

Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passengers' Association

11:15 Saturday 21st September 2024

Wynnstay Hotel, Machynlleth.

Present: Cllr Mair Benjamin, James Davies, Angus Eickhoff, Philip Ellison, Roger Goodhew, Carol Handcock, Kevin Hardy, Sarah Harvey, Bill Redfern^(r), Colin Rigby (RMT), Thomas Wheeler^(r).

Apologies: Dennis Bates, Steve Boulding, Alex Grant, Tony Harvey, Robert Knight, Dennis Onions, David Purdon, Meryl Roberts, Cllr Jeff Smith.

Roger Whitehouse chaired the meeting, since he was managing the computer.

Minutes:

Copies of the of the August meeting minutes were available. The minutes were accepted with clarification that Angus Eickhoff had apologised, and correction that 'assembly member' should have been 'Senedd Member'.

Matters Arising:

Steve Boulding (Shrewsbury Chester Group) informs us that the name change to SCARP has taken place.

Chair's report:

The Chairman Jeff Smith sent a report stating: The press release re the timetable cuts went out on Thursday but only the Cambrian News have picked up on it; Eluned Morgan has not responded to our request to be included in the listening exercise; and we have received a response from the Welsh Language Commissioner's Office stating they have not seen evidence that the a full impact assessment was carried out.

Officer's Reports:

The web master reported that the site is up to date. As usual we have far more in the Facebook group than we have members.

The Treasurer reported that it has been a quiet month with little movement on the accounts.

Future Timetables:

Angus stated that he used to be able to use the 19:09 service from Machynlleth to travel to Leicester changing at Shrewsbury and Birmingham New Street. Now West Midlands Trains new timetable routes the Birmingham service via Tame Bridge Parkway, which takes ages, so it arrives too late for the connection at New Street. The same applies to Kettering, Loughborough, Cheltenham, Reading Oxford etc. This is not good from a relatively early departure from Aberystwyth, discouraging use of the railway. Angus wrote to the managing director of West Midlands Trains and received a response from the stakeholder manager that they are aware of the problem and are looking to re-time when new stations (Darlaston, Willenhall) open. Angus considered this to be quite positive, but we should keep an eye on.

Bill said that this is a worrying trend matching the Cambrian cuts showing a lack of concern about the railway as necessary public transport where the extremes of the day, early and late, are very important to the journey opportunities possible. It seems the response from WMT is better than what we have been getting from TfW.

Mair asked why there seem to have been a lot of problems where our trains into Birmingham are delayed by slow trains. Roger Whitehouse explained that it is a consequence of different operators (TfW & WMT) and rules that don't allow departures of slow trains to be held. Mair said that she was talking about Machynlleth to Shrewsbury. Roger Whitehouse said there aren't any slow trains. Colin said it's likely to be passing trains that have been delayed. Mair said it seems to be the last month when there have been problems. Colin said there seems to have been more traffic, engineering trains etc., and that could be a factor.

Sarah said that the reasons given for delays often seem generic and often wrong so you wonder what the facts are!

Cambrian Lines News and Issues:

Angus said that the last down train from Machynlleth to Aberystwyth and return seems to be a bus! Roger Whitehouse said that there was a notice at Machynlleth station about engineering works. Angus said engineering works is the official reason but it's been going on for months and you never see any signs of work going on. It was agreed that Jeff should write to TfW asking what are the works repeatedly requiring the last service to/from Aberystwyth to be a bus.

Bill said that it's been noticeable recently that our doomed first service, 06:45 from Barmouth, has been very unreliable recently, it missed 3 days last week. There isn't always a bus replacement and when there is it doesn't make the connection at Machynlleth. TfW have been good at recruiting staff (conductors and drivers) to prevent cancellations but don't have enough trains to run a reliable service.

Roger Whitehouse said that he's been say persistently that they are trying to operate the Cambrian and North Wales with insufficient trains for reliability. Results in cancellations and short formed trains with delays and changes due to the wrong sort of units at Shrewsbury.

Correspondence:

We have received a letter from the RMT raising concerns re on train catering.

Colin explained that he is the retired Secretary RMT Cambrian Branch and was standing in for the Alex Grant (current Secretary) who is on holiday.

Concerns about catering were brought up at a recent Branch meeting.

Back in 2018 RMT were included in franchise discussions with Keolis Amey including enhancing the catering service, use of Welsh products, protection of Aberystwyth satellite depot.

Since Covid the trolley service as deteriorated.

Trolleys missing (lack of staff to cover);

No provision for cash.

This looks like stealth to remove the trolleys.

RMT are looking for support from SARPA.

Agreed Jeff should write to TfW asking why the trolley service is deteriorating.

Mair said that they have stopped doing sandwiches, when asked they say they'd have to throw a lot away.

Colin said there is no provision to keep sandwiches cool or get sandwiches delivered to Aberystwyth. The flasks don't keep the water hot enough for the length of journey.

Thomas asked if the problem is with the new trolleys designed for the 197s because the 197s have a cupboard for heating cooling? He had recently heard of an instance where there was no hot water because it had not been possible to get to the charging point at Shrewsbury due to lifts out of order.

Colin said that there used to be a progression from cleaner to trolley to guard to driver. Staff don't now want to move to trolley.

Bill said that as you can see SARPA consider the trolley provision to be very important so we are with you on that. Catering is one of the things that TfW likes to boast about so this is not consistent with what they are saying publicly. Colin said there is nothing to boast about at the moment, all agreed.

Roger Whitehouse said that the franchise was mentioned but there is a problem that all sorts of aspects of the franchise agreement have been totally ignored since TfW was nationalised.

Mair said that when getting an early train you're paying a lot and should be able to get a drink and a sandwich, it's really bad.

Sarah said she was concerned about congestion, especially on the Coast Line. How are trolleys going to get through when there isn't room for luggage. Mair said TfW know when it's freshers week at Aberystwyth but don't make provision so students are choosing road transport. Thomas said there is less luggage rack space on the new trains, though more overhead. Bill said that he'd experienced this on 197's between Shrewsbury and Manchester and it's as described by Thomas. So if you have large luggage with you and with a packed train haven't got on at the right door you'll end up blocking the way. This will come into prominence on the Cambrian with holiday makers.

Angus stated we had an email from Paul Atkins re article in the Newsletter about buses. Paul states that Powys have one of the best organised bus services in Wales. There rural buses are funded because they provide a school service. He makes the point that the rail sector is not sympathetic to the needs of the bus sector when it comes to integration. Angus said it's a matter of the parties talking, maybe they should be forced to?

Bill had correspondence from a user of the Cambrian Coast Line. The gentleman concerned states that he suffers from urinary incontinence problems so toilet provision on trains is especially important to him. On a journey to Pwllheli the train toilets were not in a fit state to be used so he waited till Pwllheli where he found that the station toilets were out of use with a notice advising use of toilets at the bus station, but no directions on how to find them. He found similar problems coming back so tried to find toilets at Criccieth station, but couldn't find them. He wants to make the point that the railway is not in a good position to help people in these circumstances and not inclusive. He suggests that, particularly with the new trains having only one toilet that information should be available at stations and or with conductors regarding the location of the nearest toilets to stations. It was agreed that Jeff should raise this with TfW. Bill added to compound the matter news from SCARP on the the new 197 trains states that the toilets are frequently automatically locked out of service. They also continue to suffer from engine/transmission and door problems. A 197 caused a line blockage at Leominster for 4 hours fifteen minutes.

Colin stated that TfW did not ask the union for comments on the 197s. Roger Whitehouse stated that SCARP also was not consulted.