19:01 and northbound at 07:10 and 19:40, which were scarcely used due to the lack of commute opportunities / long day they imposed on passengers.

The new service, with the previous trains enhanced through the peak hours, daytime, and early evening is now fit for the purpose of providing passenger transport along the north - south corridor in Wiltshire which links the five largest urban population centres of Swindon, Chippenham, Melksham, Trowbridge and (with a change at Westbury on most services) Salisbury.

Partnership arrangements and early results

It's been the Community Rail Partnership's role to help liaise requirements, inform potential service users, provide support especially for newcomers to rail, monitor service use and passenger flows prior to and after the changes and feed back and support in both directions on an immediate and longer term basis. First Great Western, Wiltshire Council and the community have been working very positively together, taking a "can do" attitude to help towards making the service a success.

Prior to the improvements of December 2013, between 50 and 60 passenger

journeys per day were being made on the Chippenham - Trowbridge section per day, and a target of 45,000 journeys was set for the first year of the new service with a target of 20 passenger journeys per train (320 per day) once a steady state was reached in year 2 or 3. By February 2014 it was clear that the target was likely to be exceeded, and at the time of writing (May 2014) journey numbers are running at around 2700 per week (385 per day) - that's over 24 passenger journeys per train, and around 110,000 journeys per year allowing for some seasonal variation. All this achieved with a single extra carriage running one extra (peak) commuter round trip to Swindon and five more off peak round trips. It should be noted that the existing trains are also loading much better, with up to 76 passengers into Swindon on the 07:04 from Westbury, many returning south on the new 17:36 which is already regularly "standing room only".

New survey data indicates that 32% of current users are new trips, with substantial numbers in new jobs or having moved house (or both!). 10% are mode change from car, 18% diversions from the longer old journey with a change via Bath. 8% were already TransWilts users, 4% transferred from bus. We expect to see the proportion of new trips and mode change increase as those are flows which naturally take longer to adopt the newly available service - but the total of 42% already making a significant sustainable and economic step is an excellent interim result; note that the figures do not add up to 100% as around a quarter of surveyees did not complete this question or provided complex answers.

Wiltshire Council under LSTF - a key partnership member - has also provided enhanced information via the Connecting Wiltshire brand / web site, and has provided travel planners to assist both individuals and businesses in the key towns of Salisbury, Chippenham, Trowbridge and Bradford-on-Avon with journey planning. Bus / Rail projects such as the Melksham Rail Link service means that up to 40% of commuters joining the train at Melksham station in the morning have arrived at the station by bus, and arrangements have been made for the late bus from Chippenham station to Melksham and Trowbridge to accept rail tickets, providing a final "safety net" service home at the end of the day for delayed commuters ... at the same time providing additional traffic for a subsidised bus service which has had plenty of available space. Improvements at stations, such as parking and safety markings (and a bus stop) at Melksham and electric car charging points at other stations help to encourage traffic too.

First Great Western have provided additional information boards (under the lights, so readable at night!) at Melksham and poster information all along the line. A to Z departure sheets at most stations reflect the new services, with a new poster at Melksham this month. As far away as London, trains to Melksham are now shown on the A to Z. Community Rail posters, showing the layout of the lines in the county and suggesting leisure opportunities were designed by local community members, and printed and posted by First Great Western. FGW designed a launch

leaflet and distributed it widely, and have also printed line brochures in the last weeks. These are being distributed, along with timetable information, to most households in Melksham and many in target areas in other towns, and there is repetitive feedback that these distributions are persuading people to use the train.

A new (larger, lit) waiting shelter at Melksham, with space for a ticket vending machine, are very welcome and help make the station (which isn't far on foot from the town, but is in the back on an industrial estate) more customer friendly.

Train crews and other operations staff are very positive in their approach and support of the new service, almost without exception. They very clearly take a pride in the service and they want it to flourish though providing customers with an excellent experience and full information. FGW staff who interact with the community members of the CRP also take time to listen, inform, help, and take ideas forward, and to work with the CRP in resolving issues raised by passengers and wannabe passengers.

Ongoing partnership

We're now at the very busiest time in promoting the TransWilts service and assisting with the new traffic the new service and promotion bring. With major updates by First Great Western and Wiltshire Council at Melksham station, the Community Rail Partnership has not yet got deeply involved with infill station activities there due to wanting to channel resources onto service, and waiting to see what infills are needed. At Swindon, we're looking towards working with / in the area currently known as the sensory garden, and at Chippenham to getting the tourist information boards brought back into use - both picking up older community projects from before the TransWilts CRP days that now need some tender loving care, and which can be used to help lever / promote / inform rail passengers including main line ones who we would like to be informed about our community service. Both Trowbridge and Westbury are also served by the Heart of Wessex CRP, and they are 'passed masters' at station improvement and adoption; the TransWilts CRP would very much be happy to assist them with future projects where appropriate, but we do not intend to take the lead except on issues there which are TransWilts service specific.

Looking to the future

Looking ahead, the CRP elements are all working well together and we have further marketing and monitoring planned over the next six months. We attended our first ACoRP meeting recently, and have returned with ideas that we can adopt (with local tailoring) on our service; it's really useful for us to learn from others in this way. We also have feedback from a community survey of the effectiveness

of our marketing to help us tune for the future.

A request from First Great Western to formalize our relationship with them (as they're asking all CRPs in the area to do) is welcome - we are happy with the extra responsibilities it puts on us, and it provides for a review of what we're doing and why we're doing it to ensure best use of resources - both time and money.

ACoRP runs annual awards for best practise in community rail, with projects completed by June judged over the summer. The CRP acknowledges the usefulness of these awards for encouragement, marketing, and review. But it's too early for us to apply for (m)any this year, as most of our projects are ongoing.

The consultation for the 2015 - 2020 franchise award for the Great Western area is currently running, and CRP members are active in discussion of inputs to that. With a service that has grown much better than forecast, it needs to be retained at least at the current level as a bare minimum, and that beyond the end of the three year LSTF / Wiltshire Council funding, using the mechanism planned from the start for this eventuality and laid down in the appendix to the consultation. Come electrification of the line through Swindon and Chippenham, recasting of services via Westbury on the London to Devon and Cornwall line, and probable cascading of rolling stock, much will change and our inputs will look forward to the grasping of opportunities at that time to improve the service to meet the higher than expected passenger flows, and to sort out timing, connectional and other issues which already remain for largely historic reasons on and onto the Westbury to Salisbury section, and on Saturday and Sunday afternoons / evenings between Swindon and Westbury.

Conclusion

The TransWilts Community Rail Partnership has made an excellent start on promoting and supporting the useful new service on the Swindon to Westbury railway via Chippenham, Melksham and Trowbridge for the benefit of residents and businesses of the area, and of visitors to the area. Wiltshire Council, First Great Western and the community groups and individuals involved are all working well together, and measuring results and the effectiveness of individual elements to ensure resolution of issues and promote further cost effective growth over the next six years.

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