

Bus Advisory Board Public Questions – 6th February 2024

Question (submitted by)

Linda Snelling

The new Taunton Park & Ride contract includes a reduction in frequency on Mondays to Fridays to every 20 minutes. It is generally accepted across the country that a 15-minute interval is the minimum service level required to make a Park & Ride service attractive to car drivers.

There is a complicated relationship between Park & Ride fares, service levels and town centre parking charges. Now that Somerset Council controls all of those, it is in a position to set each of them in such a way that incentivises use of the Park & Ride service. This will be particularly important if funding to continue the subsidised £1 fare is not forthcoming.

Will the Council review parking charges in Taunton and consider the relationship between them and Park & Ride fares and frequency, with a view to incentivising use of the Park & Ride service?

Rosa Kell

The enhanced partnership scheme (paragraph 4.7) states:

“Bus Operators providing services within the Taunton Town Fare Zone will use Tap On/Tap Off (TOTO) technology from quarter three of financial year 2023-24 and will work with SCC to develop a roll-out programme for vehicles used on routes within the Taunton Town Fare Zone.”

We are now past the committed start date but no operators are using Tap On/Tap Off technology in Taunton yet.

Please give full details of the roll-out programme.

Andy Strong

1. The frequency of Taunton town services 1, 6 and 7 in the morning peak on Mondays to Fridays was reduced on 27 November 2023 to facilitate the saving of one bus between 0750 and 0910. The Bus Advisory Board was not consulted on this at its last meeting on 12 October.

The enhanced partnership scheme (paragraph 4.11), states that: “When contemplating making changes to frequency of services included within the Enhanced Partnership Scheme, Bus Operators will consult with the Bus Advisory Board and take into account any comments made by the Bus Advisory Board prior to making such changes.”

It is very disappointing that no consultation occurred, and that a similar failure occurred only a few months previously, as reported to the July meeting. Confidence in the enhanced partnership will be weakened if the parties to it do not follow the commitments they have given.

It is disappointing as well that the Council appears to have supported the application to register the reductions with the Traffic Commissioner at less than 6 weeks' notice, knowing full well that the Bus Advisory Board had not been consulted.

The agreement between the Council and bus operators on the Taunton Town Fare Scheme (Annex H to the EP Scheme) does not oblige bus operators to maintain their service levels - despite the fare subsidy being provided from the public purse. In my view, that was a significant omission.

The reductions were not made to address a punctuality problem because the running time on those services remained the same and the layover between trips is an average of 5.5 minutes during the period that only three buses are running.

Will First South explain why they failed to consult the Board on the reductions and restore those services to pre-Covid levels at the very least, to match the investment in the subsidised fare from the public sector?

2. The enhanced partnership scheme (paragraph 4.2.1) states: "Bus Operators with a fleet containing ten vehicles or more used primarily on locally registered bus services will commit to modernise their fleet of buses operating only on registered local bus services across Somerset by lowering the average age of their bus fleet by one year by each subsequent April from an agreed average fleet age baseline in April 2023 to a point in following years where no Bus Operator has a fleet of buses used on registered local bus services with an average age over six years."

Please (a) give details of the average fleet age baseline that was agreed for each operator in April 2023 and (b) provide an update on fleet modernisation to the next Bus Advisory Board meeting on 23 April 2024, outlining the progress made by each operator over the past year.