

WATAG AGM 30 January 2026 - Speaker notes to accompany presentation

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We get quite a bit of feedback on public transport services in Dorset – not all of it good... Trains running late, not enough buses, poor evening transport, poor connections between different bus routes, missed train connections. In Britain, we have a tradition that we love to complain about Public Transport – but when we look at West Dorset, I think we have a reason to Public Transport here isn't great.

The feeling is similar amongst the other Transport Action Groups in Dorset too. So, a couple of months ago WATAG formed a team to look at what could be better and how we might do something to improve local transport.

We don't profess to have all the answers - but what is obvious is that what we have in this part of Dorset is poor – certainly much worse than our neighbours in Devon. So the following is our current thinking and sets out some simple goals. It's the start of a programme to lobby much more strongly for a better transport structure right across West Dorset. But to make progress we need public support...

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Our objectives are simple: We need to **Make Public Transport more attractive** and we need to **Reduce reliance on private cars** – If we can make Public Transport better then perhaps people may not have to rely on their cars to the extent that they have to today.

And we need to ensure that we get your views on what you want. So, after today we want to hear from you on what you want – and what you think of our strategy.

Our initial thinking has only focused on the **key transport routes** – we need to get that agreed first and then look at how the more rural communities are served. So we need to:

- Agree minimum frequencies on Key Routes – most likely a regular hourly or even half hourly pattern
- We want longer operating hours - early morning right through to mid /late evening
- We'd like to see Councils/Bus Operators developing Transport "hubs" which will offer better local connectivity (local buses, cycle paths, etc)
- We need better integration with Rail timetables – they're not bad at Axminster and Dorchester South stations but pretty much non-existent at Dorchester West and especially at Crewkerne which really should offer much better connections.

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But before we talk about our thoughts on what we want, Let's look at where we are now...

Bus

- Councils/Bus Operators – actually do very little themselves to promote services
- Timetables aren't easy to access – unless you actually go to some of the bus stops –generally, you need to go online to find out times. Printed timetables are available at the Bridport Tourist Office – but they're provided by ourselves, WATAG, with the financial support of a generous local resident. Neither the Council nor Bus Operators seem interested in producing them.
- Usage - Very little data available. Both the Council and the Bus Operators refuse to provide data on how many people use the buses. That doesn't seem right.... We get great data from the Rail companies, we know exactly how many passengers use each station, so why won't the bus operators provide something similar? If we had better data, we could work with the operators to target certain routes, to increase bus usage.

Train

- Services well publicised –but timekeeping, especially on the Salisbury to Exeter route, can be unreliable
- Perceived as expensive – not always true, but if there are 2 or more people travelling together, it can often be cheaper to drive
- Connectivity between train and bus is quite good at Axminster and Dorchester South, although there doesn't seem to be any strategy on how long buses will wait if a train is delayed. Elsewhere, as I've said earlier, connectivity between bus and train is pretty much non-existent especially at Crewkerne. Also, no buses from our part of Dorset serve either of the two stations at Yeovil

A quick comment on **Active Travel** (Cycling, Walking, etc)

- Needs a Strategy – we've not started on that yet it's on our list – and we are going to need help. If anyone from any walking or cycling groups is able to help, we'd be grateful.

Many of you will have seen and perhaps responded to the Council's **Local Transport Plan (LTP 4)** – which covers the period for the next 15 years (until 2041). It was open for consultation late last year, had some good aspirations, but needs a lot more specific definition on what might be achieved.

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And as we speak, right now Dorset Council are meeting to discuss how they might “Transform public and community transport” and an “Active travel Infrastructure Plan” They announced this just last week, so it's very early days. We look forward to hearing their plans and I hope we will become involved in the discussions.

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These are the **key routes** we've identified:

Rail Services in Orange, Buses in Blue.

The hourly services are shown with hard lines whilst the irregular services are shown by dotted lines.

The Rail services (the orange lines) only touch the periphery of our area. At the top the Salisbury to Exeter Line passing through Axminster, Crewkerne and Yeovil. And then to the right, the Weymouth, Dorchester main line towards Poole, Bournemouth and London- both of which have hourly or even more frequent services, then finally the secondary route north from Weymouth through Maiden Newton which has a much lower frequency.

The Bus routes are in blue.

And you can see that the ONLY bus route in our area that runs hourly is between Axminster and Bridport ... plus services between Weymouth and Dorchester.

That's very poor – especially the route between Bridport and Dorchester. Dorchester is our County Town – it's where our major hospital is. How many people use the bus to get to hospital appointments or perhaps work in Dorchester? How many more would not have to use a car if we had a bus every hour?

So that's where we are now.

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Before we move on.....Let's compare what we have in Bridport with Sidmouth over the border in Devon.

The distance from Bridport to Dorchester is very similar to the distance from Sidmouth to Exeter It's around 13 miles. But just look at how many buses Sidmouth has to Exeter – 29 a day compared with just 8 per day from Bridport to Dorchester. Bridport also has a larger population than Sidmouth – 21,000 compared with Sidmouth's 13,000.

Why? Well look at the figures at the bottom. Devon gets almost 4 times more revenue funding from Government for buses than Dorset (£25m vs £6m). It begs the question... why does Devon get so much more funding than Dorset? We don't know the answer to that but we need to find out and somehow help Dorset get better funding.

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Potential Service Improvements.

This shows our where we would initially like to target improvements. It only includes what we see as the Core Routes right now. Once we have the Core Routes agreed, we can look at how we integrate local routes and campaign for better local transport to/from villages in the region. But we have to start somewhereWe see the 5 towns marked in red as hubs for development of local services. That's Lyme Regis, Bridport, Beaminster, Dorchester plus Axminster (technically in Devon but important for rail connectivity).....

We want to lobby for a minimum of hourly bus services on the east/west axis – that’s basically Dorchester/Weymouth through to Axminster and then also from Bridport, north through Beaminster to Crewkerne and Yeovil - that route is very poorly served at the moment – just 3 or 4 buses a day between Bridport and Yeovil, virtually none of which connect with train services at Crewkerne.

Moving on to rail services – we see very little change in the short term – there are regular hourly services on the line between Salisbury/Yeovil/Crewkerne/Axminster and Exeter and normally 2 trains per hour from Weymouth and Dorchester towards Bournemouth and London. That’s generally sufficient. We would also like to see better services on the line north from Dorchester to Yeovil and on towards Bristol. There are vague plans to increase services from every 2 hours to hourly, but to do that means more passing loops need to be built – and that’s expensive and will depend on Government money.

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In summary – we see these core east/west and north/south bus routes as our priority and we think that these will form the basis of an “aspirational” Transport Plan.

But...We need to check that this initial thinking will meet with public approval? Will it encourage more people towards public transport?

We have already had initial discussions with other local transport groups and we will also speak to local councils.

But we must be realistic..... we need to get councils onside with the plan, in order to help them gain the money to improve services.

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Importantly, we need your feedback as members of the public on our thinking. We need evidence that what we are doing has the public support.

So, we are asking for your feedback Will these proposals encourage more people to use public transport? What else would you like to see?

You can provide feedback simply by emailing us at

watag@hotmail.co.uk