

Minutes of a Meeting of the Bus Advisory Board held Virtually, on Tuesday, 25 April 2023 at 10.00 am

**Present:**

Cllr Mike Rigby (Chair)

Andrew Ardley	Natasha Bates	Ian Bell
James Eustace	Luke Farley	Simon Goff
Phil Grocock	Joana Jackson	Dan James
Lee Jones	Adam Ozdowski	John Perrett
Amy Poole	David Redgewell	Tony Reese
Tim Reynolds	Josh Strickland	Peter Travis

**1 Welcome and Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1**

Apologies for absence were received from Mike O'Dowd Jones, Rob Pymm (First Bus) and Deborah Fiddik (Dorset Council).

The Chair proposed and it was agreed that Agenda Item 9 would be taken before Agenda Item 5.

**2 Minutes of the Last Meeting - Agenda Item 2**

The minutes of the last meeting held on 17 January 2023 were confirmed as a true record.

**3 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 3**

There were no public questions received.

**4 Enhanced Partnership (EP) Scheme - Setting Fixed Dates for Timetable Changes - Agenda Item 4**

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning, explained to the Board that as part of the Enhanced Partnership, there was an aim to agree fixed dates for timetable changes across operators. During the discussion the following key issues were highlighted:

- There was difficulty in committing to a timetable of dates with the uncertainty of future funding from the Bus Recovery Grant.
- There needed to be some flexibility in the frequency of timetable changes to cater for leisure services, or consideration for whether seasonal periods could be detailed within individual bus timetables.
- It was important to also coordinate the timetable change dates with neighbouring authorities, particularly where there were cross border services.
- There was a desire for timetable changes to be communicated in a variety of ways, particularly to reach bus users who may not readily have access to the internet.

Board Members commented that current bus timetable changes were difficult to follow, where the frequency of changes were sporadic and vary across both services and areas. If there were set dates for timetable changes bus users would have awareness of when to expect timetable changes.

**ACTION:**

**It was agreed that Natasha Bates would consult with operators on the best point in the year to set for timetable changes and bring proposals to the next meeting.**

## **5 Service Updates from Operators - Agenda Item 9**

The Board received an update from Simon Goff (First Bus), including:

- The £1 fare in Taunton had been in place since December 2022, running for a period of 2 years. The data had started to show a steady increase in usage of the fare. There had been a 28% increase in passenger numbers for the first quarter of 2023 in comparison to last year.
- The National £2 fare scheme had led to overall steady growth in passenger numbers, with a stark increase seen in the previous week, yet to be investigated. The increase in passenger numbers mainly related to interurban routes.
- Overall patronage in Somerset remained at 85% of pre covid levels, this was an improvement on last year, which was 65%.
- The evening service trial in Taunton started at the end of January 2023 and had received positive encouragement, with a particular increase in journeys in the early evening period.

- There had been an improvement in delivery of services, with actions and plans in place to mitigate against a shortage of drivers.

Josh Strickland (Hatch Green) highlighted the following points:

- There were many potential benefits from cooperation and partnership working, with assistance needed going forward to help coordinate services, journeys and hub interchanges.
- There had been growing concerns from service disruptions resulting from unexpected roadworks or closures, and stressed the importance of having an immediate contact at Somerset Council in such situations.

Members of the Board highlighted the following points:

- The need for improved communication of short notice cancellation of services, making use of more social media platforms and apps, where possible.
- The importance of the availability of buses and drivers, to be able provide reliable services for bus users. It was understood many operators were taking actions to share drivers to mitigate in the short term, and increase wages and training programmes to mitigate in the long term.

John Perrett, Operations Service Manager for Transporting Somerset, confirmed that the Street Works teams did impose fines where roads were incorrectly closed, however there could be emergency closures at times which the Council may not be aware of.

**ACTION:**

**It was agreed that John Perrett and Natasha Bates would explore a system for which operators could contact with immediate concerns over roadworks and closures.**

**6 Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) Reporting to SYSTRA - Agenda Item 5**

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning, gave an update on the BSIP reporting to SYSTRA, who were supporting the Department for Transport with data analysis and confirmed:

- The requests for data would be regular, on a quarterly basis.
- The next deadline would be 10 July 2023, for data covering the period April to June 2023.

In response to a question raised, it was confirmed that the request for data collection had been received directly from SYSTRA to Somerset Council.

The update was noted.

## **7 Update on Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) - Agenda Item 6**

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning, gave an update on the Digital Demand Responsive Transport trial in Somerton and highlighted the following key points:

- Following procurement, the contract for delivery of the DDRT trial was to be awarded later this week, with an aim for the service to commence late summer.
- The service would include passenger and driver apps to make and manage bookings, alongside a back office system, including a phone line booking service.
- There was work ongoing with current DDRT providers to avoid the conflict of area coverage and to ensure the services complemented each other.
- The Somerset Bus Partnership will be consulted via Peter Travis/Tony Reese

Members of the Board highlighted:

- The importance of how the service would be communicated locally to maximise awareness and promote usage.
- The need for the service to have enough availability to join up with main line buses.
- The importance of phone line capacity to meet the needs of users.

The update was noted.

## **8 Update on Evening Services Trial - Agenda Item 7**

John Perrett, Operations Service Manager for Transporting Somerset gave an update on the evening services trial in Taunton including:

- The services, whilst still relatively new, had been running well, with no plans to make any changes currently.
- Whilst there had been some cancellations generally due to driver shortages, there had been little impact on the reliability of the evening services.

The update was noted.

## **9 Update on £1 & £2 Fare Schemes - Impact on Patronage - Agenda Item 8**

John Perrett, Operations Service Manager for Transporting Somerset gave an update on the current fare schemes, and confirmed:

- Operators working within the £2 fare scheme were continuing to do so.
- There had been some service information missing on [bustimes.org](http://bustimes.org), which had now been updated to include over 95% of bus times in Somerset. It was hoped that this would encourage further bus usage.

Members of the Board expressed the importance of lobbying Government to provide funding to allow the fare schemes to continue, and also to maximise opportunities regionally to communicate this to Government. The Chair confirmed that this was ongoing and that he had written to the Secretary of State urging the continuation of funding.

The update was noted.

## **10 Update from the Chair of the Bus User and Stakeholders Group - Agenda Item 10**

Peter Travis, Chair of the Group, praised the progress being made and presented the update, including the following:

- The need to lobby Government, and confirmed a letter had been sent to Somerset MPs to encourage this.
- The importance of reliable services to maximise the increase in bus users with the current fare schemes.
- The need for more stability in bus timetable changes and the desire for more bus operators' involvement in the meetings.
- The importance of weatherproof waiting areas for passengers. Although the Mobility Hub in Taunton was underway which would provide this, Taunton Train Station currently had no enclosed spaces for waiting bus passengers. It was understood that there may be funding available for bus shelters.
- There had been more engagement across Somerset with rail operators in interlinking services and looking at bus shelters at the train station in Yeovil.

The update was noted.

## **11 Any Other Business - Agenda Item 11**

Members of the Board expressed concerns over the withdrawal of National Express services from Frome and highlighted the need for ensuring tickets could be accepted across other operators. Amy Poole (National Express) confirmed that the change would not take place until June and that suggestions were currently under active consideration.

**12 Date of Next Meeting** - Agenda Item 12

The Chair confirmed the next meeting would be held on 18 July 2023.

**(The meeting ended at 11.18 am)**

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**CHAIR**