

# **BUS ADVISORY BOARD**

## **Minutes of a Meeting held Virtually via Microsoft Teams**

**24 May 2022**

### **Attendees:**

Anthony Reese, Cllr Glen Burrows, Mike O'Dowd-Jones (CHAIR), Pam Pursley, Peter Travis, Cllr John Hassall, Natasha Bates, Alex Hallet, Marc Morgenhuws, Tim Blackburn, Mike Rigby, Phil Grocock, Josh Strickland, Lee Jones, Owen Clark, Joe Walsh, Daniel Mumby, David Redgewell, Deborah Fiddick, Peter Fairey

### **Welcome and Apologies for Absence – Agenda Item 1**

There were apologies from Tim Reynolds, Andrew Ardley, Dan James, Julie Sullivan, Joanna Moczadlo, Tessa Saunders, and Simon Ford.

The Chair, Mike O'Dowd-Jones, noted that he was chairing this meeting until the new Lead Member for Transport takes over at the next meeting. He then read the meeting guidance and etiquette for virtual meetings.

### **Minutes from the Last Meeting – Agenda Item 2**

The minutes were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting held on 25 April 2022.

### **Public Question Time – Agenda Item 3**

The Chair advised that four questions had been received from Mr David Redgewell, three of which would be read out along with the responses from Natasha Bates while the fourth would be answered in writing. The Chair noted that he had advised Mr Redgewell that in future he did not need to submit public questions, given his position as a Board member.

#### **Question 1:**

What discussions are taking place with Stagecoach Group, First Group plc, South West Buses and West of England commercial network in the submission to the DfT on 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 2022 and the need to protect the support subsidised network from October 2022 and as the DfT say? What are the railway alternatives, if any, in Somerset, i.e., Taunton-Bridgwater, Highbridge and Burnham on Sea-Weston Super Mare corridor, to Bristol

Temple Meads, Yeovil to Castle Cary, Bruton-Frome-Trowbridge and Bath, Frome-Trowbridge-Melksham-Chippenham, Taunton-Tiverton-Exeter St David's-Newton Abbot and Plymouth coach station?

**Response:**

Some operators have already been in discussion with SCC around the changes required to the network and have submitted registration forms to the Traffic Commissioner to reflect these changes. Further discussions will be held with operators over the coming weeks as part of the network review submission required for the DfT.

**Question 2:**

What discussions are taking place with the West of England Mayoral Combined Transport Authority mayor Dan Norris and North Somerset Council about cross-boundary services and the commercial review of First Group West of England bus network, i.e., import link such as the following services:

- D2 Frome-Salisbury to Bath Spa bus and coach station via Beckington, Rode Norton, St Phillips Midford
- 376 Street-Glastonbury-Wells bus and coach station, Chewton Mendip, Farrington Gurney, Clutton, Pensford Whitchurch, Hengrove Knowle, Bristol Temple Meads Station, and Bristol bus and coach station
- 173/174 Wells bus and coach station, Chilcompton or Shepton Mallet interchanges, Midsomer Norton Westfield, Radstock, Peasdown St John, Bath Spa bus and coach station
- 20 Burnham on Sea, Berrow, Brean, Weston Super Mare hospital, railway station and bus and coach interchanges—these services require evening and Sunday services
- Falcon Coaches / Stagecoach South West – Plymouth coach station, Newton Abbott, Exeter, Cullompton, Wellington, Taunton, Bridgwater, East Brent-Churchill-Bristol Airport, Bristol Bond Street
- Devon County Council services: 22 Taunton-Wellington-Tiverton bus station, 25 Taunton to Dulverton via Bampton, 30 Taunton-Chard-Axminster station, 51/53 connections for Lyme Regis, Bridport and Weymouth
- Dorset Council services: 58 Yeovil bus and coach station to Sherborne and Wincanton bus station via Yeovil Pen Mill station, x12 Yeovil bus and coach station to Blandford Forum via Yeovil Pen Mill station
- All services operated by First Group plc
- Wiltshire Council: x34 Frome-Rode-Trowbridge, Melksham, Chippenham bus station (Faresaver buses)

And what discussions are taking place with Dorset Council, Wiltshire Council and Devon County Council, the South West Transport Board and Western Gateway Transport Board, the NHS in Somerset and the South West, university campuses, colleges and schools?

**Response:**

We have only very recently received further guidance on the Local Transport Fund and as yet, no conversations with neighbouring authorities have taken place. Our understanding is that Buses of Somerset have spoken to Devon County Council about the changes they are putting in place.

**Question 3:**

Taunton bus and coach station was a regional transport hub, so what discussions are taking place with National Express coaches, Flexibus, and Megabus? As First Group plc operates all regional bus services, Taunton needs a regional bus and coach station, and is that the view of passengers? Taunton also needs a bus-rail interchange and coach station facilities for the Megabus and Falcon Coach services at Riverside or Gateway Park and Ride. What progress is being made in the Bus Services Improvements Plan bid to the DfT to improve passenger information, real-time information displays, disabled access, shelters and interchanges in Taunton, bus priority measures including bus lanes and removing the private car from part of Taunton town centre? The government guidelines also call for a parking review.

**Response:**

The second phase of the study by WSP with regard to Taunton Bus Station is still being worked on and we are due to meet with colleagues from Somerset West and Taunton District Council shortly to discuss this piece of work in more detail. Conversations with the long-distance coach operators will take place at the appropriate points. We will also continue to explore options for coaches to utilise the Gateway Park and Ride site. A package of bus priority measures for both Taunton and Bridgwater were submitted as part of the submission on 3<sup>rd</sup> May. These are all subject to the final funding announcement from the DfT and then further feasibility studies and consultation exercises will be required before these can be progressed further. Car parking and bus shelters are currently the responsibility of the District Councils, but as part of the move to unitary, these elements will all be reviewed under the relevant workstreams.

A statement was also received from Mike Palmer of Norton Fitzwarren Parish Council that appears to be objecting to the Buses of Somerset proposals for Route 25, which were discussed at the Bus Users and Stakeholders Group meeting on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May.

**Update on BSIP Proposals Submitted – Agenda Item 4**

Natasha Bates presented the report, noting that it had been circulated to Board members last week. A table in the report showed the split of capital and revenue spending under the new proposals, which had been discussed at last month's meeting. As noted at that meeting, spending will be focused on the Taunton Transformational Bus Town, rather than spreading funding too thinly over the rest of the county, although there will also be a focus on Somerton as a mobility hub and for a Digital

Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) feeder trial, as well as some bus priority measures in Bridgwater. It is hoped that his plan will make a good case for receiving additional funding in future to be used in other areas of Somerset. As regards the capital funding, the DfT has been asked if the previous bus station site in Taunton can be utilised as a new mobility hub development; a response is being awaited. With respect to revenue funding, the focus will be on reducing town bus fares to £1 (return journey £2), trialling evening and weekend routes, the day-to-day operation of the DDRT in Somerton, expansion of the Think Travel portal, and marketing the BSIP specific schemes. Feedback from the DfT should be received by the end of May, then the proposal will be updated again together with draft changes to the Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme. Also, the new Liberal Democrat administration of the Council will be briefed and then a key decision will be taken.

A discussion followed. Interest was expressed in the development of Somerton as a rural mobility hub, although it was noted that Somerton is now becoming the interchange point between Yeovil-Taunton routes, so there is an immediate need to improve waiting facilities. It was responded that feasibility studies need to be completed before action can be taken, but this will be considered. The Chair of the Bus Users and Stakeholders group stated that he is very supportive of the approach chosen; his question regarding KPIs was whether increased patronage expectations are discussed with the DfT. It was replied yes, and that targets are set out in a table in the EP Plan and Scheme; the targets assume more funding will be received, so probably DfT will ask for variation to the monitoring requirements and precise impact relating to the new measures.

### **Variations to Enhance Partnership Plan and Scheme – Agenda Item 5**

Natasha Bates presented the proposed variations to the EP Plan and Scheme, which is a legal document that underpins delivery of the BSIP proposals. Local authorities were required to produce an EP Plan and Scheme, which SCC did by 29 March 2022; the EP Plan and Scheme contains a bespoke variation mechanism in order to easily make changes to it. In her presentation, NB pointed out that the proposed changes to the EP Plan and Scheme are highlighted in yellow and that they had worked with the legal team to draft them. All changes are subject to the DfT funding being received, and they relate to the local authority's obligations as well as those of the operators. NB advised that all operators will be asked to provide a letter of support for the draft EP Plan and Scheme. These letters will then accompany the draft variation when it is submitted; it will be reviewed by the DfT, and if agreed, it will then come before the Bus Advisory Board for them to formally agree the variations.

NB went over each of the changes, noting that they will continue to look for other sources of funding to achieve all of the initial proposals, even if they cannot all be effectuated with the current funding award. She advised that feasibility studies, consultation and planning will be required for the mobility hubs, but this proposal is contingent upon the DfT agreeing to it; there is a backup plan to re-direct the capital funding into bus priority if it is not agreed, in order to avoid losing the funding altogether. She also noted that there is a commitment from bus operators to modernise their fleets and make fare information available to SCC for their Think Travel portal, to measure improvements in performance and passenger usage, and to install equipment on buses compatible with junction technology for bus priority.

A short discussion followed, with concern expressed regarding routes involving Burnham on Sea and the state of unmaintained bus stops; it was responded that more work is needed on these matters, although most of the responsibility for bus stops lies with the District and Parish councils, but this is being picked up through one of the workstreams as part of the move to the unitary council.

NB then asked for agreement in principle to these proposed changes from operators who had signed up to the EP Plan and Scheme in March; there were no objections raised. Mike O'Dowd Jones will follow up in writing to those operators not in attendance, and all operators will be asked to confirm their support in principle in writing.

### **Any Other Business – Agenda Item 6**

A question about access and bus parking at the Taunton railway station during its refurbishment was raised; it was reassured that the current situation is temporary and that new access will shortly be provided.

The issue of marketing was again raised, with it being noted that there have been extensive timetable changes which have not been communicated to users; also, the recovery level of bus users is at only two-thirds of what it was pre-Covid with many lapsed users, yet there have been no significant marketing initiatives regarding them. It is true that finances are tight, but promotion is needed to recover passengers. The Somerset Bus Partnership is suggesting a return in major towns to the Catch the Bus initiative which ended in 2019; the Partnership hopes that SCC and bus operators will support it, as it will make users aware of timetable changes. It was agreed that good marketing is essential, and the SCC Comms department will be asked to work with the Somerset Bus Partnership on this matter. It was added that changes to timetables will be made as of 6<sup>th</sup> June and that these changes will be available on the First Group's website, as well as there being a downloadable timetable from Buses of Somerset. With respect to the return of passengers, the recovery rate for students is 100%, leisure

users is 100%, commuters is 70%, while ENCTS cardholders is at only two-thirds. Dialogue is underway with the public transport team for Somerset regarding a county-wide timetable book with routes from all operators included; the BSIP response from the DfT is being awaited before a marketing campaign can be started for Taunton Transformational Bus Town.

First Group was thanked for all their work, but concern was again expressed that timetables at bus stops were not being updated. It was asked if bus user groups could help in any way, especially with respect to marking stops that are no longer in use, as there had been many complaints in Yeovil. It was opined that the positivity of changes in service needed to be pushed, that marketing is the responsibility of everyone, and SCC needed to be involved with the campaign taking place elsewhere that was focused on concessionary users. Timetables need to be printed and some mailed out. Another issue raised was the disparity in the quality of bus stops and shelters across Somerset, with Mendip really needing improvement; it was responded that active work is occurring on this and on other assets.

It was again expressed that there should be a ticket covering all services in the area, that coordination is needed in marketing efforts, that buses should be heavily marketed in the summer, and that the problems in Mendip should be discussed with the Mayor of the West of England. It was replied that integrated ticketing is being worked on and it will be picked up by the BSIP, while roadside assets will be replaced in time for the service changes. With respect to the West of England, matters are constrained by the BSIP and the limits of funding; it needs to be understood why most of the funding will be used for work in Taunton Town, and that this can lead to further funding for Somerset.

### **Date of Next Meeting – Agenda Item 7**

The next Bus Advisory Board meeting is scheduled for 12 September, 2022.

**The meeting ended at 11:13 am**

**CHAIR**