

BUS ADVISORY BOARD

Minutes of a Meeting held Virtually via Microsoft Teams
on 25 April 2022 at 10:00 am

Attendees:

Mike O'Dowd-Jones, Strategic Manager for Commissioning-Highways and Transport (CHAIR); Natasha Bates, Service Manager, Commissioning – Highways & Transport; Pam Pursley, Governance Manager – Democratic Services; Tim Reynolds, Associate, WSP; David Redgewell – Campaign for Better Transport; Peter Travis – Bus Users & Stakeholders Group Chair; Cllr Glen Burrows - Somerset Bus Partnership Co-Chair; Anthony Reese - Somerset Bus Partnership Co-Chair; Phil Grocock, Wiltshire Transport Authority; Dan James, Exmoor National Park; Tim Blackburn, Mendip Community Transport; Richard Gibson, Cross-Country Trains; Josh Strickland – Hatch Green Coaches, Joe Walsh – South Somerset District Council; Adam Hawksworth – Buses of Somerset; Marc Morganhuws – Buses of Somerset; Peter Fairey – Southwest Coaches; Owen Clark – Dorset Council; Geoff Lovejoy – Buses of Somerset; Christopher Parkinson – Public Transport Manager, Transporting Somerset; Richard Gibson – Cross Country Trains; John Perrett – Service Manager, Transporting Somerset; Cllr John Hassall – Somerset Bus Partnership Co-Chair; Lee Jones – Fleet Operations Manager, Transporting Somerset

Welcome and Apologies for Absence – Agenda Item 1

The Chair noted that the meetings of this Board are not subject to the statutory public meeting requirements and will therefore be held virtually, with a recording to be made and published on the Council's website. Members of the public can also observe virtually. The Chair reminded attendees that the role of this Board is to provide a formal structure for discussion and engagement between the local authority and bus operators.

There were apologies from Michael Bryant (Governance Manager) and Tessa Saunders (South Somerset District Council)

Minutes of the Meeting Held on 17 February 2022 - Agenda Item 2

The minutes were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting.

Public Question Time - Agenda Item 3

Public questions should be submitted in writing no later than three clear working days before the meeting to democraticservices@somerset.gov.uk.

There were two public questions from David Redgewell, which were read by the Chair:

Questions from David Redgewell:

- (1) What progress is being made on Taunton bus and coach station now that we have £11.9 of bus service improvements plan money. It's a top priority of passengers to provide proper bus and coach interchange facilities in Taunton. Taunton is a major Southwest town without a public transport interchange bus or coach station. Tower Street by station is owned by Somerset West and Taunton Council. National Express coaches are interchanging passengers outside Shire Hall in Park Avenue for Exeter, which has a coach station under construction. Plymouth and Penzance with services to Barnstaple bus station, Ilfracombe and Bideford. Passenger facilities are some of the worst in Southwest England for bus and coach services.
- (2) Why Did Somerset County Council, who is the Transport Authority working with Somerset West and Taunton Council, not plan to keep bus and coach service layovers in Taunton bus and coach station instead of agreeing to allow buses to lay over and block stands in Taunton town centre? Other Southwest councils regulate the highways and bus and coach stops and where buses can wait. The blocking of stands without service of First Group buses and other companies is making it difficult for wheelchair passengers to access services. We need very, very urgent review of bus stands and passenger facilities in Taunton town centre by Somerset County Council.

In response to the first question, Natasha Bates, Service Commissioning Manager, said that following the funding announcement the DfT have also issued further information relating to the use of the funding, including rules on how it can and cannot be used. One of the stipulations is that the funding cannot be used for investment in existing infrastructure, which we have assumed rules out the Taunton bus station proposal. However, we will continue to look for alternative funding streams. Although there is nothing immediate in the pipeline, we are still intending to complete the feasibility study which will provide suggestions on what the improvements should look like, in case funding does become available in the future.

In response to the second question, Natasha Bates stated that the former bus station facility is owned by Somerset West and Taunton, and since the closure of the facility in March 2020, Buses of Somerset have had an arrangement with Somerset West and Taunton whereby Buses of Somerset lease space on the site for parking their vehicles. This arrangement between those two parties has recently come to an end, but our public transport team have been working with the operator to identify appropriate layover bays for buses where required and to advise of any action needed from their perspective to facilitate this. What is worth noting is that as part of the move to the unitary council, there are various workstreams looking at the activities across all five councils; and bus stations and bus stops will be picked up in this work stream under the assets and infrastructure side. So as these evolve, I believe that more strategic discussions will be required in relation to Taunton bus station and how it progresses.

Verbal Update on the Enhanced Partnership Plan & Scheme - Agenda Item 4

The Chair invited Natasha Bates, Service Manager for Commissioning-Highways and Transport, to present the update regarding the EP since the last Bus Advisory Board meeting in February. The EP Plan and Scheme was approved at Cabinet on 16 March and was then signed by all of the relevant operators. The EP was then dated and made on 29 March, published on the SCC website, and a copy sent to the DfT team. The EP came into effect on 1 April 2022. The EP is obviously dependent upon the BSIP funding allocation, so the EP will need to be varied to accurately reflect the schemes funded; this will need to be discussed at the next board meeting once we have agreed the proposals for the funding received, and those proposals will be discussed later in today's agenda.

There were no questions from the Board or other attendees.

The Bus Advisory Board received and noted the update.

Update on Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) Funding - Agenda Item 5

The Chair invited Natasha Bates, Service Manager for Commissioning-Highways and Transport, to present the update. She stated that hopefully everyone was aware that Somerset had been awarded BSIP funding of approximately £11.9 million, and whilst that was significantly lower than the original bid, it was worth pointing out that Somerset could be very pleased for having been recognised in what was a highly competitive and obviously over-subscribed process entailing 79 bids received and only 31 funded. She has circulated a report with the agenda which sets out more information about the funding split and the rules governing the funding; it has to be spread over three years and has been split between capital funding, which amounts to approximately £8.2 million, and revenue funding, which totals approximately £3.7 million. The next stage of the process is for us to submit a summary table to DfT which sets out how we propose to use the funding and the cost of the schemes that we are looking to fund; this needs to be submitted by 2 May, which is a bank holiday, so it is a very tight timescale.

In the next agenda item today, Tim Reynolds from WSP will be presenting some of the funding options, but the important point is that we are working within very specific rules set by the DfT. They have sent us a follow-up letter confirming how the funding should or should not be used, and NB will circulate a copy of that letter to this Board. As regards the capital funding, the DfT have been very clear that their priority for capital funding is centred on bus priority measures; while on the revenue funding side, there are two key areas, with the first being ambitious initiatives that reduce or simplify fares, and the second being an increase in service frequencies and introducing new or expanded routes (but not existing service levels and patterns). DfT has also been very clear that the funding should not be used for any schemes that do not primarily benefit buses, nor for generic marketing and advertising, nor for provision of bus hardware such as CCTV or audio-visual equipment, not for investment in existing infrastructure, which

rules out investment in bus stations. There are also funding stipulations that the focus must be on promoting the use of the bus more widely, promoting the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS), providing ENCTS travel on those schemes funded by BSIP, and ensuring that publicity will be made in conjunction with the DfT so that it is all co-branded and co-publicised.

A discussion by the Board followed; the point was raised that the DfT said funding could not be used for existing infrastructure "unless it directly tackles barriers to use". It was believed that the argument could be made that not having a transport hub in a major town centre is a definite barrier to use of bus services, as if there is no interchange to get another bus, that is a barrier. It may also be a safety issue as well if there is no safely organised hub bus station. The Chair responded that this issue will be explored more in the next session, but at the moment they are very keen to stringently follow the rules to ensure that the funding is ultimately secured.

It was suggested that the restriction on marketing of approximately 3% is not enough, as marketing is key to getting more people on buses, and it was also suggested that there be an all-operator ticket across the county, as there are in other areas, even including railways in some cases. This would be important for reaching holiday destinations, where we need to grow our market with tourists. It was responded that the BSIP sits within the EP, so marketing will also be done outside of the BSIP funding. As far as county-wide tickets, this will be difficult to institute because of a vast urban area in the north of Somerset and a very rural area in the south, but it is something that needs to be discussed within the EP rather than being included in BSIP funding.

With respect to the bus station, the opinion was expressed that it would be better not to upgrade what was there before at Tower Street but to start with a clean sheet and look at how people actually move around Taunton, as less than half of services go through Taunton centre. It was opined that we could do more and do better than re-opening that station. Another member expressed the belief that there is a separate fund for bus stations across the country outside of the BSIP which might provide funding. The Chair said he was not aware of such a fund, but they will obviously explore all funding opportunities; it was responded that it was a levelling-up transport fund for changes in bus and railway stations that came out recently. The Chair noted that the Council is not currently eligible for round two of levelling up but asked that information on the fund be sent to him and NB.

Another issue raised was the possibility of having the park and ride open after normal hours so that nurses working shifts at the hospital can get to work, as this has been ongoing for years, as well as the possibility of re-routing some services to areas where there are more residents. It was responded that there were security issues to consider with leaving the park and ride open longer, but the issue would be looked at; it could be part of both the EP and the BSIP. As regards re-routing, it was replied that operators regularly review their routes in light of new housing developments, but there is a difference between perceived social need and commercially viable operations. One of the criteria for getting more bus users is speeding up services, so making journeys longer may not be advantageous.

The Bus Advisory Board received and noted the update and discussed it.

BSIP Proposals - Agenda Item 6

The Chair invited Tim Reynolds, Associate from WSP, to make the slide presentation on the proposals and to discuss completion of the form required by the DfT for allocation of the £8,169,839 capital funding and £3,695,020 revenue funding over the next three years. He pointed out that the funding is not formal or binding at this stage, and no money has actually been issued; so at any point the government could say that they do not like our plans and take back part or all of the funding. Therefore, we have to meet all of the DfT's criteria and make a strong case for achieving what it is intended; we must meet their aims and priorities. Many other LTAs are not in as good a position as we are, so our partnership approach has functioned very well. Given the amount of funding, we will not be able to achieve all of the aims in the BSIP, but we should be thinking about how we can deliver on the key objectives that stakeholders and the public raised at the time of writing the BSIP together; i.e., more buses to more places, services that run later and on weekends, improvements to frequencies in rural areas, and decarbonisation of the fleet. We can achieve quite a lot of that even with the smaller funding allocation. The Annex 4 form that was at the end of the award letter is what needs to be completed this week; it is a high-level form very much like the BSIP funding form where we indicated the types of projects we were working on, the effects they will have, the amount of funding needed for them, and the type of funding required to deliver them. Once that is submitted, we need to start work on updating the EP in accordance, which can be done using the bespoke variation mechanism where we can add detail to any of the measures or operator objective that are outlined in Sections 3 and 4. The draft of the updated EP needs to be submitted to the DfT by the end of June, which will give us time to take into consideration any comments from the DfT on the summary form that we submit by the end of this week. So by the end of June, we will hopefully have a final set of capital and revenue items that we are all in agreement with, and using the change mechanism in the EP, we will have a Board meeting to agree the changes detailed in the EP. Funding should then be received by the end of October.

He noted that the DfT's top priority for capital investment is bus priority, meaning bus lanes, especially on all major roads with a high-frequency service, and also signalisation prioritisation, bus gates, removal of parking that impedes buses, etc. In terms of revenue spending, DfT priorities centre on reducing or simplifying fares, creative initiatives, service and frequency increases, new and expanded services, and demand-responsive transport services. As mentioned earlier, funding cannot be used for road schemes that benefit all modes of transportation, for general marketing, for provision of bus hardware, or for changes to existing infrastructure. With respect to the last item, this leads to an interesting debate on the Taunton bus station, as it has been closed down and is defunct, so therefore it is not a functioning bus station. However, as was also mentioned earlier, this may not be the right site in any case, so we will look at people's

movement around Taunton to see how that site relates to the local bus network, as well as looking at the likelihood of increasing bus priority through the town.

TR then presented the two major proposals for distributing the funding that has been received, given how there is a reduced amount to deal with and cannot fund everything that was planned for. First, for capital spending, one proposal involves funding across the four major towns of Taunton, Wellington, Yeovil and Bridgwater; the other proposal involves making Taunton and the Taunton-Bridgwater corridor the focus for various initiatives like bus lanes, electrification, a Taunton hub, DDRT, etc. With respect to revenue spending, the first proposal involves fare caps and lower P&R fares for the four main towns; the other proposal again focuses on the one transformational town of Taunton with fare caps, P&R fares, evening and Sunday support, and DDRT.

The pros and cons of the two types of proposals can be summarised by saying that the first approach would benefit the network more widely by spreading out the money over disparate locations, but this may spread the money too thinly and only achieve piecemeal portions of the priorities; while the second proposal is one that various authorities across the country have carried out successfully and that achieves some real benefits and serves as an exemplar by focusing investment in one location. In addition, studying such programs which are already in operation can provide lessons learned on what works well and what to avoid.

TR stated that if bus priority capital spending was focused on Taunton as an exemplar transformational town, quite a lot could be accomplished in terms of bus lanes, junction improvements, and junction priority measures, rather than just a few bus lanes and reallocated parking space. Some of the capital allocation could be used to develop a hub or hubs, which could take different forms allowing interchange between different modes of zero emission such as vehicle charging, bicycle hiring, and e-scooters, all linked into the bus network for wider mobility across Taunton. Aside from Taunton, we are looking to develop a hub in Somerton to connect services; this could be used to create a demonstration project looking at the benefits of different sized hubs and how different hubs work in rural and urban locations, with demand-responsive transport and digital interaction having a role. The advantage of focusing efforts and resources on a single location or corridor may allow us to gain better funding in the future by demonstrating that we effected the project very well, and this would allow us to extend the same measures across Somerset in other towns. If we are able to provide a very good example in one location, that will serve as a case study that gives us a better chance of receiving more funding to replicate this elsewhere in the county. TR believes that combining capital and revenue in one area might have a more positive effect than spreading it more thinly across Somerset and that we need to ensure that revenue and capital spending work together, e.g., if we make priority and vehicle speed improvements, we need to back that up with lower fares and increased levels of service in and around the town.

There is also the potential for bus priority measures to be supported by matching contributions from operators, as the DfT are very keen to see that operators reinvest

savings into the network via either higher frequency on the same route or serving additional locations. There are many opportunities to develop the network in the long term using the benefits made in the shorter term. The possibility has also been raised that SCC may be able to review its own internal revenue support budget for public transport and potentially move some of it.

There was then a discussion by the Board, with it being pointed out that the DfT clearly wants plans and proposals that can be delivered with their funding and can transform things. It was noted that Cornwall Council has regular meetings with the Prime Minister's special advisor on public transport, which makes it clear that this programme has an unusually high level of scrutiny, not just in terms of numbers that come out of it but also in terms of what goes into it, what is actually being done, and how the fund is used. If we do not deliver on our plan, we will not receive more funding in the future, so we need to maximise what we can achieve with the current funding by spending the capital and revenue together and spending it where we can get the best return on it, including some improvements alongside/outside those using the BSIP money. Taunton is the hub of the network, with the vast majority of our routes feeding into it, and if Taunton fails in terms of commercial viability, the whole network will fail. It is worth looking also at the general need to protect the economy of Taunton and grow it by working with local retailers and resolving traffic congestion, so that Taunton is a place where people want to go. After doing an ambitious transformation of Taunton, we can then move the same process out to Bridgwater and other areas.

It was opined that removing the car from the centre of Taunton has always been a priority and ambition, thus it makes sense to improve the bus services in Taunton and the radial routes to and from there to Bridgwater and other localities. A major concern is passenger facilities and bus shelters, which improve the customer experience, and there are not just local buses to consider but also a considerable number of coach services also coming through Taunton such as National Express which need places to park. This can create problems especially for handicapped users.

The Chair stated that they have made the point to government that the model they are promoting does not suit rural areas, and via influential groups that point is continuing to be made. He believes that the government is going to be releasing a future of transport rural strategy soon, which he hopes will include funding that can be bid for. In the meantime, with the allocation that has been received, there is a need to stretch the benefits of the funding as much as possible, and although it may be focused towards the transformational opportunity in Taunton, the feeder routes need to be considered as well.

A concern was expressed that we will not be meeting of the levelling-up objectives of the White Paper released earlier in the year if all funding is directed toward making Taunton a transformational town, which would exclude other large areas of the districts. It was suggested that an approach which complements existing regeneration schemes in key towns like Yeovil, Glastonbury, Bridgwater as well as Taunton needs to be

considered, as there are public transport issues that could benefit from the capital element of this fund that may offer a more aligned levelling up approach. It was also asked if a potential hub in Somerton was linked with a DDRT solution, or if there would be a blended approach where the DDRT could expand out to other key towns and not just within the feeder services into Taunton.

The Chair agreed that there is conflict between the requirements they have been given for the current funding, which is quite urban focused, versus the levelling up requirements. He stated that they need to ensure that they are not missing some points about levelling up in the submission to DfT, and there needs to be a conversation with DfT about ensuring that the proposals are of benefit to the whole county. As regards DDRT, it was responded that some funding is needed to assist that process, and possibly three to five vehicles could potentially operate in a seven-day pattern. It would make sense for them to be placed in the Taunton area, possibly in the higher up part of routes to feed some of those passengers into Taunton.

An operator that is based mainly in the Yeovil area and the east of the county expressed his great worry about the future of bus services throughout the county if the approach of funding mainly Taunton is pursued, as this might decimate rural bus services in the remainder of the county. The Chair responded that these concerns were valid but that the concern also existed that by spreading the funding too thinly would result in missing out on further opportunities for long-term funding from the government. He said that we need to get this proposal right and demonstrate that we can use funding to actually grow patronage; therefore, the Council would certainly support the transformational and focused approach, but on the basis that it is genuinely believed that this will better position us for any future opportunities, without the intention to exclude other areas of the county.

It was noted that the national strategy addressed quite a lot of matters other than just the BSIP, and that we need to be looking at all the things that can be done which don't require much money in Yeovil and rural areas. Perhaps some funding could be derived from the community infrastructure levy, the civil money which comes to district council, which needs to be part of the discussion about how district money will be administered in the new unitary authority. It was also emphasised that providing information is paramount, which development of the Think Travel portal will assist. Another member noted that it was encouraging that the local authority and the major bus company in the county are both onboard and enthusiastic about the proposals for making Taunton a transformational town. It was also suggested that Somerset did well in gaining funding compared to other regions because they work with the South West Transport Board, and that more work can be done via collaboration with Western Gateway and the surrounding councils.

The Chair thanked the Board for their participation in a very useful and helpful conversation; he pointed out that the receipt of funding was a demonstration that the county was a good investment and that we were in a very good position to build bus services in the county and make the case for more money in the future by concentrating

the current funding on a focused area/feeder routes, albeit a rural strategy also needs to be defined. The submission to the DfT will go in at the end of the week, giving DfT an opportunity to feed back to us by the end of June in order that we can refine the proposals accordingly.

The Board received and discussed the proposals.

Network Updates from Operators – Agenda Item 7

The Chair invited operators to advise of any network updates, noting that part of the Enhanced Partnership and Scheme allows for operators to advise the board in advance of their network proposals.

Marc Morganhuws of First Group stated that there is a need to consolidate the network post-Covid without removing services. He has consulted with John Perrett, Christopher Parkinson, and Natasha Bates on the need to remove some frequencies in areas where they are only around a 50% recovery rate; on peak flows carrying students, double-deck buses can be used, thus saving on having to provide more buses. They are receiving replacement vehicles now and are at the back end of a consultation with SCC within the 70-day registration period; the news of this endeavour will be made public by the end of this week. In Somerton there will be changes in order to provide better services; timetables are still being worked on but should be finalised by the beginning of June. In response to a question about Sunday services and tourist routes, he said there is an aspiration to do more regarding tourist routes on weekends, but the other issues that he discussed need to be finalised first. It was requested that any changes to services be marketed/publicised through all possible media channels, social media, and printed timetables; MM agreed that a Somerset-wide timetable should be discussed.

Peter Fairey of South West Coaches reported that they are de-registering the service from Yeovil to Barwick, which has been a victim of Covid, by the 3rd of June this year. John Perrett stated in regard that they are looking at data from South West Coaches at the moment and reviewing options to keep the service going.

The Board received and noted the updates.

Any Other Business – Agenda Item 8

DR advised that the Western Gateway Transport Board has a bus and coach study, which he has discussed with the chair of the South West Transport Board and which he believes should be picked up for the whole of the southwest. There will be a public meeting on 22 June via Zoom or Teams where they will discuss the buses and coaches in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset; he hopes that the executive member for transport in Somerset

will attend, as Baroness Vere is looking at regional transport boards for extra funding, and a push for further bus money in rural southwest England could provide dividends.

Date of Next Meeting – Agenda Item 9

The next meeting is scheduled for 24 May 2022 at 10:00 a.m. via Microsoft Teams.

The meeting ended at 11:48 a.m.

CHAIR
