

Exeter Highways and Traffic Orders Committee

Meeting – 12 April 2022

Exeter Bus Services background information

Background

From 10 April 2022 Stagecoach will be reducing the frequency & operational day of certain bus services they operate in Exeter. This reflects 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 meet with the Stagecoach. They provided challenge over the changes, in particular to ensure there would be enough capacity (i.e., enough seats on peak-timed buses) in the network.

Operational context for bus services in Devon

Bus services in Devon currently operate under the 1985 Transport Act where bus operators state which services they wish to run on a commercial basis, including timetables, route, and fares. The LTA's role is to look at where services are not provided commercially and tender routes that are deemed an essential social requirement.

The Office of the Traffic Commissioner oversees the operator licensing system. All local bus services must be registered with the Traffic Commissioner, and they also oversee all safety and compliance issues and, if necessary, can call an operator to Public Enquiry.

Impact of COVID-19

Since March 2020 bus services have been supported by central Government funding. This funding has been used to maintain essential services due to the impact of the reduction in passenger numbers. The Covid Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG) was 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 will be a further Government fund called the Local Transport Fund. At the time of writing Devon County Council (DCC) has yet to receive notification of its allocation or any conditions attached.

Patronage level

Bus services during the height of the first lockdown dropped to 10% of pre-pandemic levels. Since then, the level has fluctuated to be around 70% with variations dependent on Government guidance due to COVID, for example Omicron variant had an impact. Recovery in passenger numbers in the commuter and National Bus Pass holder sectors have been slower than other areas such as scholars travel..

Fares

Fares on Stagecoach commercial bus services recently increased by 10% across Devon. However prepaid fares bought on the Stagecoach App remain frozen. Fares on Stagecoach services supported by DCC rose by 7%. This is higher than other supported services (which had a 5% fare increase) as Stagecoach deferred implementing the last round of fare increases in 2020 which was 2%. This is the first increase since 2019 and reflects the increased operating costs linked with increased wage, fuel, and other supply chain costs.

Driver shortages

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

National Bus Strategy

The Government announced their National Bus Strategy in March 2021. This set that to be eligible for a part of the £3 billion 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 is a process, as set out in the 2017 Bus Services Act where a formal partnership is formed between the LTA and local bus companies for the delivery of all local bus services within its area. DCC is following the statutory process for this to be in place.

2. Submit a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)

All LTAs were asked to submit a BSIP by 31 October 2021. DCC’s plan was 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 DfT responded to all LTAs setting out their BSIP allocation. This is part of a reduced amount allocated of £1.2 billion. For Devon the funding allocated for the 2022/23 to 2024/25 period will be:

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

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

Damien Jones

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8 April 2022