

## WTUA CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR 2023-2024

### COMMITTEE AND EXTERNAL MEETINGS

In addition to our own committee meetings, members of the committee attend many external transport meetings and occasionally make site visits. These meetings with transport organisations and other user groups are opportunities both to raise matters of concern to Wirral transport users and for us to learn about developments and good practice elsewhere.

In 2023-24, the principal meetings attended since the last AGM were:

Liverpool City Region Rail User Group (LCRRUG)	3
Cheshire West and Cheshire Council (CWAC)	1
Transport for Wales (TfW)	3
TravelWatch North West (TWNW)	2
Railfuture North West	1

The Liverpool, Cheshire and TfW meetings all involve other rail user groups (RUGs), as appropriate. As mentioned last year, we have set up an organisation called the *Mersey Dee Consortium* so as to better represent the interests of passengers on TfW services in England radiating from Chester, together with the Wrexham-Bidston service.

Issues taken up include TfW's plan to close the booking office at Chester station and replace it with an open desk directly opposite the entrance, with banks of ticket machines behind. The recent proposal to close most ticket offices in England has been rescinded, but TfW is not for turning. TfW has no plans to close any ticket offices in Wales, which could be opposed in the Welsh Sennedd, but are seemingly unaccountable for its stations and services in England.

WTUA is pushing for the reopening of Ledsham station, between Hooton and Capenhurst, to serve a major new housing development east of the railway. Ledsham station was closed in 1959. Although the prospect of securing funding to develop a business case has diminished, we will keep Ledsham on the agenda, in the hope of a more favourable financial climate in future.

A few days before the AGM, a WTUA representative attended a demonstration of a prototype railway seat, developed by a Leeds-based upholstery manufacturer, at the University of Huddersfield. The 'Quantum' seat, which offers improved comfort whilst still meeting all necessary safety requirements, will be trialled in a Great Western Railway coach next year. We hope for future deployment in the North West when new trains are ordered.

### OTHER LOCAL RAIL ISSUES MONITORED

We back proposals by *Merseytravel* to assess the feasibility of two potential extensions to the *Merseyrail* network on Wirral, as outlined in David Powell's talk earlier, including the proposal for a new station at Woodchurch.

For the extension east from Ellesmere Port, CWAC is proposing a new station at Bridges Road, Ellesmere Port to replace Stanlow. There is no prospect whatsoever

of Stanlow station reopening, due to its very low usage and unsafe footbridge. We continue to back the *Wrexham-Bidston Rail Users Association* in their call for a new station at Deeside, between Neston and Hawarden Bridge, to serve the Deeside industrial estate.

*Merseytravel* has announced plans to provide step-free access to all platforms at two further Wirral Line stations, Port Sunlight and Rock Ferry. The Metro Mayor has pledged to make all 83 *Merseyrail* stations fully accessible by 2030, with the latest announcements bringing the total to 66. So, there is still some way to go, including Bromborough, Spital and Green Lane on the Wirral line.

## **SOME NOTABLE RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

**Introduction of the Class 777s** – As we've heard, earlier in the meeting, almost all the 53 Class 777s have been accepted by *Merseytravel* and are now in passenger service, with work now underway to extend the use of 8-car trains at busy times. The few remaining Class 507s are (or were) retained on standby in case of problems with the Class 777 fleet. There will be a second Class 507 farewell tour on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> November.

**Transport for Wales** – TfW has introduced a 45-minute frequency on the Wrexham-Bidston line, with journey times extended to 64 or 65 minutes giving much improved reliability. This service is currently operated by two Class 197 DMUs and one Class 230, with the latter doing a unit swap in the middle of day primarily because of a tendency of its batteries to overheat. TfW still has engineering work to do to get to the position where all services are worked by Class 230s, as originally intended.

On the Chester-Runcorn-Liverpool route, using the Halton Curve, the largely hourly service frequency with a second unit was reinstated in February.

**Everos** – From the June timetable change, Avanti has started introducing its new fleet of Class 805 "Evero" overhead electric-diesel bi-mode trains on Holyhead-Chester-London services. The 805s are replacing the previous *Voyager* diesel units. Whilst the new trains undoubtedly have better environmental credentials, being able to draw power from the overhead line between Euston and Crewe, they do not have tilt capability. In part, the new trains compensate for the resulting slower speed round curves, between Euston and Crewe, with faster acceleration.

**Buses** – Bus news has been dominated by moves towards franchising of bus services in both Liverpool City Region and Wales. We continue to monitor progress on the implementation of bus franchising in Greater Manchester for any learning relevant to implementation in Liverpool City Region in general and Wirral in particular.

Outside Wirral and Chester, there is considerable activity in decarbonisation initiatives, either hydrogen- or battery-powered buses.

**Mersey Ferries** – As people most probably know, the big news on the Ferries is that a new boat is on order from *Cammell Laird* and should enter service in 2026. Otherwise, it has been a difficult time with Woodside terminal still closed for refurbishment, a drifting sandbank by the Pierhead affecting services at spring low

tides, and mechanical unreliability of the current ageing vessels. We look forward to better times.

## **WTUA DEVELOPMENTS**

In March this year, the WTUA took a stand for the first time at the *Wirral History & Heritage Fair* at Hulme Hall in Port Sunlight village. We shared the stand with *Friends of the Ferries*. The Hall was filled with around 90 stands, of which about 25 were trade and the rest community groups like ourselves.

Our stand attracted a good deal of interest, particularly with regard to newsletters and excursions, but no new members, unfortunately. One person commented about having an interest in public transport as a user over many years but had never heard of the WTUA. With Hulme Hall, publicity for trips and the AGM, plus the website, we are starting to get better known.

About a month ago in early September, as you've heard, we ran a very successful coach excursion taking 56 people on the *Severn Valley Railway*. At least in this instance, we cracked the publicity side bringing in bookings from the general public to supplement those by WTUA members – roughly half and half.

Again, as you've heard, we've published two *Wirral Transport User* Newsletters since the last AGM. It is our intention to continue with two Newsletters a year, but to some extent that is dependent on the flow of news over which we have little control.

## **An Appeal – Recruitment**

On membership, we are getting a trickle of new members joining the WTUA, but it is not enough to sustain the organisation. If you have talked with friends and relatives about the Association - maybe given them the Newsletter to read – and if they have shown some interest, please encourage them to join.

In addition, for the Association to continue operating effectively, we really do need more members to come forward for roles on the Committee. There are currently two vacant positions:

### **1. General Secretary**

- *To compile the agenda for and take minutes of the 12 monthly Committee meetings and of the AGM*
- *To deal with correspondence received*

### **2. Buses Secretary**

- *To monitor developments in bus routes and services across the Wirral*
- *To follow major developments elsewhere that are potentially relevant to the Wirral*

Alternatively, maybe you would prefer to start as an ordinary member of the Committee and can contribute to other aspects, eg newsletter production, website content or organising activities. This could include taking photos for our newsletter/website.

We would welcome members coming along to the meetings, to see what we do (no obligation), before deciding whether to join us on the Committee. One of the

advantages of coming to the meetings is to hear reports on external meetings attended, giving detailed insight about what is happening and what is planned – the ins and outs of transport developments.

So, if you are newly retired or just looking for something interesting to do, why not give us a try. Please contact Brian if interested.

Finally, I would like to thank all my fellow members of the Committee for all their contributions to the running of the WTUA.

NIGEL BIRD

WTUA Chairman