

MINUTES OF A PUBLIC MEETING HELD IN NEWENT ON 8TH JANUARY 2019

This meeting was held at Newent Memorial Hall with approximately 150 people in attendance. The meeting was chaired by local resident Peter Coulson. In attendance were Emma Trim from BBC Radio Gloucestershire and Will Windsor-Clive, the county councillor for the area. Several other local councillors introduced themselves during the course of the discussion.

A meeting at the same time and place had originally been arranged by Newent Town Council, at the request of Severn Trent Water (STW). Their representatives were due to attend along with representatives from Gloucestershire County Council. This was cancelled late on the previous Friday following a private discussion which had taken place between Mark Harper MP and Severn Trent, during which STW were persuaded to rethink their road closure plans and come up with a new proposal to be put to a subsequent public meeting, the date of which has not been set.

A group of local people, mainly concerned residents, were so alarmed at the prospect of a five months road closure that they decided to reconvene the meeting to enable locals to express their concerns. The feeling was that a real consultation should take place **before** any major decisions were too far advanced. The last-minute nature of the 'postponement' and the lack of a robust method of informing potential attendees was also a major consideration, although obviously not one shared by the town council.

Peter Coulson (PC), who has a background in local government law and mediation, introduced the session with a preliminary talk covering the issues and his recent discussions with the Severn Trent project engineer responsible for the pipeline renewal. He said he had invited STW, Mark Harper and local councillors to attend this meeting but STW had responded with a statement that following their meeting last Friday with Mark Harper, they are having a series of internal meetings and reviewing the plans for the new water pipes. They don't wish to engage formally with the public until they have firmed up their plans and can put a concrete proposal.

Peter confirmed that STW are **not** going ahead with either the previously planned A40 closure or the Newent Road closure at this stage. The problem is that the pipe they need to replace is a large feeder tube for Maisemore Reservoir — it is not just a water main — and it goes down the middle of the road, not at the side. In places there is no room at the side of the road anyway and they cannot put a replacement 'sleeve' inside the existing pipe for technical reasons, so they had planned to lay the second pipe in a trench next to the existing one, which would have meant trenching out the road right in the middle, leaving little or no room for a driving lane next to the work. That is the reason why they wanted to close the road off completely.

The bulk of this difficult work is on the wooded, winding section of the road between Highnam and the Tibberton junction. After that, up to the Upleadon turning, they can put the pipe in the verge, because it is level and open. So that part of the road was not to be permanently closed anyway.

PC said that our point was that **any** lengthy closure would be unacceptable on this road and would cause traffic chaos in surrounding areas. So we want to press them to look for complete alternatives and to begin a dialogue right now on what they can do if the road is not completely closed. This issue has ignited opposition like nothing else locally — for very good, practical and in some cases life-threatening reasons. It is the right time to make

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Severn Trent understand this and place our views and suggestions right in the mix at this early stage.

Points and questions from the floor

Mr DP, a former area controller for Severn Trent Water, questioned the necessity for the work to be carried out at all. He said we should be asking STW how many times this 14 inch main, which was installed around 1896 to 1897, has failed and if it really does need to be replaced, why they can't line the existing main with a smaller new one, since the main doesn't get very heavily used. There are few households taking water from it, and it feeds Maisemore reservoir, but that is only a small reservoir.

Ms TA who lives along the route confirmed there were regular and persistent problems with the water supply, but questioned the need to lay the pipe up the centre of the road and wondered why it couldn't be laid to one side, keeping the road open.

Ms BT, a commuter, wondered if the five month closure had been set up as a false bargaining position by STW In order to make a shorter closure seem more acceptable. This seemed to be quite a commonly held view.

Dr IC expressed concern about emergency vehicles and their access to the area.

Severn Trent had raised the possibility, in a summary shown to PC, of taking school buses through the roadworks in a convoy. They did not explain how it would be possible to get buses through but not other traffic, which seems illogical.

Have the emergency services even been consulted?

Mrs ST, an Oxenhall resident, wondered if the work could be speeded up by 24 hours seven days a week working. We have no information from STW about the resources they plan to devote to this work, but suspect it will be considerably less than this. The Severn Trent Water executive summary, as sent to PC, states that they will put on two teams of workers working six days a week, daytimes only.

STW say they can't open the road at busy times as the excavation work precludes that option.

Mr DP clarified some technicalities, explaining that water pipes need to be laid in reasonably straight lines with only a gentle fall, otherwise problems arise with air pockets. This makes some of the suggested solutions impractical.

Mr MD, a resident, asked what provisions have been proposed for local businesses such as Trioscape Garden Centre, that would be severely affected.

Will Ormond from Trioscape said they had had discussions with STW on the subject of compensation. STW have said that all claims for compensation will only be processed after the work is complete and that because Trioscape is on the periphery of the work area they probably wouldn't qualify for compensation anyway, despite being cut off from a large part of their customer base.

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Mrs MP a commuter and Newent resident, emphasised the large number of businesses that would be affected, all the way along the route and in Newent and the surrounding area.

Mr MD raised the matter of utility companies' statutory rights to do work wherever they deem it to be necessary and asked for clarification.

Will Windsor Clive, county councillor, told the meeting that STW has a statutory right to maintain and replace existing infrastructure and the county council's role is merely to facilitate and administer. They do not have a right of veto but they get involved in things like liaising with the bus companies and the schools.

WWC reported that STW were ill-informed about the volume of traffic on the B4215, the 'plethora of rat runs' in the area and the effect their use as diversions would have on local communities, or the likely effect on local businesses. Liz Garfield, Severn Trent Chief Executive, has now lifted the spending cap on this project, thus enabling less disruptive options to be considered.

WWC was asked by PC why the county council had not intervened sooner when ST's plans first emerged last year but the councillor did not answer the question except to reiterate the information about utility companies' statutory rights.

Mrs MI, a Newent resident, said she would like to know if there is an ombudsman for STW to whom we could complain. She also asked why Mark Harper MP did not attend this meeting. It transpires he's a bit busy with Brexit.

Councillor Julia Gooch, Forest of Dean District Council, representing Newent ward, told us that nobody at the FODDC was told anything about this through official channels. JG found out via a Facebook post from Trioscape just before Christmas! She expressed her anger about the lack of consultation from STW very forcefully and was applauded.

Sten Salisbury from Rudford and Highleadon parish council told us that their speed cameras recorded between 6000 and 8000 vehicles per day on that road. He emphasised the chaos that was caused in the local vicinity when a section of the B4215 was closed for resurfacing recently. Even if the road is fully closed there will need to be access for local residents.

Len Lawton of Newent District Council told us that large organisations with statutory rights such as STW do not inform local councils of impending works. He had been in conversation with Mark Harper who was under a three line whip because of the EU withdrawal legislation, hence his absence. LL also criticised STW for their failure to consult the public at the appropriate time.

PC was keen to pursue the idea of an alternative route with STW, avoiding the need to dig up the road at all. This seemed to be the preferred option all round at the meeting. Ted Roberts, Lib Dem local councillor, questioned the technology being employed. He thought they should be employing a mole type of device rather than digging up the road but apparently PC was told by STW that there was some underlying geological difficulties that made this impractical, namely shallow rocks.

Ms SS, a commuter, raised the flooding issue on the Maisemore detour.

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Another local lady thought the length of any proposed detour was likely to be unacceptable.

Mrs LJ, a local resident, had called the telephone number on the road closure notice and was put through to a transport officer at Shire Hall who emailed Amey, the contractors, with her concerns. A man from Amey called her for a discussion but he didn't know the area so was of very limited use.

Redmarley parish councillor Clayton Williams was next. He expressed gratitude to those present for drawing attention to the issue and promised to put some effort into getting a satisfactory resolution. Local councillors were able recently to prevent the simultaneous closure of three bridges over the M50 for repair which, had it gone ahead, would have left the village of Pendock completely cut off.

Mr MB, Newent resident and civil engineer, wanted questions asked about how the project was being costed. Not only all the extra journey time and fuel consumption which people would have to pay for, but also the damage to the minor roads that would ensue because of the extra traffic on them. These costs would not be met by STW, but would have to be met by others, and should be included in any assessment. The proposed school bus access might involve safety concerns and it is possible that they would stop work as the convoy went through in order to protect the workforce. He also wanted to know the number of machines that would be in use at any one time. His view was that eight could be deployed without any difficulty on the stretch of road concerned.

Mr KU, local resident, alerted us to a recent similar case in Swindon where STW were persuaded to lay their pipes through farmland rather than digging up the road. His view was that they'd get a technically better result with a more even fall by doing this, although it might be more expensive. He voiced a suspicion that Amey may lose their 'preferred contractor' status, and they might be blamed for the inadequate consultation. He thinks that alternative routes for emergency services and bus companies have probably not been considered, and that no risk assessment or cost benefit analysis has been carried out.

Mr BW, self-confessed 'busy body', asked where STW were going next. He was concerned that we may face repeated disruption in the future every time a piece of infrastructure needs to be replaced or repaired.

Mr DP described the layout of the water main which turns off at Highleadon and runs up into the village of Upleadon so is not following the course of the main road into Newent at this point. Mr DP is of the view that the 14 inch main is too big for what it is currently doing and that an 8 inch pipe would be enough unless there were some other uses of which we are currently unaware.

PC reiterated the general dissatisfaction about the lack of engagement by STW and, in answer to a question from the floor, confirmed that we will be sending a list of the points made in this meeting to STW.

JG also wanted us to put the question to STW of why they had failed to inform any of our local politicians or our MP. She wrote immediately to Mark Harper and to Jesse Norman the transport minister. She is still awaiting a reply from the latter.

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Next up was Ms PS, a retired resident of Newent. This lady is a frequent bus user for shopping and for other reasons and would find any re-routing or rescheduling very inconvenient. She would like to know if there has been any consultation between STW and the bus companies.

Mr LA from Rudford has a daughter who commutes into Gloucester by bus. She contacted the bus company to find out what the arrangements would be when she heard about the roadworks but they referred her back to STW so it would appear they have not been consulted.

Others from the floor voiced concerns about the diversions and their impact on horseriders in the locality. Many people ride on the quiet country lanes and the hazard is considerable.

An un-named gentleman reported some of the impact that the resurfacing road closure has had on local traders, some of whom suffered quite severely. He feared that some businesses would not survive.

PC re-iterated that our red line should be that there is **no** closure of that road, in response to comments that people change their shopping habits permanently when a temporary diversion is set in place. This means that the long-term effects on businesses persist for long after the road has reopened.

Someone has heard that the new water main is being installed to serve the development of a new agri-tech Centre at Hartpury College. This would explain quite a lot.

Ms K who works at the school is wondering how the teachers would get there. She is also concerned about the over 16-year-olds who drive themselves to school because they don't get free bus transport after that age. If the journey time is extended it will add greatly to the stress during exam time.

A gentleman pointed out that this road is one of only four B roads in the country to be connected directly with a motorway, which in part accounts for the high traffic volume.

A lady also raised the point about deliveries from Gloucester to the outlying regions. People, potentially vulnerable people, who rely on home shopping may perhaps not be able to do so.

Another lady would like to know if the road is closed, will there be ambulances stationed inside the Newent area? We have a fire engine and a boat and a Land Rover all at the fire station in Newent, but no method of safely transporting someone with a spinal injury.

Another lady expressed her annoyance at the lack of representation at the meeting from STW and Mark Harper's office. PC said that perhaps those local politicians who were here might be relied upon to feed back the strength of feeling expressed at this meeting. PC said that both Mark Harper and STW will be sent transcripts of this meeting. PC encouraged people to keep batting away and to ask the hard questions, and if they don't get adequate replies, to keep asking them and making sure that these dialogues get publicised. It would be a major PR victory for STW if they revise their plans to avoid a road closure. If we email philip.smith@severntrent.co.uk he will pass on the information to his CEO, who should then be minded to take this a bit more seriously.

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Mr JT of Oxenhall summarise the meeting and came up with three main themes, the first being the many negative effects of a road closure on both individuals and businesses, the second being a number of creative ideas for alternatives to closure and finally the really terrible communication, consultation and information sharing mainly on the part of STW. He also thanked PC for the organisation and running of the meeting, which generated a lot of 'here, heres'.

Finally Cllr Julia Gooch mentioned the extra fuel costs, environmental impact and stress/ health impact of a closure, and with that the meeting concluded.