

Minutes of a Meeting of the Bus Advisory Board held virtually on Tuesday, 17 October 2023 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Mike Rigby (Chair)

Peter Fairey

Simon Goff

Joana Jackson

David Redgewell

Peter Travis

Natasha Bates

Ian Bell

Lee Jones

Richard Gibson

Phil Grocock

Dan James

Tony Reese

Mike O'Dowd-Jones

John Perrett

Tim Reynolds

Thomas Hughes

In attendance:

Cllr Dave Mansell, Cllr Diago Rodrigues, John Hassall, Linda Snelling, Philip Sears, Stanley Thomas, Alan Peter and David Northey

23 Welcome and Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

An apology for absence was received from John Hammond.

24 Minutes - Agenda Item 2

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th July 2023 were approved.

The minutes of the meeting held on 25th July 2023 were approved subject to the following amendment:

Item 17 – Update from Operators on Taunton £1 Fare, Government £2 Fare and Services Updates

Bullet point eight to be amended to read:

The Bus Advisory Board should have been consulted on the proposed changes to the

frequency of services in advance of the public announcement as is required by the EPS.

The Bus Advisory Board noted the closure of Bridgwater Depot and the planned closure of the Yeovil Depots by First South. David Redgewell requested further consultation in respect of Yeovil Depot and any future proposals.

25 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 3

Two questions were received from Andrew Strong. The questions submitted and responses provided are as follows:

1. Paragraph 2.5 of the Enhanced Partnership Scheme says: *“The Scheme will have no end date, but progress will be reviewed by SCC on a quarterly basis and publicly accessible reports will be prepared on a routine basis. The review will also consider and report against BSIP targets outlined in Scheme Annex A.”*

I have been unable to find any reports of such reviews, even though five should have been done by now. Please advise me how the public can access the reports.

The BSIP funded schemes are reviewed on a quarterly basis and progress reported to the DfT as per their specific reporting requirements. With regard to reports being prepared on a routine basis, the intention is to report annually against BSIP targets as part of the BSIP Annual Review. The BSIP was updated last October but only at a high level as we had not received the funding to start delivering the schemes at that point. That version is available on the Somerset Council webpage. This years annual review was due in October, but the DfT have requested we put this on hold whilst they review their guidance. Therefore, a decision was taken to wait until the new guidance is released to ensure we are delivering against any revised requirements from the DfT.

2. First West of England Ltd has been given approval by the Traffic Commissioner to use Wells Bus Station as an Operating Centre for 6 vehicles. I presume that Somerset Council, as the landowner, has approved this and is receiving payment to compensate for the additional wear and tear on the road surface in the bus station. Please confirm that the Council is open to negotiation with other bus operators -who may be interested in setting up operations in the county - for use of its land as operating centres.

With the internal (First) transfer of the operation of service 75 and most of

service 29 from Buses of Somerset to First West of England we received a request from First West of England to use Wells Bus Station to store up to six vehicles overnight as we understood there was insufficient space at First West of England's Wells depot. Wells bus station is now owned by Somerset Council and internal discussions with our property team resulted in our making an offer the First West of England to allow vehicles operated under contract to Somerset Council to be parked on the site on a temporary basis at the owner's risk. This was done to ensure that services transferred could operate reliably from the date of transfer and as this site is for the primary use of bus and coach services then this was deemed appropriate use of this land. However, this should not be considered as the Council being prepared to allow any of its premises to be used as an operating centre for buses and any further approaches from any operator would be considered on a case by case basis as any site requested might not be suitable or have sufficient space for the overnight parking of buses.

26 Coordination of Bus Timetable Changes - Agenda Item 4

John Perrett, Operational Services Manager summarised the agenda report. He explained that at the Bus Advisory Board in July, members agreed to two main timetable dates per year with flexibility maintained for unforeseen/emergency operational issues and seasonal changes where it was not possible to confirm the changes at the two main agreed dates. The date changes were agreed for Easter and the beginning of September, with exact dates to be agreed at each October Board meeting.

He referred to the proposed timetable for bus service changes, registrations, consultation and Board meetings for 2024 as set out in table 1 of the report. He said that operators would be asked to complete a proforma outlining timetable changes for consideration and discussion at the Bus Advisory Board.

In response to comments raised, John Perrett confirmed that in terms of the registration process, there was provision to allow for emergency or changes that were deemed necessary outside of the normal process. The 126 service would fit into this category and he was aware that people wanted the issues resolved as soon as possible. A proposed timetable had been received from North Somerset and the plan was to go out to tender again in the near future.

The Operators subject to Somerset's Enhanced Partnership accepted the recommendations as outlined in the report and agreed the following:

- The specific dates for timetable changes and associated

consultation/registration periods in 2024 as set out in table 1 of the report.

- To use the proforma as outlined in Appendix A of the report for presenting proposed timetable changes at future Board Meetings to ensure clarity on any changes being suggested.

27 Update from Operators on Taunton £1 Fare, Government £2 Fare and Service Updates - Agenda Item 5

Simon Goff, Managing Director of First South was invited to give an update. He said that since the changes made in September (aligned to the closure of the Bridgwater depot), they had allowed the network to settle and it was always known that further tweaks would need to be made to improve reliability and punctuality. Further changes to be made included the following:

- From 1st October changes to post AM peak departures on routes 21, 21a, 22 to ensure prompt departures.
- From the 27th November:
 - Changes to timetables proposed for services 21, 21a, 22 and 51 to improve punctuality.
 - Earlier morning departures from Taunton to Bridgwater and Wellington to be introduced on the 21 and 22.
 - Evening journeys on service 21 extended to Dunball (J23) accessing distribution centres north of Bridgwater.
 - Exmoor Coaster would be suspended during the winter months.
- Services 55, 77/77a would transfer to Wells depot from the 27th November. No changes to the timetables from this date, however some changes planned from 1st January 2024.

Simon Goff reported that a steady growth had continued on the £1 fare in Taunton. There had been a 60% increase in passenger volumes with biggest percentage increases on the 22, 28, 30. The biggest volume growth was on the 1, 2, 6 and 7. Patronage was currently at 92% of pre Covid levels.

With regard to the £2 single trips, it was reported that the £2 bus fare cap had been extended to 31st December 2024. Simon Goff highlighted that the overall number of trips had grown steadily starting at 38% in January and increasing to 52.1% in October. He said that they were continuing to lobby government for longer term certainty for the industry.

In terms of Somerset Passenger Recovery, it was reported that overall passenger

volumes for this financial year were 21% ahead of the previous year. The greatest volume growth was on the 21A, 28, 1 and 77.

Simon Goff advised that since the changes made in October, there had been an improvement in punctuality and the additional changes being introduced in November had been designed to increase service punctuality further. With regard to lost mileage, it was reported that driver availability had been the main issue due to sickness. Over the last three weeks there had been a continued and sustained improvement.

Peter Fairey, Operations Director of South West Coaches reported that they had also seen a year on year growth as a result of the £2 fare with an increase of 19% compared to the previous year on general travel. He had concerns regarding sustainability in the future following the end of the £2 fare and hoped that follow up funding would be available to bridge the gap. He advised that passenger numbers continued to grow, however there were still challenges across the network specifically the No. 1 service from Shepton Mallet to Yeovil. It was reported that a training programme had been put in place but there were still issues with a lack of drivers coming forward.

Thomas Hughes, Operations Manager for Bath and Wells First Bus advised that they would be reviewing the reliability of services across the network including routes out of Frome and Bath. He reported that driver recruitment for Wells in particular was looking positive.

During the discussion, a number of issues were highlighted which included:

- Punctuality issues on the Taunton town services
- Cleaning of buses at Wells and Taunton
- The need for marketing across the whole of Somerset
- Improvements needed on the performance of the 20-21 corridor Weston-super-Mare to Taunton
- The need for an Operating Centre in Yeovil to maintain the network
- It was suggested that work was required to understand the usage of bus stations and bus depots.
- Bus users experiencing problems reporting reliability issues.
- A request for passenger usage data on the 25 service including pre and post covid.

With regard to marketing, the Chair advised that countywide marketing was being undertaken and not just on the four under threat routes. He highlighted that it was important to understand that without further use, the four under threat services would not be able to continue in their current form.

At the conclusion of the item, the Chair thanked the operators for their updates and agreed for the slides presented by Simon Goff to be circulated for information.

28 ZEBRA 2 - Agenda Item 6

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning reported that the Government had recently announced a new round of ZEBRA2 (Zero Emissions Bus Regional Areas) funding. For this round of funding, the Department of Transport (DfT) were focussing initially on rural areas. Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) eligible for funding would include those that had not previously received ZEBRA funding, be able to demonstrate that the area where the zero emission vehicles would be introduced would be used on rural services and LTAs must have an Enhanced Partnership Scheme in place. Only new zero emission buses and mini buses would be eligible for funding.

In terms of the funding available, it was noted that there was up to £89 million available in 2023/24 and up to £40 million in 2024/25. £25 million was being initially reserved for rural proposals. The DfT would contribute up to 75% of the cost difference between a zero emission bus and a standard conventional diesel bus of the same capacity. For infrastructure, the DfT would contribute up to 75% of the total capital expenditure as a result of the purchase and installation of the infrastructure.

Natasha Bates said that local transport authorities were being asked to submit notification of intention to apply by 20th October with applications being submitted by 15th December. All local bus operators had been contacted to make them aware of the opportunity and to come forward with expressions of interest for working on a combined bid. She was pleased to report that an operator had come forward and initial discussions were taking place.

It was suggested that officers should co-ordinate with neighbouring authorities as potentially there could be elements of cross boundary working.

The Chair commented that this was very positive news and hoped that the opportunity would move forward to fruition. He also thanked Natasha Bates for all her hard work.

Members of the Board noted the update.

29 Somerset's Bus Information Strategy - Agenda Item 7

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning reported that officers were currently working with WSP to pull together the Somerset Bus Information Strategy. The elements of work contained within the Strategy included QR codes and the further roll out of the Taunton trial, bus stop audits, Think Travel journey planner, Somerset Council website and how it is used to share information as well as the Somerset Bus Passenger Charter.

She highlighted that funding had not been secured to deliver all of the elements originally set out in the BSIP therefore some of the work would be restricted by budgetary constraints and this would be reflected within the Strategy.

The following points were raised by members during the discussion:

- The importance of providing printed materials included timetables at bus stops. It was hoped that this would be included within the Somerset Bus Information Strategy.
- It was suggested that it would be useful to have the code of the bus stop and the texting information included within the QR code leaflets.
- Potential opportunities for working with the town and parish councils to contribute to the running of under threat routes.
- The possibility of providing a Somerset wide booklet for the tourist season similar to those produced in Devon and Cornwall.

In response to points raised, it was confirmed that:

- Work would continue with the operators to ensure timetable information was widely available at bus stops.
- The suggestion regarding the QR code leaflets was noted and would be taken forward by officers.
- A meeting had been held specifically for the town and parish councils that covered the services that were under threat to make them aware of the issues.
- Timetable booklets were extremely expensive to produce and there was a lot of wastage therefore production was likely to be reduced in the future, however it was accepted that there was a demographic of people that required a physical timetable booklet. It was highlighted that route level guides were just as effective and more practical.

Members of the Board noted the update.

30 Passenger Satisfaction Survey - Agenda Item 8

Tim Reynolds, WSP Associate gave an overview of the work that had been

undertaken with Queenswood, an engagement company who had been undertaking surveys across the Somerset Bus Network. As part of Somerset Council's commitment to delivering and monitoring the Bus Service Improvement Plan, a satisfaction survey was required to be conducted every year and the results fed through to the Department of Transport.

Points highlighted during the presentation included the following:

- The survey was designed to gauge the level of satisfaction that bus users feel when planning, assessing and travelling on local bus services across the Somerset area;
- The topic areas covered by the survey would inform Somerset Council on areas of high and low satisfaction and how the BSIP plan was performing;
- This year the survey ran from 11th September to 7th October;
- The full data set of results was currently being collated;
- Work was due to commence with local bus operators and stakeholders to ensure QR codes are installed across all buses used across the network so a continual survey could record passenger feedback and results reported on a four weekly period;
- The 2023 survey covered the following routes: 1, PR1, 21/A, 22X, 25, 28, 30, 51, 51 (Yeovil), 54, 75, 77 and 81;
- 1248 surveys were recorded.
- Reasons for the lower survey numbers were attributed to: survey period being out of school holidays and the tourism season, poor weather and closure of Butlins, on more rural routes and town services the same passengers leave and board the bus impacting the numbers and some bus users declining the survey.
- A detailed analysis of the data would be undertaken through October and early November, initial results indicated that most responses came from 17-24 age group, with most people using the bus to go shopping and most stated that the £2 bus fare had encouraged them to travel by bus.

In response to a question, Tim Reynolds confirmed that the Passenger Satisfaction survey would be conducted annually so trends would be able to be picked up going forward. The National Highways and Transport Survey which covered a number of matrices also gave a broad picture of bus user satisfaction. All of the data information sets would be looked at and pulled together through the work of the Bus Information Strategy.

31 Update from the Chair of the Bus User and Stakeholders Group - Agenda Item

Peter Travis, Chair of the Bus User and Stakeholder Group was invited to speak. His points included the following:

- There appeared to be a greater willingness by First Group to engage with the Bus Groups and Users across the County which was welcomed.
- Somerset Bus Partnership had ran 26 bus stalls to help launch the new September timetables, 10 of which were on the under threat routes.
- The Group had printed timetables and were in support of specific bus route timetables. The key issue was making sure the timetables were distributed to the people that really needed them. There needed to be a mechanism for this to happen.
- With regard to the four under threat routes, hard work was needed in conjunction with Somerset Council to ensure those bus routes were maintained. A meeting was held the previous evening to discuss the 25 and the 28 service which was attended by over 40 people from various town and parish councils. The councils had indicated a willingness to promote the services. The reliability of buses was raised as an issue particularly on the 25 service and it was felt that Somerset Council should be monitoring the cancellations carefully on a daily basis. Issues with the 28 service related to overloading. A meeting to discuss the Yeovil route was due to be held that evening.
- He was pleased that the Passenger Satisfaction Survey results would be published in due course.
- With regard to the Bus Passenger Charter, he would like to see it being publicised more widely on the buses as well as promoted in the media so that bus passengers were aware of their rights and the commitment of the bus operators.
- The increase in bus usage was very welcome and it was good news that the £2 fare was being extended through to the end of 2024. The Somerset Bus Partnership would be working with Somerset Council to ensure that bus patronage in Somerset continued to increase.

In response, Simon Goff reported that route 28 had been challenging particularly on Fridays and Mondays due to the Butlins impact. Engagement with Butlins staff had taken place and data on the number of expected passengers was being shared as well as communication and engagement with Great Western Railway which would help with the planning of services and providing additional support where required.

David Redgewell sought assurances that all transport operators including those in neighbouring authorities would be approached regarding the under threat routes with a view to maximising funding opportunities. He also raised an issue regarding the Westlink connection in Axbridge and the need for this to be improved.

32 Any Other Business - Agenda Item 10

A member of the Board raised some concerns regarding inaccurate press articles and photographs that had been published in the Somerset Confidential Leveller and the Western Gazette. It was agreed that Natasha Bates and John Perrett would liaise with Somerset Council's Communications Team.

A member also referred to the need to get Taunton Bus Hub reopened as soon as possible.

A member queried whether a change to the 77 service was taking place from January 2024. In response, it was noted that the route was being looked at to improve punctuality.

A member queried whether any progress had been made regarding contactless payments. In response, Ian Bell, Public Transport Manager confirmed that contactless payments would be available on Somerset in-house vehicles within the next two weeks.

33 Date of Next Meeting - Agenda Item 11

The Chair confirmed that the next meeting would be held on Tuesday 6th February 2024.

(The meeting ended at 11.45 am)

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CHAIR