

Minutes of a Meeting of the Bus Advisory Board held virtually on Tuesday, 30 April 2024 at 10.00 am.

Present:

Cllr Richard Wilkins – Chair

James Eustace – First South	Peter Fairey – South West Coaches
Deborah Fiddik – Dorset Council	Richard Gibson – Crosscountry Trains
Phil Grocock – Wiltshire Council	John Hammond – Somerset Council
David Redgewell – Campaign for Better Transport	Tony Reese – Bus User & Stakeholder Group (Vice Chair)
Peter Travis – Bus User & Stakeholder Group (Chair)	Sunita Mills – Somerset Council
Natasha Bates – Somerset Council	John Perrett – Somerset Council
Lisa Bentley – Somerset Council	Lee Jones – Somerset Council
Robert Sanderson – First West of England	Darren Hewlett – Dartline Coaches
Martyn Starnes – Mendip Community Transport	Chris Comer – Stagecoach
Dan James – Exmoor National Park	

Also in attendance:

Cllr Dave Mansell, Ian Cook, Barrie Childs, Rosa Kell, David Northey, Linda Snelling, Mick Lerry, Susannah Clements and John Hassall

47 Welcome and Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

An apology for absence was received from Josh Strickland (Hatch Green Coaches)

48 Membership Update - Agenda Item 2

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning clarified that when the Board was established the organisations to be represented on the Board was agreed. There had been no changes to the organisations but the individuals representing them had changed over time. The current record of membership had been circulated with the agenda outlining the individuals representing each

organisation. She asked that any changes to the individuals representing the organisations be forwarded to Jo Morris in Democratic Services in order for the membership list to be kept up to date.

49 Minutes of the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 3

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 February 2024 were approved.

50 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 4

Questions were received from Rosa Kell, David Redgewell, Barrie Childs and Emery Taylor. The questions submitted and the responses provided are as follows:

Question 1

Can the Advisory Board tell us what advice it's giving Yeovil Town Council and Somerset Council to ensure that the sale of the bus station and adjoining development at Glover Walk will by it's new owners incorporate a new bus station for the benefit of all visitors and bus and coach passengers of Yeovil.

Response

Once there are new owners of the site we'll start engagement about the future of the bus station.

Question 2

Can the Bus Advisory Board tell us on how can Taunton Bus & Coach Station be let out to the (a) NHS Trust and (b) sublet with all the public liability included to The Thames Valley & Great Western Omnibus Trust (TV&GWOT) to be accessed by the public on a Vintage Bus Run Event and where bus passengers are hour by hour during the whole day use buses departing from the Station and the public accessing those buses leaving this Station

Yet, the Taunton Bus & Coach Station be considered too dangerous and unusable by the bus travelling public of Taunton on a working daily.

I beg to ask how is the Station not safe to be open to the public bus passengers (and the station has not reopened since it's close down during the COVID outbreak). How can it be safe for a Vintage Event but not for the working day.

Response

We are currently investigating this claim. A written response will be provided.

Question 3

Can the Bus Advisory Board tell us where the coach and bus fees for accessing Somerset Bus and Coach parks is diverted by Somerset Council, in whose machines access fees are deposited. These funds should be ring fenced solely for use on the station and it's infrastructure.

In Street, Glastonbury, Wells, Frome, Shepton Mallet etc the payment machines are clearly signed Somerset Council.

Response

Currently the coach parking income is collected alongside car parking charges and due to the nature of the systems don't separate it, we are however looking to use some of our surplus car parking income to support sustainable transport, in the same way as we are doing in the Taunton area where we took the decision in December to support the park and ride.

Question 4

With The Thames Valley and Great Western omnibus Trust using Taunton bus and coach station for a special bus service, leased by the NHS who appear to have given permission for this event but as the bus and coach station reopening require Planning permission and months of work how is this event with the travelling public using the Bus and coach station going ahead on the 2nd June 2024?

Has Somerset council Public transport Department given permission and are the travelling public covered by insurance when using the Bus and coach station. Whilst we welcome this event and is Somerset public transport unit involved in the Event, we understand that First Group plc buses and National Express coaches stagecoach south west go ahead are involved in the Event,

Response

We are currently investigating this claim. A written response will be provided.

Question 5

What is the process on Reopening Taunton Transport hub as a bus and coach station, The NHS leaving and planning permission being granted and the First bus and coach services, Taxis services and bike and scooter hire being provided with toilets including Change place, Buffet and waiting room facilities.

Response

Somerset Council has concluded the 'pre-application' phase of planning approval at the old Taunton Bus Station site. The next step is for a full planning application along with an application for heritage approval. Detailed design and planning application work is underway. There is also a workstream underway which will inform

how maintenance costs are managed at the site. First Bus have been consulted to gain feedback on the designs. There is also work being done which will inform branding and wayfinding at the hub. Delivery of the works are programmed for 2025.

Question 6

Under the 1985 Transport act and the 2017 Transport act, all public buses and coach station and interchanges facilities need to be accessible to all bus and bus operators and access charges are made.

South west transport Network and Somerset bus partnership And public transport group in Dorset and the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council.

That bus and coach operators are paying access charges at the bus and coach stations in Somerset including coach parks at Yeovil bus and coach, Wells bus and coach station, Bridgwater bus and coach station, Wincanton bus and coach station,

Coach parks and stations at Wellington, Minehead coach park at the Railway station street, Glastonbury, Frome, Cork Street, the last coach park have had charges by Somerset west and Taunton council and Mendip District Council.

The money raised from charges is supposed to be used for up keep of the Bus and coach station Including walking rooms Toilets, Shelters lighting and cctv facilities, cafe and Kiosk rental in the case of Bridgwater bus and coach station what is happening to income from cafe rental,

As Somerset council Public transport has to provide open access at these bus and coach stations, what is happening to the money collected in charges

Response

Currently the coach parking income is collected alongside car parking charges and due to the nature of the systems don't separate it, we are however looking to use some of our surplus car parking income to support sustainable transport, in the same way as we are doing in the Taunton area where we took the decision in December to support the park and ride.

Question 7

How are First South/Buses of Somerset proposing to resolve the several communicated issues apparent since introduction of their revised route 25 & 28A timetables?

Specifically, with regard to Norton Fitzwarren:

- lack of effective weekday peak inbound service (to Taunton) between 08:10 and 11:10
- lack of effective weekday peak outbound service (from Taunton) between 14:55 and 17:45
- endemic early running, i.e. departing stops too early. Traffic Commissioner

guidance states depart no more than one minute early

- many would-be passengers left behind at bus stops with waits of up to 3 hours for next bus, destination box displaying 'sorry - bus full'
- failure to provide timetables at bus stops; day 11 of new timetable but majority of local bus stops have no information or out-of-date timetables displayed
- single decker buses operating some busy route 25 services, causing many passengers to have no option but to stand for their whole journey
- 28A buses often displaying incorrect route number (28) leading to passenger confusion
- Ticketer software not functioning (not programmed?) for route 28A - unable to issue correct tickets or to display necessary information to driver
- First Bus app tracker not functioning for any buses operating route 28A, erroneously displaying 28A AND 28a in each case but no timings/seat information
- errors in printed timetable booklet and pdf version requiring correction

These problems extend throughout the Dulverton and Minehead corridors and beyond, and impact heavily on passengers using, or attempting to use, buses on these routes. A significant amount of time and money has recently been invested by several people and organisations to encourage folk to make greater use of their rural bus services. As long as this seriously sub-standard service remains in place, we risk undoing so much of that good work as passengers revert to their personal vehicles to make journeys that really ought to be made by bus. Once these people give up bus travel they are unlikely to return to the mode.

Response

Somerset Council met with First South West yesterday to discuss passenger concerns following the introduction of new timetables on 15th April.

Question 8

The 16:20 Wells to Yeovil service 77 is scheduled to stop at Strode College at 16:47 however over the last few months, it has on over 10 occasions, skipped the college and thus left students trying to get home stranded. This has had a negative effect on myself and other students who are now worried they may not be able to catch this bus home. This issue does not only affect students on the day itself, but also has a major long term effect of reducing the overall reliability of the service which could have detrimental impacts to the students future transport choices, and the overall passenger numbers on this service.

This issue has not been resolved despite multiple complaints from various students to the First Bus National Contact Centre.

What is First West of England and Somerset Council doing to ensure this issue does

not happen again?

Response

We have raised this matter with the operator previously when we have been made aware of it happening. This is a commercial service, and it is for the operator to correct but we will continue to raise the issue. We will also discuss this matter with Strode College.

51 ZEBRA 2 Update - Agenda Item 5

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning reported that since the last meeting confirmation had been received that the Zebra2 funding bid submitted in partnership with First South West had been successful. £2.2 million had been awarded coupled with £13 million operator investment from First South West. Natasha Bates expressed her thanks to all those involved in the bid at First South West. The project would see the introduction of 25 electric vehicles into the network and would be a combination of single and double decker vehicles. Once the vehicles are in operation, they would be operated on services 28 Minehead to Taunton, 22 Wellington to Taunton (interoperable with the 21) and Taunton Town services 1 & 2. Further updates on the project would be given through the Bus Advisory Board as appropriate.

James Eustace of First South West noted the comments raised in relation to the specification of the vehicles and whether they would include USB chargers, extra wheelchair spaces and wi-fi. He said that he would be happy to engage with Somerset Bus Partnership and Somerset Council on the specification of the vehicles.

The update was noted by Board members.

52 Co-ordination of Bus Timetable Changes - Agenda Item 6

John Perrett, Service Manager – Transporting Somerset referred to the agenda report which was a reminder for operators about the co-ordination of bus timetables going forward. He confirmed that the second bus timetable change for 2024 was due on 2 September 2024. The 28-day consultation was from 24 June to 21 July 2024. Operators would be asked to introduce changes to the Bus Advisory Board on 25 June 2024. From 22 July to 1 September 2024 there would be a 42-day registration period where no further changes could generally be made with the introduction date on 2 September 2024.

John Perrett asked operators to discuss their changes with Somerset Council in

sufficient time for the proposals to be considered and reviewed ahead of the Board meeting in June.

It was noted that the Bus Advisory Board would be asked to agree specific date changes for 2025 at their meeting on 15 October 2024.

In response to questions, John Perrett confirmed that he was in talks with WECA over the co-ordination of change dates in 2025 to ensure better co-ordination between cross boundary services. In terms of the last changes and the sharing of details, some of the operators consulted on their proposed changes with the Somerset Bus Partnership which was to be encouraged in the future.

Peter Travis commented that Somerset Bus Partnership welcomed the timetable for the bus service changes. He said that communications with First South and First West of England had greatly improved, and conversations were taking place over suggested route improvements. He expressed his thanks to the operators for their willingness to engage. He felt that it would be useful if more statistical information could be shared in the future.

The Board noted the report outlining the timetable for the bus service changes.

53 Update from Operators on £1 fare, Government £2 fare and any other relevant updates - Agenda Item 7

The operators were invited to provide any updates.

James Eustace of First South West provided a powerpoint presentation. Some of the points raised included the following:

- On average from January to April there was an 8% increase in passenger performance overall compared to the previous year.
- With regard to the performance of the £1 fare, there was already strong growth compared to the previous year and passenger numbers were steady month on month.
- In terms of punctuality, figures were disappointing and a lot more work was being done to understand the key challenges. It was hoped that the position could be turned around in the next few weeks.
- One of the main concerns was around lost mileage which was predominately being driven by challenges with vehicles mainly at weekend and in particular issues with coolant leaks and the supply of parts. The issues had been reviewed and hopefully the problems would be rectified shortly.

Robert Sanderson of First West of England provided a brief update. Some of the

points raised included the following:

- In terms of passenger figures, there has been £6 million more passengers in 2023 compared to the previous year. Passenger numbers for 2024 continued to be encouraging.
- With regard to punctuality, extra journeys had been provided in Frome. The new longer routes from Bristol into Somerset were experiencing issues with roadworks.
- The prospective AI tool would help with collating GPS information from every bus and every journey and assist with providing reliable timetables.
- The Wells depot was fully staffed with a reliable workforce.
- Challenges ahead included the end of the £2 fare in December.
- Following a successful Zebra2 bid, 92 electric vehicles were being rolled out mainly in Bristol with 22 being put into the Weston-super-Mare Depot running on the long distance routes to Bristol. This would allow experience to be gained with a view to providing electric buses on routes into Wells in the future.

Peter Fairey of South West Coaches also provided a brief update. Some of the points mentioned included the following:

- A slight growth was being seen across the network. Due to the changes made the picture was not as clear as it would have been.
- The £2 fare cap had reached a plateau and was making no impact or growth.
- The removal of the £2 fare was concern for the future.
- A new timetable had been released on 15 April for the No 1 service. A few teething problems had been experienced and a few timetable tweaks were looking necessary.
- Ian Cook had been appointed as the new Services Manager and would initially be looking at punctuality in order to produce a better timetable.

The Chair thanked the operators for their updates which were noted by the Board.

54 Draft Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) 2024 - Agenda Item 8

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning gave an update on the current BSIP £1 funded fare in Taunton. She advised that the scheme had been successful in increasing patronage with a 30% rise in bus use in Taunton. The scheme had been reviewed and the fare would be revised slightly to be able to continue to maintain a lower fare ensuring that it remained sustainable within the BSIP funding available. From 1st June 2024, the fare would be revised to £1.50 for an adult single and 80p for a child single. The scheme would continue to be monitored including the impact of the revised fare with a review at the end of the

year to coincide with the end of the Government £2 fare scheme. She clarified that the Park & Ride Scheme would be maintained at the £1 fare as it was part of a separate BSIP initiative.

Natasha Bates gave a powerpoint presentation on the draft Bus Service Improvement Plan for 2024. A draft version had been circulated with the agenda. Her presentation covered the following:

- Background to the BSIP review
- Review themes
- Review process
- An overview of each section of the document

Following the presentation, Board members were given the opportunity to raise comments and questions. Some of the points raised included the following:

- Encompassing the network into Dorset and Devon was important in making sure the region was well connected.
- The need to understand the current position in relation to staffing and recruitment.
- The need for further information regarding the Yeovil Bus Depot and plans for an outstation.
- The need to understand the role of the Community Safety Partnership in relation to bus stations.
- Improvements needed to the bus/rail integration for disabled passengers particularly at Castle Cary station as well as the installation of drop kerbs.
- It was felt that an explanation of the core bus network and reference to secondary routes was needed.
- It would be useful to receive a summary and more regular updates on the document.

Natasha Bates thanked Board members for their comments which she noted and would be considered as part of the review of the Bus Service Improvement Plan for 2024.

The Chair commended Natasha Bates and her team on the work carried out in producing such an excellent clear document.

55 Update from the Chair of Bus User and Stakeholders Group - Agenda Item 9

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

- He reiterated his appreciation to First South and First West of England for their engagement.
- It was felt that the timetable change in April had been confusing especially in the north of Somerset. One of the main issues was that the bus times at bus stops had not been changed in time to reflect the timetable changes.
- Concerns over the lack of printed bus timetables at bus stops which were still used by approximately 20% of bus users. A solution needed to be found.
- Yeovil Bus Station continued to be an important issue. Consultation by Somerset Council and clarity on its future was needed.

The Chair thanked Peter Travis for his update.

56 Any Other Business - Agenda Item 10

In referring to a road closure in Yeovil, Tony Reese raised the need for the Operators and if possible, Somerset Bus Partnership to be notified of upcoming road closures prior to their approval. In response, John Perrett, Service Manager - Transporting Somerset agreed to raise the issue with the roadworks team.

David Redgewell reported on a meeting he had attended in Bristol involving young people and some of the bus companies. Concerns raised had included anti-social behaviour on late night buses, cleanliness, unsafety of local trains, drugs on the local transport network and revenue protection. He felt that the Somerset revenue protection rollout was an issue that should be discussed with First Group.

He also raised issues with the First Bus Group ticketing system and having to buy multiple tickets to travel across Somerset. He referred to the possibility of creating a county-wide ticket that would also work with the rail system.

57 Date of Next Meeting - Agenda Item 11

The Board noted that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on Tuesday 25th June 2024.

(The meeting ended at 12.00 pm)

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CHAIR