

BUS ADVISORY BOARD

Minutes of a Meeting held Virtually via Microsoft Teams

14 July 2022

Attendees:

Cllr Mike Rigby (Chair), Cllr Glen Burrows, Peter Travis, Cllr John Hassall, Tim Reynolds, Phil Grocock, Lee Jones, Joe Walsh, Stuart Moon, David Redgewell, Carl Nicholson, Chris Hanson, Deborah Fiddick, Richard Gibson, Adam Hawksworth, Rob Pymm

Officers:

Natasha Bates, John Perrett, Andrew Doyle, Joanna Moczadlo, Christopher Parkinson, Andrew Melhuish, Terrie Brazier

Others in Attendance:

Cllr Steve Hogg, Ross Pollard (BBC)

Welcome and Apologies for Absence – Agenda Item 1

There were apologies from Josh Strickland.

Cllr Mike Rigby introduced himself as the new Chair.

Minutes from the Last Meeting – Agenda Item 2

The minutes were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting held on 24 May 2022.

Public Question Time – Agenda Item 3

Two questions had been received on behalf of the South West Transport Network and Railfuture Severnside, which the Clerk of the Board read, as below, with Natasha Bates, Service Manager for Commissioning-Highways and Transport, providing the responses.

Question 1: What progress is being made in the county with First Group plc, South West Buses of Somerset to look to restore a 7am to 8pm service Monday to Saturday, especially on vital bus links across the county? Especially from Taunton to Yeovil bus and coach station via Langport and Somerton Services 54; Bridgwater bus

and coach station to Wells bus and coach station via Glastonbury and Street 75; Taunton to Wells bus and coach station via Street and Glastonbury Bus 29. These are all journeys, are all services with no connection working for passengers from Somerton to Yeovil bus and coach station on Bus 77 or from bus service 29 and 75 into service 376 to Wells bus and coach station. Both these routes require through ticketing.

Response: The proposal to implement a core 7am to 7pm network across the County was part of the original Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) bid. Unfortunately, the revenue element of the indicative BSIP funding was not sufficient to support this proposal being taken forward. This still remains one of our longer term aims through the BSIP process, but we will need to look for alternative funding streams as and when they arise, although there is nothing immediate in the pipeline.

Question 2: What progress is being made on a marketing strategy for bus services and public transport across the historic county of Somerset? Unity Somerset, North Somerset, BANES and West of England mayoral combined transport authority. Booklets and bus stop maintenance and publicity, including marketing campaigns for bus drivers such as at the Bristol Pride festival, Taunton Pride festival or Burnham on Sea festival.

Response: Our Communications Team have started to create a marketing strategy for public buses with the aim of this being implemented from the end of July and continuing throughout the summer and will also lead into the 'Catch the Bus Week' coming up in September. Peter Travis, the Chair of the Bus User and Stakeholder Group (also a member of the Board) is also engaged and supporting us with this campaign, which we really appreciate. We will also be liaising with operators and ensuring a co-ordinated and joined up approach.

Membership Update – Agenda Item 4

Natasha Bates welcomed Mr Stuart Moon of Dartline; Dartline provides cross-border services between Devon and Somerset, so they will be added to the Board if their membership is approved today. Then the next time the Enhanced Partnership (EP) Scheme is varied, they will be included.

The Board approved the membership of Dartline.

Network Review – Update from Operators – Agenda Item 5

Natasha Bates introduced the topic. As part of the Local Transport Fund (LTF), which is the final tranche of covid-related funding from the government for bus services, we

were required to undertake a network review with operators by 1st July. During the review meetings held to look at the commercial network, operators indicated that they are still struggling in some areas, with passenger numbers at only 65-70% of pre-covid levels. It is still too early for operators to make their final decisions, but we are anticipating some further changes to the commercial network in October. At the moment, the operators want to see what the patronage will be like over the next several weeks. A 70-day registration period begins around mid-August, and as plans develop, SCC will continue to work with operators in order to understand in more detail the changes being proposed, as well as agreeing to mitigating action where appropriate.

Mr Hawksworth of First Southwest gave his update. They have draft plans for changes in October based on patronage over the past few months; they are encouraged by the plans in the BSIP but are waiting as long as possible to take decisions. The recent network changes have taken effect, and he does not anticipate very big changes in October. Mr Redgewell commented that people in Yeovil are very unhappy over missed connections, with some having to make the return journey by train; he asserted that the role of the transport authority should be commissioning, not cutting services. He declared that there should be a public meeting in Yeovil. Mr Hawksworth responded that First Southwest had noted these comments and were trying to resolve problems with the 54 and 77 services. The Chair also stated that Mr Redgewell's comments had been taken on board, and attempts were being made to rectify the issues. Peter Travis reiterated the points he had made previously about Somerton and the problems that issues there had caused for Yeovil passengers; he will be meeting with them in the next few days and agrees that there needs to be a public meeting.

Mr Pymm and Mr Hanson of First West of England stated that they are in the process of working out changes to take effect on 9 October; they will submit these by the end of the month. There are two main points to consider: First, it has been very difficult across the network to recover passenger levels, and there has also been a change from pre-Covid as far as the demand and habits of users, so operators have to change. Second, their absolute priority is to have reliable services, which they feel they are not delivering at the moment with respect to punctuality; there is a driver shortage problem, so all changes made in the autumn will focus on the level of service that it is possible to deliver with the number of available drivers. As with many operators, the problem in the West of England is attracting drivers, with staffing levels 30% lower than pre-Covid. This has been caused by the 'great resignation' after Covid and also by drivers being poached by the HGV industry. The level of service that they are able to provide is not acceptable, so they will have to make difficult decisions; their focus will be on punctuality even if frequencies must be reduced. Peter Travis stated that they were all aware of huge challenges facing the operators, but what is worrying is that the services will be determined by driver numbers rather than passenger numbers.

He hopes that remuneration policies will allow the operators to gain the drivers needed, which is something that is strictly operational and which the Council cannot help with. He said that the operators' plans in Yeovil were pushed into action with no consultation, so he hopes this will change and that the necessary mitigation will be put in place. The Chair noted that previous changes did not have a very wide consultation due to the elections, and they hope to do better. John Perrett, Service Manager-Transporting Somerset, pointed out that there had been mitigation in Yeovil with the 68 covering part of the 53, but the changes to the 53 left small gaps which were hard to fill. The focus had to be on services that were completely withdrawn, in order that they could be hopefully reinstated. Mr Redgewell thanked Mr Pimm and Mr Hanson for their efforts regarding staffing recruitment. He noted that Somerset has more organisations and roles than just transport, so he asked what Heart of the South West and the economic partnerships in Somerset are doing to help recruitment. With respect to the problems in Mendip, discussions need to be held to ensure that the network extends into Frome, Wells and Weston, especially the health facilities, where cross-border routes are vital. The WECA and Somerset teams need to discuss this; although there will be changes, the most important thing is to let everyone know what is happening and to talk to people, as there may be a better way to serve the area. Mr Walsh, representing South Somerset District Council's Economic Development Team, asked operators to email him (and provided his email address in the meeting chat) regarding employment support that they can offer regarding driver recruitment.

Mr Cook of Southwest Coaches gave his update; they have adequate drivers but there are challenges with fuel costs and having to raise wages to retain drivers. Their biggest challenge are the services to Castle Cary, as it is necessary to board the bus from the road; they are attempting to get Great Western Railway to communicate with them on this matter. The Chair asked if anyone on the Board could assist with this; Mr Redgewell suggested First West of England, and Mr Parkinson provided his email address in the meeting chat.

Mr Perrett provided an update on FromeBus in the absence of their representative; they provide one commercial service (No. 30), and unfortunately the driver situation has made it difficult to keep it running every day. The principal has concluded that he therefore cannot maintain the service and has de-registered it as effective 20 August. They are looking at ways of using LTF funding to reinstate it; they need more data, and it may take six months to restore it and allow time to increase the patronage. There are no issues with FromeBus' contracted services.

Mr Redgewell noted that there is much work going on involving Castle Cary. There is a promotional video out that talks about the car park and new café, but what we want is bus stops/shelters for the No. 667 and the No. 1 (Yeovil to Shepton Mallett). He suggested having a meeting about bus interchange facilities and said he recently had

a 30-minute call with parishes and town councils. Castle Cary is a major station and the interchanges need to be dealt with; the bridge is also a big issue. Natasha Bates responded that this was helpful feedback, and she would give an update at the next meeting. Mr Travis stated that he fully endorsed Mr Redgewell's comments and has had many representations from the Castle Cary catchment area expressing a desire for improvement of services and bus stations, a project that needs to be looked at along with South West Coaches. With respect to FromeBus, one of the biggest issues for all operators is having drivers, but the Frome bus service is used mostly by the elderly, who are greatly affected when the bus just doesn't show up. There has to be a way to inform passengers when services are cancelled, and he is happy that Mr Perrett is working on the problem. He asked if the de-registering of the No. 30 in Frome was in the public domain yet; he was told that it was.

Mr Redgewell said, with respect to the proposals to reorganise First Group, that they have two offices, one in Bristol/Swansea one in Southampton, which he finds problematic for Somerset and the South West, including Wells and Mendip. He believes First Group should consult with the local authorities. Everything needs to be joined up in Somerset, such as the wonderful timetable book covering all services that will come out in autumn.

The Chair thanked all operators for their updates and said he appreciated the efforts of the operators. There is concern regarding the upcoming changes to services, so the Board will continue to work with operators on mitigation. He is optimistic regarding the upcoming BSIP benefits and will provide more information and answers at the next meeting.

Any Other Business – Agenda Item 6

There was no other business.

Date of Next Meeting – Agenda Item 7

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

The meeting ended at 11:51 am

CHAIR