

# **BUS ADVISORY BOARD**

## **Minutes of a Meeting Held Virtually via Microsoft Teams**

**17 January 2023**

### **Attendees:**

Mike O'Dowd-Jones (Acting Chair), Peter Travis (Chair-Bus Users & Stakeholders Group), Anthony Reese (Somerset Bus Partnership/Vice Chair-Bus Users & Stakeholders Group), Phil Grocock (Wiltshire Council), Lee Jones (SCC In-House Fleet), David Redgewell (Campaign for Better Transport), Richard Gibson (Cross-Country Trains), Deborah Fiddick (Dorset Council), Peter Fairey (South West Coaches), Tim Reynolds (WSP), Dan James (Exmoor National Park), Glen Burrows (Somerset Bus Partnership), Joana Jackson (WECA), Marc Morganhuws (Buses of Somerset), Carl Nicholson (North Somerset Council), Cllr John Hassall (Somerset Bus Partnership), Phil Wright (WECA), Rob Pymm (First West of England)

SCC: Natasha Bates, John Perrett, Andrew Melhuish, Terrie Brazier, Jonathan Hallows

### **Welcome and Apologies for Absence – Agenda Item 1**

Mike O'Dowd-Jones, Strategic Manager-Highways and Transport and Acting Chair in Cllr Rigby's absence, read the meeting guidance and etiquette for virtual meetings.

Apologies were received from Josh Strickland (Hatch Green Coaches)

### **Minutes from the Last Meeting – Agenda Item 2**

The minutes were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting held on 2 December 2022.

### **Public Question Time – Agenda Item 3**

There were no public questions or statements received.

## **Enhanced Partnership (EP) Scheme Variation 3 and Formal Adoption / BSIP Funding Update – Agenda Item 4**

Tim Reynolds, Associate-WSP, noted that the changes to Version 3 of the EP are minor and driven by comments from the Department for Transport (DfT). In Section 3, nothing has changed in the Plan, but in the Scheme evening services have been added. Regarding operator obligations, the commitment to multi-operator ticketing has been added, as well as the low-fare schemes. However, there is not enough funding to invest in the multi-operator ticketing, so there will only be facilitation of this scheme through discussions with operators. As noted in Section 3.14, there are no disincentives to not being part of this voluntary scheme, but there will be benefits for those who are. In Section 4, with respect to bus operator obligations, the DfT wants a tap on-tap off scheme, which will be possible using current machines without additional readers. The operators will work with the Council on this, and the scheme must be available in the Taunton fare zone by the end of this December. The final change is to Annex J, which notes that this is the third variation and that the changes have been made in order to release the BSIP funding.

The Chair invited comments from the Board regarding the variations. David Redgewell, representing The Campaign for Better Transport, observed that he was very keen on multi-operator ticketing as Devon, Wiltshire and other areas already have this; it should be possible to effect it by having discussions with operators and without guidance from the DfT. Cllr John Hassall of the Somerset Bus Partnership asked if the Exmoor Coaster could be included in this scheme, given that it runs cross-boundary with Devon; it was replied that it could be included in an appropriate scheme where agreed with the operator. The first area in which it will be set up is Taunton, but it will expand to additional areas and will not be restricted by boundaries. There were no objections to the scheme by the operators present.

Tim Reynolds then gave an update on BSIP funding, noting that Year One funding had been received before the holidays; the programme covers three years, and there are discussions with DfT regarding how and when it will be spent, given that Year One funding can't all be spent in a few months. Work will begin on the Year Two funding once the updated EP is submitted. It is necessary to complete the first monitoring update by April regarding what is spent and where, and there is now a change control process in place to agree any amendments required with the DfT. Natasha Bates, Service Manager-Transport Commissioning, clarified that once changes to the EP are agreed, it will be published on the website and submitted to the DfT by the end of January in order to release the Year Two funding.

All operators present unanimously agreed to adopt the latest variations to the EP through the bespoke variation mechanism.

### **Update on Mobility Hubs – Agenda Item 5**

Natasha Bates, Service Manager-Transport Commissioning, advised that she has spoken to her colleague Josephine Patterson, Transport Infrastructure Commissioning Manager, who is leading on the capital program elements of the BSIP, and she has provided information for the update.

On the Taunton mobility hub, the Stage 1 feasibility report with a list of options for possible components to be included has been received; these include:

- Mobility services such as buses, taxis, e-scooters, and mobility scooters.
- Mobility infrastructure
- Traveller facilities including wifi, toilets, and real-time information
- Place-making facilities
- Commercial functions
- Community functions

The Stage 2 study will begin shortly and will inform the preferred option, although this will not be the final design. This study will:

- Inform SCC as it reaches the preferred options stage
- Include discussions with bus operators in order to advise on the operational requirements of the buses
- Determine which mobility hub services and components are required at the site
- Set out high-level capital and operational costs
- Outline the commercial strategy
- Provide an artist's impression of the chosen layout.

There will be a wider consultation and then detailed design work in the spring/summer of this year, with construction work expected to be undertaken in 2024. With respect to the NHS lease, this is being discussed with Somerset West and Taunton District Council and is due come to an end before the construction work takes place.

With respect to the Somerton mobility hub, which is a smaller, rural hub, the draft Stage One feasibility report has been produced which is currently being reviewed by SCC staff. This report has provided a short list of potential sites for the bus interchange and looks at the provision of additional community services where required. Once that is complete, Stage Two will involve engagement with Somerton Town Council and other

key stakeholders and will develop a high-level design concept and consider how best to procure and deliver the key components. It is intended that the consultation, detailed design, and construction work will be undertaken during 2023.

The Chair invited comments from the Board regarding the mobility hubs; David Redgewell, representing The Campaign for Better Transport, advised that National Express are keen to return to the Taunton bus station rather than going through Exeter or Bridgwater; therefore, it would be best to discuss this with them, as it will mean more buses arriving in Taunton. Berry's Coaches and Flex Bus wish to do the same. The Chair agreed that those conversations would be picked up.

Cllr John Hassall, representing the Somerset Bus Partnership, brought up the issue of wheelchair access on buses, observing that some persons in wheelchairs cannot board because the wheelchairs are too wide; and he suggested that this be discussed with bus companies. The chair noted that there are access requirements for operators, and Lee Jones, in-house Fleet Operations Manager, stated that there are size and dimension requirements for ramps and wheelchair access. Marc Morganhuws of Buses of Somerset added that every bus in Britain is built to legal requirements and standards and meets those structural requirements; so the problem lies in a wheelchair being too big or too heavy. There is unfortunately nothing that bus companies can do about that, as vehicles carrying wheelchairs and scooters are built to meet the required standards; operators can only advise users whether there may be an issue if they are contacted before the journey. The Chair said this issue would be considered as to whether there was anything the Council could do for members of the Community in a wider sense.

Tony Reese, Vice Chair for the Bus Users and Stakeholders Group, asked if the Board would be able to see the Stage One feasibility reports; the Chair responded that the documents are currently being reviewed and will be updated following officer comments, after which they will be circulated to the Board.

Returning to the issue of wheelchair access, David Redgewell observed that there are 120 disabled access buses across Somerset, and if grant aid could be obtained, perhaps a new design could be looked at that provides two wheelchair spaces rather than one. He acknowledged that the new vehicles were very expensive. Marc Morganhuws replied that there is a wider issue of different passenger markets; Bristol has a much higher demand for wheelchair users than other areas, and each wheelchair space takes up space on the #28, for example, that reduces space for other users by 2-4 seats. There needs to be a balance between these needs.

## **Update on Evening Services Trail – Agenda Item 6**

The Chair invited John Perrett, Operational Service Manager for Transporting Somerset, to give a further update following the information provided at the last meeting. He confirmed that the introduction date for these services would be 30 January 2023, and he gave a summary of the services involved:

#1E Priorswood service in Taunton – The routing will be slightly different from the #1 in order to address car parking issues in the evening; it will run from Musgrove Park Hospital through Taunton to Bridgwater, while the last buses will now be 10:15 pm from Bridgwater and 11:15 pm from Taunton centre at Castle Way.

#22 Taunton-Wellington – This will be an hourly service with the last buses from Taunton at 11:25 pm and from Rockwell Green at 11:45 pm.

#28 Taunton-Minehead – There will be two additional return journeys from Taunton at 8:30 pm and 10:30 pm, and from Minehead at 8:45 pm and 10:15 pm. On the last three journeys, there will be a diversion via Cotford St Luke and Norton Fitzwarren.

#30 Taunton-Chard – There will be two additional journeys from Taunton at 8:10 pm and 10:10 pm, plus one additional journey from Chard at 9:11 pm. The two journeys from Taunton will travel via the Gateway Park and Ride site, in order that people can leave their cars at the Park and Ride earlier in the evening and be able to come back later in the evening. Both Park and Ride sites will have additional buses in the evening.

The Chair invited comments from the Board members; Glen Burrows, representing the Somerset Bus Partnership, asked if it was only the late journeys on the #21 which ran to Musgrove Park; it was replied that services from Musgrove Park to Bridgwater commence around 8:00 pm for three hours as there are no town services running then.

Cllr John Hassall, representing the Somerset Bus Partnership, noted that there were no Sunday services for the #28, which are needed for those who work on Sundays and for a population of 10,000. It was replied that evening services are being funded through the BSIP funding, while Sunday services are run commercially by Buses of Somerset, and Marc Morganhuws pointed out that Sunday services are not currently commercially viable. The Chair added that the purpose of new services is to drive more demand and sustainability; in future, services will be reviewed to identify the viability of various changes over time, but at the moment there is no funding for Sunday services on the #28.

Tony Reese, Vice Chair of the Bus Users and Stakeholders Group, declared that these services were a marvellous step forward and that everyone need to work together to

publicise them. He expressed his hope that in future there would be the scope for reinstating Sunday services, as well as an evening service on the #54. John Perrett responded that the arrangements the Council had with Buses of Somerset entailed cost contracts, so revenue taken during the evenings will come back into the pot. It may be possible that the services could be tweaked or amended in some way or that further changes could be made. Peter Travis, Chair of the Bus Users and Stakeholders Group, asked if funding of the evening services would continue through March 2025; it was responded that this was the broad intention, but the funding might last a bit longer than that. Two years is the limit, but it could possibly be extended if there is still money available and depending on the cost of the services and the revenue they generate, as well as authorisation from the DfT to continue beyond this date.

David Redgewell, representing The Campaign for Better Transport, emphasised the need to market these services to the night-time economy in Taunton and ensure that the pubs and clubs know about them, which will encourage young people to use the services. The Chair stated that this was a very good point, and John Perrett advised that the Comms Team was working closely with Buses of Somerset's marketing team on this matter. He related that he had attended a meeting that brought together some of the local businesses and connected people to promote the initiative, and more meetings are scheduled.

### **Update on £1 Fare Scheme in Taunton Town Zone – Agenda Item 7**

The Chair invited Natasha Bates, Service Manager-Transport Commissioning, to give the update. She noted that this scheme started on 5 December 2022, so it was in place in the lead-up to Christmas. All five operators who provide services in the Taunton town zone have signed up to the scheme, and the general feedback from them has been very positive. Work has begun on collating figures that will provide more information. The Council has been working with the Comms Team to extensively promote the scheme, with all of the promotional material being designed to fit in with the wide Bus It campaign and to meet the DfT rules regarding the promotion of BSIP schemes.

The Chair commented that the bus stops around Taunton town had appeared to be very busy, and he asked the operators if they had any evidence of the success of the scheme. Marc Morganhuws said it was difficult to compare this year with previous years because of where Christmas and bank holidays sit, and the best thing to do would be to analyse the January 2022 numbers against those of January 2023.

Cllr Hassall related that there had been problems on the bus to Minehead a few weeks ago resulting in people being left behind and the bus following a different route than scheduled, perhaps because it was late. Marc Morganhuws replied that there may have been reasons for the change of route due to bridge lights, and it is known that there is overcrowding on the #28; but when such incidents occur, they need to be reported to the operator on the day in order that an attempt can be made to rectify it. The Chair advised that it is always better for individual issues to go through the urgent customer service channels, but he would be happy for the Board to examine examples and case studies that may be illustrative of wider strategic problems (such as perhaps a capacity problem emerging from the £2 fare initiative); Marc Morganhuws agreed that the £2 fare initiative is currently a problem for the #28 but they did not want to exclude the #28 from the scheme. He noted that the wider issue is about loading passengers and the inability to put larger vehicles (double-decker buses) on the route, so that is something that needs to be discussed as it is fundamentally affecting their ability to deliver the service.

### **Update on £2 Fare Cap Trial from January 2023 – Agenda Item 8**

The Chair observed that this initiative was being brought forward directly between the government and the operators, rather than being set up by the Council (although the Council was running some of the routes affected by it), so it would be useful for the operators to speak first.

Marc Morganhuws of Buses of Somerset said that it was very early days and that it was an incredibly complicated scheme, which has moved a whole series of people to a different fare. The effects will only really be seen after a six-week period, as there are weekly and monthly tickets that hadn't expired yet before the introduction of the £2 fare. He believes that it will encourage more travel by existing bus passengers (rather than new ones), but if it is extended beyond the three-month period it could create some problems, especially if applied to the #28 and the Exmoor Coaster. February will provide some needed figures, as by then the monthly tickets will have expired and been replaced by £2 singles and £4 returns. He noted that, given the amount of paperwork and Excel spreadsheets that the DfT has required from the operators, the government should have plenty of information to evaluate; although it will be difficult to analyse because it's not a straight reduction but rather a scheme that will move people around from one type of ticket to another.

Peter Fairey of South West Coaches agreed with the preceding comments with regard to it being too early to gain any significant findings from the scheme or compare the

numbers to previous years, especially given that everyone is coming out of a three-year period that was very unusual and involved many changes. He said that he had done a few comparisons against previous months, and he couldn't see a significant increase in patronage, although he did not want to speak too soon. His company had issues with discount cards, where a discount would have made the fare less than £2.

John Perrett, speaking from the Council's perspective, reminded that before the holidays the DfT was contacting operators directly, so the Council had no initial contact about the scheme. When it became obvious to the DfT that there were operators missing from the invitation, either because they weren't registered for the Bus Service Operators' Grant (BSOG) or because they were services provided directly by local authorities, the DfT tried to quickly include those services. An announcement was made just before the holidays that they would be included, but details were still not available, and even after several weeks there was not enough information on reimbursement or what services would be included. The good news is that the Council has now registered with the DfT to take part in the scheme, and there will be a meeting this week to discuss ticketing. It will involve an additional 30 bus services across the county, hopefully beginning next Monday; these are services either run directly by the in-house fleet or not registered for the BSOG. It will include services such as Bakers Dolphin, Mendip Community Transport, South West Community Transport, Frome Bus, and Libra Travel. As long as the ticketing can be sorted this week, the £2 fare will be available from 23 January 2023 on all of those services; there are only a couple of services that will not fall under the scheme, as they are primarily aimed at schoolchildren, which are excluded under the rules of the scheme. The new scheme will be marketed, and an updated list of the services will be published once the scheme actually begins.

The Chair invited comments from the Board; David Redgewell, representing The Campaign for Better Transport, noted that growth had been seen on numerous routes and passengers had even been left behind, so he was worried that if the scheme were to be extended through the summer, there might not be enough buses to accommodate passengers in tourist areas. He also raised an issue with the evening service between Bath and Wells; the Chair said the Council would ensure that they would engage with DfT before summer on the matter.

Tony Reese, Vice Chair of the Bus Users and Stakeholders Group, opined that the scheme is very strangely organised between the DfT and the operators, and he agreed that there are worries about the scheme becoming too successful. He believed that three months was really not long enough to evaluate it, but he repeated the need to



publicise it, especially to those with concessionary passes who can get the £2 fare before 9:30 a.m.

### **Service Updates from Operators – Agenda Item 9**

The Chair invited updates from the operators in attendance; Peter Fairey of South West Coaches stated that there have not been any real changes in their network that had not already been announced, so they are more settled now. Marc Morganhuws of Buses of Somerset said that as well as the evening routes mentioned earlier, they have done some work in the eastern part of the county near Somerton. The Exmoor Coaster has been a huge success, and they are working on the summer timetable. They are waiting to hear what will happen with the bus recovery grant beyond April, which will be critical to the viability of commercial bus services in Somerset after April. The Chair advised that there had been a response to Cllr Rigby's letter to the Secretary of State in this regard, but the response was vague, saying only that the government was actively considering funding going forward but without giving any firm commitment.

### **Update from Chair of the Bus Users & Stakeholders Group – Agenda Item 10**

Peter Travis, Chair of the Group, presented the update and touched on the following:

- Bus drivers have been faced with very challenging driving conditions in the past few days due to the weather.
- No BUS Group meeting was scheduled for this month, but the next meeting will be held in March.
- There are many bus groups in Somerset, more than anywhere else, and there are 125 Bus Champions, so a great deal of feedback was received at the Somerset Bus Partnership meeting.
- There are many positive initiatives underway currently, and there is a need to publicise all of this good news; the importance of the £1 and £2 fare schemes is that this is a way to reach out to lapsed bus users, who are easier to persuade than new users, especially since patronage is still below pre-covid levels.
- With respect to the £2 national fare scheme, the government had quite a shambolic way of launching it, since it only applies to some buses and not all; Frome Town Council has been advertising it, but many of their routes cannot offer it. The DfT needs to be advised of these issues. It was noted that Wiltshire County made the £2 fare scheme standard throughout their county.

- An audit is being carried out of all bus shelters and bus stops in Frome in order to improve the display of timetables. New timetables will be out in the next two weeks, and bus users have advised that it is a big problem when there are changes to the timetables. Within the EP Plan and Scheme, Sections 4.3/4.4 establish that operators need to agree and coordinate these by March 2023; given prior difficulties with operators not producing timetables, it devolves to bus user groups to do it even though they don't have the funding. It is very important to have printed information (not just online), which other counties and transport authorities have; this needs to be addressed under the new unitary council.
- Regarding multi-operator tickets, all bus users would welcome this; it is part of the EP Plan and Scheme going forward.
- With respect to the Bus Recovery Grant, the county's bus groups have written to the Minister, the Council has written to the Minister, and they have written to MPs urging them to lobby the Minister. One can hope that the grant will be extended beyond April, as it would seem strange have introduced the £2 fare from January to March if the grant were to then be ended, inevitably meaning bus cuts across the country.

The Chair reminded with regard to paper timetables that the Council, working with Buses of Somerset, did commit to working on a comprehensive timetable; there had been so much change that this was delayed until issues were stabilised, but now that they are more stable, it can be picked up in discussions with operators and a firm plan and timescale decided. Regarding bus stops, given the large number of very rural bus stops, he did not believe that there could be a commitment to paper timetables at every stop; but there is a unitary workstream analysing bus stop assets within the new unitary Council, so this issue will be picked up within that workstream. Finally, as regards marketing, there will be discussions with the Comms Team around the whole program to determine if there is more that can be done to promote to various audiences in a wider sense the successful work currently underway.

The Chair then invited comments from the Board; David Redgewell, representing The Campaign for Better Transport, noted that there was an upcoming meeting that will look at services running into Somerset and what funding is available from WECA to maintain them. There is an EP between North Somerset and WECA, and there is a need to look at Mendip services and the EP standards. The Chair replied that John Perrett and Natasha Bates would make contact with relevant personnel to discuss what could be done cooperatively.

Marc Morganhuws of Buses of Somerset opined that rural Somerset bus services are no more stable than those in Bristol; the network is very fragile and depends upon the Bus Recovery Grant. They are still committed to the joint timetable and will produce the timetable book, whether it will be in April or in September; they will also be doing a review of bus shelters and roadside timetable in conjunction with John Perrett and Natasha Bates once the unitary council commences. He pointed out that Yeovil bus station has had issues with certification, quality and infrastructure; so their maintenance team has been carrying out work there; they are committed to working with the local authorities, operators and bus users to improve the situation.

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

David Redgewell, representing The Campaign for Better Transport, urged that the Communications Department contact the BBC, who will be producing a programme on the £2 fare scheme and fares across South West England; he was advised that Andrew Doyle in Comms would do so.

The Chair noted that this had been a very positive meeting.

### **Date of the Next Meeting – Agenda Item 12**

The next Bus Advisory Board meeting is scheduled for 25 April 2023.

**The meeting ended at 11:40 am**

**CHAIR**