

EXETER HIGHWAYS AND TRAFFIC ORDERS COMMITTEE

12 April 2022

Present:-

Councillors Y Atkinson (Chair) T Adams, M Asvachin, Y Atkinson, S Aves, D Barnes, R Hannaford and C Whitton,

Exeter City Council

Councillors D Harvey, P Holland, M Pearce and T Wardle

Members attending in accordance with Standing Orders 8 and 25

Councillors A Davis (DCC) and P Bialyk and B Denning (ECC)

Apologies:-

Councillors A Leadbetter and P Prowse

* **44** **Items Requiring Urgent Attention**

No item was raised as a matter of urgency.

* **45** **Bus Services in Exeter**

(Councillors Philip Bialyk and Barbara Denning (both Exeter City Council) and Councillor Andrea Davis attended in accordance with Standing Order 25 and spoke to this item)

(Sharon Pavey (TEABAG campaign group) attended and spoke at the invitation of the Chair).

The Committee considered a Briefing Note by the Head of the Transport Coordination Service, Devon County Council. This covered the background and the reducing frequency of certain bus services operated by Stagecoach in Exeter. This reflected the acute shortage of drivers to carry out their registered bus services and the current level of patronage.

While a commercial decision, officers from the County Council's Transport Coordination Service regularly met with and challenged the changes, in particular to ensure there would be enough capacity in the network.

The Note also outlined the operational context for bus services in Devon under the 1985 Transport Act where bus operators stated which services they wished to run on a commercial basis, including timetables, routes, and fares. The Local Transport Authority's (LTA) role was to look at where services were

not provided commercially and tender routes that were deemed an essential social requirement.

Since March 2020 bus services had been supported by central Government funding. This funding had been used to maintain essential services due to the impact of the reduction in passenger numbers. The Covid Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG) had been followed by the Bus Recovery Grant (BRG) and was paid to local bus companies for commercial services and local transport authorities (LTAs) for financially supported services.

From April 2022, for a period of 6 months, there would be a further Government fund, the Local Transport Fund. At the time of writing the County Council had yet to receive notification of its allocation or any conditions attached.

The Note also covered patronage levels, fares and driver shortages.

Following a meeting with Exeter County Councillors on 17 March 2022, Officers had been working through the issues raised with Stagecoach and making sure the revised scheduling from 10 April was as supportive as possible.

The Note also referred to the National Bus Strategy announced in March 2021. This set out that to be eligible for a part of the £3billion fund announced at the time all LTAs had to do the following:

1. Establish an “Enhanced Partnership” for the future delivery of bus services. This was a process, as set out in the 2017 Bus Services Act where a formal partnership was formed between the LTA and local bus companies for the delivery of all local bus services within its area. The County Council was following the statutory process for this to be in place.
2. Submit a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP): All LTAs had been asked to submit a BSIP by 31 October 2021. The County Council’s plan had been approved by Cabinet earlier that month and was based on the message from the Department for Transport – be ambitious.

On Monday 4 April 2022 the Department for Transport responded to all LTAs setting out their BSIP allocation. This was part of a reduced amount allocated of £1.2billion.

For Devon the funding allocated for the 2022/23 to 2024/25 period would be:

Capital:	£8,811,000
Revenue:	£5,246,270
Total:	£14,057,270

While the Capital funding represented the majority of the funding requested, the revenue allocation fell significantly short of the £34million per annum requested.

Mr M Watson, Managing Director, Stagecoach Southwest, attended and spoke at the invitation of the Committee on these developments affecting bus services in and around the Exeter network.

In response to Members' questions Mr Watson referred to:

- current driver shortages and additional recruitment under way and retention policies, current and improved pay and conditions for drivers (in excess of industry norms) relating to work rotas and weekend working for example;
- capital costs relating to new e-bus provision and the need for additional capital support, noting that the current stock of diesel vehicles was the most efficient and least polluting available;
- the level of services operating currently at 92% reliability compared to a pre-covid (pre-restriction) level of 99.5% and the decrease in patronage to 70% of the pre-covid level;
- the accuracy of the Stagecoach App (which at times was not wholly consistent) and his recommendation for the 'interactive map' which he undertook to promote and publicise to a greater degree;
- his views in regard to any franchising proposals in relation to potential costs and implementation periods and whether improved efficiency and reliability would accrue;
- the objective to reduce cash and promote digital payment methods to help maximise driver efficiency and patron convenience and noting that a cashless service would not be proposed by Stagecoach (or by the County Council);
- a review by Stagecoach of the timetabling of the high frequency routes in the City, particularly in the evenings; and
- company policy was to prioritise the last evening bus and it would give consideration to reimbursement for taxi fares where appropriate for any stranded patron;
- the proposed company merger and his belief that the new owners supported common objectives for an environmentally sustainable, efficient and expanding service; and
- work with the County Council in developing a sustainable network within finite resources; and marketing campaigns to promote services and increase patronage, such as the day ticket offer with competitive pricing.

The Head of the Transport Coordination Service and the Cabinet Member answered questions relating to:

- the future model of delivery through the Bus Support Improvement Plan (BSIP) with the forming of 'enhanced partnership' between the County Council and local bus companies;
- the real ambition of the County Council to improve public transport, as demonstrated in its BSIP bid case to the Government;
- the disappointing allocation for Devon through this process;

- the role of the Traffic Commissioner;
- compliance on County Council contracted services and the positive introduction of new smaller operators in his area; and
- the key role of the Local Planning Authorities in terms of highways and transport infrastructure and services associated with expanding residential development.

It was **MOVED** by Councillor C Whitton; and **SECONDED** by Councillor M Asvachin and

RESOLVED

(a) that after listening to members and the public statements today, the Exeter Highways and Traffic Orders Committee concludes that the bus service in Exeter and its travel to work area is currently not fit for purpose for the following reasons:

- impact on vulnerable users of buses being cancelled without notice and for safety of women and girls where the last bus of the day fails to turn up;
- failure of the Stagecoach 'App' to provide reliable up to date real time bus information;
- lack of zero emission buses, particularly on routes within the city centre and heavily trafficked arterial routes;
- disappointing level of funding allocated to Devon under the Government's bus improvement strategy;
- ongoing bus driver recruitment and retention issues; and
- recently reduced timetable that has drastically cut the scheduled bus service for many areas of the city;

the Committee therefore concludes that the Service cannot be made fit for purpose under the current legislative framework, and believes that local councils must have power to set local requirements on timetables, routes and fares for the benefit of its residents and therefore calls for Devon County Council to press for a bus franchise arrangement to be an essential part of any Devon Devolution deal; and

(b) that in addition to the above, the Cabinet be requested to see how it can work on a marketing campaign in partnership with Stagecoach and other local bus operators to increase patronage on local services following the reduction in patronage after the pandemic restrictions.

NOTES:

1. *Minutes should always be read in association with any Reports for a complete record.*
2. *If the meeting has been webcast, it will be available to view on the [webcasting site](#) for up to 12 months from the date of the meeting*

* **DENOTES DELEGATED MATTER WITH POWER TO ACT**

The Meeting started at 10.30 am and finished at 12.40 pm