

PUBLIC TRANSPORT UPDATE FOR THE STRETTONDALE LJC AREA

Rail issues for Church Stretton

The rail service at Church Stretton is provided by Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) as a franchise from central Government, funded largely by the Welsh Assembly. Accordingly, the priorities laid down for the franchise are largely dictated by the requirements of the Welsh Assembly Government's (WAG) Rail Unit, and the policies of Wales, particularly the "One Wales" policy. This has the objective of improving communication links both within Wales and between Wales and the major conurbations in England. However, this does not ignore those parts of the English Border areas also served by these trains, and Shropshire benefits well overall from this association with Wales. Many of the improvements to stations and services within Shropshire, are funded by Wales.

Rail Service

The new summer rail timetable came into force as from 23rd May, and will last until 10th December. This timetable sees a number of changes to the service pattern at Church Stretton and Craven Arms.

ATW and WAG have long seen the need to provide faster services along the north-south corridors for through passengers, which make up the vast bulk of the passenger usage of the Marches line. Manchester to Cardiff is one of the largest income generators to the business, and serving this market is seen by both as a priority. The aim is to bring end-to-end journey times down to below three hours. Another priority has been to address the poor service provision for the major stations between Crewe and Shrewsbury, at Nantwich, Whitchurch and Wem, which have had to rely on a basic two-hour interval service throughout the day. Nantwich and Whitchurch have a larger potential passenger base than Church Stretton or Craven Arms, which needs to be addressed.

To achieve these objectives, ATW have speeded up a selection of the through services by omitting some intermediate stops to create "express" services, and introduced additional stops on others to create "semi-fast" services. This has the unfortunate effect of altering the previously regular pattern at Church Stretton (and other stations), creating some service gaps. Some of these gaps have to some degree been filled by additional stops on the Holyhead to Cardiff services. Rather than a static hourly interval, the new timetable produces a 30/90 interval pattern for parts of the day.

The clock times of these trains on their journeys is largely dictated by the need to intermix with heavy inter-city traffic flows on the two main lines at each end of their journeys, ie. at Crewe with the high-speed West Coast services, and intense Manchester area services, and the Great Western services between Newport and Cardiff. Even a few minutes difference to times can mean there being no "path" for the ATW service through these areas. Thus it is increasingly difficult to provide additional stops at one stage in the journey without removing stops elsewhere.

Another effect of this change of pattern has been to alter connectional opportunities at Shrewsbury with services which run west to east, particularly to Birmingham. Again, clock times of these services are dictated by the need to fit in with the intense mix of long-distance and local services on the highly-congested stretch of line between Wolverhampton and Birmingham.

Considerable dialogue has taken place with both ATW and WAG regarding this service pattern. ATW are at pains to explain that even with this altered pattern, they are providing many more calls each day at Church Stretton than their franchise contract demands, and will point to such matters as greater through journey opportunities, re-instatement of a northbound service at 0905, as being positives.

Discussions with ATW and WAG continue. Shropshire Council continues to press for improvements to rail services throughout the County, the aspiration being to achieve regular interval calls at all Shropshire stations, and good connections for wider journeys. These aspirations are well known by ATW, WAG, and the rail industry watchdog - Passenger Focus.

Station Improvements

On the positive side, Church Stretton station has seen a number of improvements recently. The solid shelters, a haven for youths and vandals, have been replaced by modern vandal-resistant shelters with fitted lighting, and modern three-line dot-matrix "next train" displays have been provided on each platform. These improvements have been funded by the DfT under the National Stations Improvement Programme (NSIP) and managed by ATW. A number of other stations in Shropshire have benefitted similarly.

In addition, Shropshire Council have funded the installation of CCTV monitoring equipment at both Church Stretton and Craven Arms, taking advantage of the electrical work being undertaken for the NSIP work. Although a passive recording system, it can be monitored directly from Cardiff if required. The system records from all cameras for a minimum of 32 days, and can be accessed should the need be, by the West Mercia Police, the Transport Police, and ATW for operational needs. Picture quality is exceptional, even at night, and can be used for legal purposes.

Following these works, and when funding permits, it is hoped to provide further improvements to facilities at the station, for example covered cycle shelters on the platforms.

Bus Services update

Shropshire Council faces some very difficult decisions in the short term as financial pressures increase on the budget for the provision of subsidised local bus services. It is vital therefore that Shropshire Council has a robust bus strategy clearly defining the principals and priorities on which the local bus network and associated services in Shropshire will be provided.

The draft Bus Strategy has recently been consulted upon to ensure that the thoughts and opinions of existing and potential passengers were considered in adopting the network proposed within the strategy.

Shropshire Councils Cabinet met on the 11 May 2011 to receive the report on the results of this consultation. Cabinet considered the results of the consultation exercise and feedback received from all stakeholders, and the Task & Finish group set up by the Enterprise and Growth Scrutiny Committee to oversee the consultation process on the bus strategy.

The minimum network proposed within the strategy was accepted, the following local StrettonDale LJC area services will be affected as follows;

- Service 435 (Shrewsbury Bus Station to Ludlow) will remain unchanged
- Subject to passenger numbers, it is proposed Service 540 (Acton Scott to Shrewsbury) will operate on college days only and will provide a single return journey to Shrewsbury each Saturday. The final timetable is yet to be confirmed but will be communicated to passengers via the usual channels.

A nearby service is also affected as follows - the timetable of Service 552 / 553 (Bishop's Castle to Shrewsbury) operated by Minsterley Motors will remain unchanged Monday to Friday; Sunday services provided by Arriva will no longer operate.

**Passenger Transport Team
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