

Minutes of a Meeting of the Bus Advisory Board held virtually on Tuesday, 6 February 2024 at 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Richard Wilkins (Chair)

Peter Fairey – Southwest Coaches	Deborah Fiddik – Dorset Council
Phil Grocock – Wiltshire Council	John Hammond – Somerset Council
Ed Hopkins - WECA	Dan James – Exmoor National Park
David Redgewell – Campaign for Better Transport	Tony Reese – Bus User & Stakeholder Group (Vice Chair)
Josh Strickland – Hatch Green Coaches	Peter Travis – Bus User & Stakeholder Group (Chair)
Sunita Mills – Somerset Council	Natasha Bates – Somerset Council
John Perrett – Somerset Council	Lisa Bentley – Somerset Council
Russell Inglis – Somerset Council	Chris Comer – Stagecoach
Thomas Hughes – First West of England	Terrance James – First South
Peter McNaughton – First South	Dan Ashworth – First West of England
George Burton – First West of England	

In attendance:

Cllr Dave Mansell, Rosa Kell, Linda Snelling, Andy Strong, David Northey and Fiona Gourley

34 Welcome and Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

An apology for absence was received from Rebecca Mantyk (First South).

35 Membership Updates - Agenda Item 2

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning advised that there had been some changes to membership of the Board. The following was noted:

Rebecca Mantyk would be representing First South
Darren Hewlett would be representing Dartline (Go South West)
Ed Hopkins would be representing WECA

Martyn Starnes would be representing Mendip Community Transport
Sunita Mills, Interim Head of Transportation, Somerset Council would be replacing
Mike O'Dowd Jones
Lisa Bentley, Public Transport Manager, Somerset Council would be replacing Ian
Bell

36 Election of Vice-Chair - Agenda Item 3

Sunita Mills, Interim Head of Transportation was nominated by Cllr Richard Wilkins
and seconded by Peter Travis.

No other nominations were received so Sunita Mills was duly elected as Vice-Chair
of the Bus Advisory Board.

37 Minutes of the Previous Meeting - Agenda Item 4

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 October 2023 were approved.

38 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 5

Questions were received from Linda Snelling, Rosa Kell and Andy Strong. The
questions submitted and responses provided are as follows:

Question 1

The new Taunton Park & Ride contract includes a reduction in frequency on
Mondays to Fridays to every 20 minutes. It is generally accepted across the country
that a 15-minute interval is the minimum service level required to make a Park &
Ride service attractive to car drivers.

There is a complicated relationship between Park & Ride fares, service levels and
town centre parking charges. Now that Somerset Council controls all of those, it is in
a position to set each of them in such a way that incentivises use of the Park & Ride
service. This will be particularly important if funding to continue the subsidised £1
fare is not forthcoming.

Will the Council review parking charges in Taunton and consider the relationship
between them and Park & Ride fares and frequency, with a view to incentivising use
of the Park & Ride service?

Response

There are a number of Park & Ride Services across the country that currently
operate at 20-minute frequencies.

As part of the decision approved at Executive on 6th December 2023, to award the Park & Ride contract, it was also agreed that the Integrated Parking Strategy for Taunton (included as an Appendix to the report) would be adopted and implemented. The Strategy is aimed at reducing demand for town centre parking and encouraging greater use of the Park & Ride and local bus services. More detailed work on the parking charges will commence in due course.

Question 2

The enhanced partnership scheme (paragraph 4.7) states:

“Bus Operators providing services within the Taunton Town Fare Zone will use Tap On/Tap Off (TOTO) technology from quarter three of financial year 2023-24 and will work with SCC to develop a roll-out programme for vehicles used on routes within the Taunton Town Fare Zone.”

We are now past the committed start date but no operators are using Tap On/Tap Off technology in Taunton yet.

Please give full details of the roll-out programme.

Response

First South have confirmed that they have started the initialising process but there have been some unexpected delays. It will take some time to complete the process, but they anticipate this being done by July.

We understand that Council Ticketer machines are capable of Tap-on/Tap-off but as many people will be aware, we have had technical issues with contactless payments, which has been our priority and now that is finally resolved, we will now explore the Tap-on/Tap-off option with Ticketer.

Question 3

The frequency of Taunton town services 1, 6 and 7 in the morning peak on Mondays to Fridays was reduced on 27 November 2023 to facilitate the saving of one bus between 0750 and 0910. The Bus Advisory Board was not consulted on this at its last meeting on 12 October.

The enhanced partnership scheme (paragraph 4.11), states that: “When contemplating making changes to frequency of services included within the Enhanced Partnership Scheme, Bus Operators will consult with the Bus Advisory Board and take into account any comments made by the Bus Advisory Board prior to making such changes.”

It is very disappointing that no consultation occurred, and that a similar failure occurred only a few months previously, as reported to the July meeting. Confidence in the enhanced partnership will be weakened if the parties to it do not follow the commitments they have given.

It is disappointing as well that the Council appears to have supported the application to register the reductions with the Traffic Commissioner at less than 6 weeks' notice, knowing full well that the Bus Advisory Board had not been consulted.

The agreement between the Council and bus operators on the Taunton Town Fare Scheme (Annex H to the EP Scheme) does not oblige bus operators to maintain their service levels - despite the fare subsidy being provided from the public purse. In my view, that was a significant omission.

The reductions were not made to address a punctuality problem because the running time on those services remained the same and the layover between trips is an average of 5.5 minutes during the period that only three buses are running.

Will First South explain why they failed to consult the Board on the reductions and restore those services to pre-Covid levels at the very least, to match the investment in the subsidised fare from the public sector?

Response

Whilst the changes relating to the 1, 6 and 7 weren't reported at the October Board, they were shared with the Somerset Bus Partnership by email, on 14th September 2023, asking for comment.

Now we have the two main change dates per year, with dedicated proformas, that should help facilitate discussion at the Board. However, where changes for exceptional circumstances are required outside of these dates, the changes will still be shared with the Somerset Bus Partnership via the Co-Chair.

Question 4

The enhanced partnership scheme (paragraph 4.2.1) states: "Bus Operators with a fleet containing ten vehicles or more used primarily on locally registered bus services will commit to modernise their fleet of buses operating only on registered local bus services across Somerset by lowering the average age of their bus fleet by one year by each subsequent April from an agreed average fleet age baseline in April 2023 to a point in following years where no Bus Operator has a fleet of buses used on registered local bus services with an average age over six years."

Please (a) give details of the average fleet age baseline that was agreed for each operator in April 2023 and (b) provide an update on fleet modernisation to the next Bus Advisory Board meeting on 23 April 2024, outlining the progress made by each operator over the past year.

Response

WSP were collating this as part of the Monitoring & Evaluation process, we are currently awaiting the final report which contains this information and will aim to provide an update at the next Board meeting in April.

39 Variation of Somerset's Enhanced Partnership (EP) Scheme - Agenda Item 6

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning explained that as part of the funding stipulation from the Department of Transport (DfT), the local transport authority was required to update the Enhanced Partnership (EP) Scheme and resubmit it to the DfT in order to release the 2024/25 BSIP funding tranche. There was a requirement for the EP to include a table of funded schemes which sets out what has been funded, what the outputs would be, who is responsible for delivery and the deadlines. She advised that the plan section of the document could not be updated without wider formal consultation with stakeholders and operators. As the BSIP was due for review by 12th June 2024, the plan section of the EP would remain unchanged and be amended following the review.

Natasha Bates outlined the proposed changes to the scheme element as highlighted in green in the document circulated with the agenda.

In response to a question regarding Taunton Transport Hub, Natasha Bates confirmed that work was taking place to move the project forward. She agreed to forward an update and the project timescales to David Redgewell.

At the conclusion of the item, the Operators approved the proposed changes, as highlighted in green, to Somerset's Enhanced (EP) Scheme through the 'bespoke variation mechanism'.

40 Timetable Changes Proposed for 15th April 2024 - Agenda Item 7

The Chair invited Operators to present timetable changes proposed for 15th April 2024.

With the aid of a powerpoint presentation, Dan Ashworth of First West of England

outlined proposed changes to the following services:

- Service 20
- Service D2 & D2x
- Service 171, 173 & 174
- Service 55, 77, 77a
- Service 374, 375, 376 & 376a

Board members were given the opportunity to ask questions. A number of questions/comments were raised in relation to the following:

- Connectivity with Service 21.
- Connectivity with rail services and where possible identifying links with bus/rail interchange and making timetables clearer to identify routes that stop near railway stations.
- Somerset Bus Partnership were keen to meet with First West of England regarding the details of the ongoing timetables and following the outcome of discussions with BANES.
- The need for discussions with WECA/BANES on the naming of the Bath Interchange.
- The need for double decker buses on route 77.
- Strode College timings.
- Concerns relating to the earliest bus from Yeovil to Wells being at 8.55am and the 7.30am being missed off the timetable.
- Query regarding the timetable for Service 126.

Dan Ashworth agreed to circulate a copy of the presentation slides which included the proposed timetables.

With the aid of a powerpoint presentation, Terrance James of First South outlined planned network changes to the following services:

- 21/21a Taunton – Bridgwater – Burnham on Sea
- 22/22a/X22 Taunton – Wellington – Tiverton
- 51 Yeovil Town Service
- EXMO Exmoor Coaster

Board members were given the opportunity to ask questions. A number of questions/comments were raised which included the following:

- The possibility of re-considering the finish date of 28th September on the

Exmoor Coaster as this seemed to be quite early. A finish date at the end of October would be able to include the half term school holidays.

- The need for the 21/21a to connect onto Weston-super-Mare.

He then proceeded to outline planned network changes due to the end of the BSIP Funding period on the following services:

- 25 Taunton - Dulverton
- 28/X28 Taunton - Minehead
- 54 Yeovil - Taunton
- 58 Yeovil - Wincanton

Terrance James agreed to circulate the presentation slides and proposed timetables following the meeting.

The Chair expressed his extreme disappointment over the lateness in receiving the proposed changes particularly of the intention to withdraw services 54 and 58 and the lower frequency of services on the 25 and 28. He said that these were important routes, and the proposals would have a huge impact on people's lives. There had been no opportunity for discussions to be held with Somerset Council and this was unacceptable. He suggested that an emergency meeting be held between First Bus and Somerset Council to discuss the proposals.

John Perrett, Service Manager – Transporting Somerset, said that a lot of work had been undertaken to try and raise numbers on the four under threat routes and he understood that numbers had increased on all four services. He referred to the lateness of the proposals presented and said that there had been no chance for discussions to be held and for the passenger numbers to be analysed in detail and possible options discussed. He advised that funding for the four under threat routes was from BSIP plus funding and had been agreed until 31st March 2024. Whilst BSIP Plus funding from government was not due to end until 31st March 2025 there was a reduction in the overall amount being received from government in 2024/25 compared to 2023/24 and therefore less flexibility in the amount of funding available. He concluded that once further work had been undertaken and a meeting held an update would be provided.

Terrance James commented that he appreciated that the proposals had only recently been shared, however he believed that First Bus had always been very transparent in relation to the impact of reduced BSIP funding and the challenge in providing commercially viable services.

Members of the Board were given the opportunity to raise questions and comments

during which concerns were expressed regarding the proposed changes.

Peter Fairey, Operations Director of South West Coaches said that as previously reported the No 1 service from Shepton Mallet to Yeovil had been deregistered with the last date of operation being 13th April 2024. A procurement process was due to be undertaken shortly.

Chris Comer of Stagecoach said that they were looking to introduce Service 24 to operate between Tiverton and Taunton via Wellington linking in with the Taunton Park and Ride service.

41 Update from Operators on £1 fare, Government £2 fare and any other relevant updates - Agenda Item 8

Terrance James of First Bus provided a powerpoint presentation. The following was noted:

- Steady growth continued on the £1 fare in Taunton from June through to November. Whilst there was an expected drop in December, this was up 80% on December 2022.
- In terms of the Government £2 fare on single trips, there had been steady growth. A big proportion of trips was being seen on the 58.
- With regard to Somerset Passenger Recovery, overall passenger volumes were down from 21% in October to 19%. There had been a slowdown in passenger volumes since the beginning of December. Year on year growth in the past four weeks had been approximately 4%.

Thomas Hughes, Operations Manager for First West of England Bus advised that there had generally been an increase in growth from October to mid- December with an expected dip over the Christmas and New Year period. There had been a slower start to year as people returned to work from the holidays.

42 BSIP Review 2024 - Agenda Item 9

With the aid of a powerpoint presentation, Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning gave an update on the BSIP (Bus Service Improvement Plan) Review 2024. The following points were noted:

- The original BSIP was produced in 2021.
- A high-level review was undertaken in 2022.
- The 2023 review was postponed at the request of the DfT due to new guidance

being released.

- The 2024 review was required to be submitted by 12th June 2024.
- The review of the BSIP was not a bidding document but was linked to the release of the 2024/25 funding.
- The key themes that the DfT were looking for in the review included:
 - Updating baseline data to reflect 2023/24 position.
 - Setting out the improvement programme for 2024/25.
 - Plans and ambitions beyond 2025 linked to the Local Transport Plan.
- Growing patronage remains the overall aim which related to 12 objectives set out by the DfT.
- There would be new reporting requirements linked to Bus Connectivity Assessments.
- There was updated guidance on Bus Passenger Charters.
- A future review was expected in 2025 and then less frequently.

Natasha Bates explained that the next step involved looking at all the guidance and what was required to be undertaken to meet the deadline for the 2024 review. She advised that operators and stakeholders would be engaged in the process and the BSIP Review would also go through Somerset Council's governance process.

43 ZEBRA 2 - Agenda Item 10

Natasha Bates, Service Manager – Transport Commissioning reported that a bid had been submitted to the DfT in partnership with First South and an announcement on the bid outcomes was expected in March. If the bid were to be successful, this would see 25 zero emission vehicles operating out of the First South Taunton depot and would be a combination of single and double deck vehicles. The bid was to operate these vehicles on services 21, 22 and 28, and Taunton town services 1 and 2.

44 Update from the Chair of the Bus User and Stakeholders Group - Agenda Item 11

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

- The proposed withdrawal of the 54 service Yeovil – Taunton by First South was shocking news and was extremely concerning meaning more uncertainty for bus users. Somerset Bus Partnership were willing to support Somerset Council in any way possible with their discussions with First South.
- There needed to be a solution to depots in Somerset. It was felt that First South should be openly sharing their plans for the Yeovil bus depot.

- Concerns over the reliability of bus services, not just the cancellation of services but also individual bus services being cancelled due to unreliable and old buses.
- Somerset Council declared a climate emergency four years ago and one of the significant actions to take was to move people away from using the private car onto buses. A trend in this direction had not been seen.
- The Somerset Bus Partnership would be supporting and helping the bus companies as much as possible.
- In April, the Somerset Bus Partnership would be running 22 bus stalls in every town in Somerset giving out printed timetables. A lot of established bus users relied on printed bus timetables. First South had agreed to supply Buses of Somerset timetable booklets. Any other operators who were able to provide timetables was welcomed.
- It was felt that further promotion of the Bus Passenger Charter was required by Somerset Council through its social media channels and press releases.

45 Any Other Business - Agenda Item 12

David Redgewell highlighted that there was a West Of England review of Westlink currently being undertaken which linked into Axbridge and Weston-super-Mare.

46 Date of Next Meeting - Agenda Item 13

The Board noted that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on Tuesday 23rd April 2024.

(The meeting ended at 12.00 pm)

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CHAIR