

Minutes of a Meeting of the Bus Advisory Board held virtually, on Tuesday, 15 October 2024 at 10.00 am

Present:

Peter Fairey – Southwest Coaches	Phil Grocock – Wiltshire Council
Ed Hopkins - WECA	Dan James – Exmoor National Park
David Redgewell - Campaign for Better Transport	Tony Reese – Bus User & Stakeholder Group
Peter Travis – Bus User & Stakeholder Group	Sunita Mills – Somerset Council
Natasha Bates – Somerset Council	John Perrett – Somerset Council
Lisa Bentley – Somerset Council	Lee Jones – Somerset Council
Rebecca Mantyk – First South West	Dan Ashworth – First West of England
Chris Comer - Stagecoach	

Also in attendance:

Peter McNaughton, David Northey, Andy Strong, Ashley Richards, Barrie Childs, Rosa Kell, Barry West, Linda Snelling and Ian Cook

67 Welcome and Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Richard Wilkins (Chair), Richard Gibson – Cross County Trains and Josh Strickland – Hatch Green Coaches.

In the absence of the Chair, the meeting was chaired by the Vice-Chair Sunita Mills, Interim Head of Transportation.

68 Minutes of the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 2

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 June 2024 were approved.

69 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 3

There were no questions or statements received from members of the public.

70 Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) Update - Agenda Item 4

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning provided the Board with a powerpoint presentation on capital and revenue schemes within the Bus Service Improvement Plan. Some of the points covered included the following:

- Patronage on the park and ride had grown and stabilised since the introduction of lower fares (£1 for a single and £2 for a return) There was a slight dip at the beginning of the year, but patronage was climbing again and appeared to be

doing well.

- Since the introduction of the Taunton Fare in December 2022, there had been a steady increase in patronage. The scheme had done extremely well leading to a review within the funding available which resulted in the fare being increased from £1 to £1.50 in June 2024. Part data received so far following the introduction of the £1.50 fare indicated that patronage was starting to increase again.
- All evening services introduced in January 2023 had seen an increase in patronage, in particular Service 21 had performed well followed by Service 28 and Service 22.
- Somerton Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) had steadily increased since the introduction of the Scheme in June 2024 from 100 passenger journeys in June to 500 in September.
- The Taunton Greenwaves West (Wellington Road) was currently at the detailed design stage.
- The first section of Greenwaves East (East Reach/Hurdle Way) had been through procurement and delivery would begin next month.
- The detailed design process for Greenwaves North (Station Road) was due to commence shortly.
- Taunton Mobility Hub detailed design continued to progress with a programme in place to complete design and approvals ahead of moving into the procurement stage. The results and feedback of the consultation were currently being reviewed. The disability group WECIL had also reviewed the initial design and provided feedback as well as Taunton LCN.
- The Somerton Mobility Hub design work was ongoing, and options were being explored.

In response to questions and comments raised, Officers advised that:

- Funding for the £1 park and ride fare and evening services was in place until the end of March 2025. A review on the schemes going forward after this period would then be undertaken.
- There had been no feedback from the Department for Transport on future funding. They were waiting to see the outcome of the Autumn Budget Statement.
- Officers would be happy to provide the Somerset Bus Partnership with a detailed update on the Greenwaves Scheme.
- Officers would be happy to undertake engagement with David Redgewell representing the Campaign for Better Transport on the proposed facilities at the Taunton and Somerton Mobility Hubs.

71 Coordination of Bus Timetable Changes - Agenda Item 5

John Perrett, Service Manager, Transporting Somerset summarised the agenda report. He referred to the proposed timetable for bus service changes, registrations, consultation and Board meetings for 2025 as set out in table 1 of the report. He said that operators would be asked to complete a proforma outlining timetable changes for consideration and discussion at the January Bus Advisory Board.

John Perrett advised that the proposed change dates had been aligned with WECA

and if for any reason they were to change their date, then he would look to amend Somerset's change date.

Peter Fairey of South West Coaches mentioned that he wished to make a change to Service 81 due to traffic issues. John Perrett said he was happy to consider the change outside of the framework as it related to a timekeeping issue.

The Operators subject to Somerset's Enhanced Partnership accepted the recommendations as outlined in the report and agreed the following:

- The specific dates for timetable changes and associated consultation/registration periods in 2025 as set out in Table 1 of the report.
- To use proforma (Appendix A) for presenting proposed timetable changes at future Board meetings to ensure clarity on any changes being suggested.

72 Passenger Satisfaction Survey 2024 - Agenda Item 6

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning reported that the second annual Passenger Satisfaction survey had recently been undertaken by Queenswood, an engagement company who also undertook last year's survey. The survey period ran between 9 and 28 September 2024 and took place over 6 days per week. The length of the survey had been reduced and was much more user friendly and some town services in Taunton, Yeovil and Bridgwater had been added in. Surveys were undertaken across 20 routes across the County.

The initial feedback from Queenswood had been positive and they were expecting 1900 responses which compared to just over 1200 the previous year. The general feedback received indicated that passengers were largely either satisfied or very satisfied with only small numbers being dissatisfied which mostly correlated to a delay in the bus service.

Natasha Bates expressed her thanks to the operators and drivers who had been involved and supportive in making the process successful.

The full results of the survey would be published in due course.

73 Update from Operators on Taunton £1.50 fare, National £2 fare and any other relevant updates - Agenda Item 7

The operators were invited to provide any updates.

In response to a question raised by Peter McNaughton of First Bus in relation to whether any information had been received regarding future funding, Sunita Mills, Interim Head of Transportation said that she had not received any clarity on future funding for bus service improvements and that any time there had been an opportunity to put feedback to the Department for Transport in recent months, she had been saying how much the Council and operators value the BSIP funding and the £2 fare cap.

Rebecca Mantyk, Operations Director of First South West commented that since the £2 fare increase passenger numbers had declined compared to the previous year

but were now starting to stabilise. With regard to the £1.50 fare, she said that since the change in June, there had been a 10% decline in passenger numbers, but they were now managing to hold those numbers.

David Redgewell representing the Campaign for Better Transport made the comment that services relied on punctuality and reliability.

Peter Fairey, Operations Director at South West Coaches said that they were concerned about what was going to happen in the future with funding. They were managing to hold passenger numbers and were not planning any tweaks to the network to try and make it more punctual and reliable as they were not able to make any plans until they knew what was happening with future funding.

Dan Ashworth of First West of England commented that overall passenger numbers had improved compared to the previous year. There had been several service changes which meant that the picture wasn't clear.

Chris Comer of Stagecoach said that with regard to the park & ride £1 fare, passenger numbers had been fairly consistent with an increase over the summer which had continued into September. Like other operators, they were waiting to see what the next steps would be for BSIP funding and the £2 fare cap.

74 Update from the Chair of the Bus User and Stakeholders Group - Agenda Item 8

Peter Travis, Chair of the Bus User & Stakeholder Group was invited to provide an update. His points included the following:

- Reliability of services was crucial. It was acknowledged that the bus operators were working hard to improve reliability, and this was not made any easier by roadworks.
- One of the major benefits of the Enhanced Partnership was that the change dates and service changes were agreed by the Somerset Bus Advisory Board on which the Somerset Bus Partnership was a member.
- It was worth noting that during the Somerset Catch the Bus month, the Somerset Bus Partnership held 45 events throughout Somerset to promote buses. Almost 100 events were held during 2024 with a lot of support received from First South, First West of England, Hatch Green and South West Coaches.
- As part of the Enhanced Partnership, First Bus have reached out to the Somerset Bus Partnership and invited suggestions for route enhancements and modifications.
- In 2025 First South would be operating 26 electric buses in the Somerset Council area which was a major step forward.
- There were a number of challenges to face as Government policy on buses was not yet known and it was unclear whether the National £2 fare would be kept, and uncertainty of it being withdrawn was a major concern.
- He had written to the Somerset MPs raising concerns over future funding.
- He hoped Somerset Council would look constructively at bus franchising and talk to neighbouring authorities.

Sunita Mills, Interim Head of Transportation thanked Peter Travis and members of the Bus User Groups for all the hard work undertaken in promoting buses in Somerset. Peter Fairey of South West Coaches also expressed his thanks.

The concerns raised by David Redgewell representing the Campaign for Better Transport in referring to the Passenger Satisfaction Survey were noted. Points raised related to the following:

- Lack of infrastructure
- Insufficient maintenance of bus shelters and bus stations
- Better information at bus stops
- The need for improved bus shelters along the Mega Bus and Falcon routes
- Funding situation of coach services

75 Any Other Business - Agenda Item 9

It was noted that Rebecca Mantyk of First South and Barry West of RMT were meeting to discuss improving welfare facilities at Yeovil Bus Station.

Peter Travis made a request for the new GWR Bus Integration Manager and the Chair of Travel Watch South West to become members of the Bus Advisory Board.

David Redgewell referred to people living in the Mendip area relying on Bristol as one of their nearest centres and raised concerns regarding services 374 and 375 which come from Somerset being re-routed away from the main shopping district in Bristol. He asked if discussions could be held with WECA and Bristol regarding the proposals.

76 Date of Next Meeting - Agenda Item 10

The Board noted that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on Tuesday 28 January 2025 at 10.00am.

(The meeting ended at 11.15 am)

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CHAIR