

# **Written evidence submitted to the House of Commons Select Committee inquiry on the health of the bus market by the West Dorset Western Area Transport Action Group**

## **Executive summary**

- Bus services remain essential for the well-being of significant numbers of people in West Dorset, a largely rural area of scattered villages centred on two coastal towns.
- The financial challenge of maintaining an adequate rural network have been known nationally for over 50 years. So too has the need for capital and revenue support.
- West Dorset needs a network of fast buses between its towns and larger urban centres outside the area, supplemented by feeder services from settlements off the direct routes.
- Dorset County Council's Local Transport Plan recognizes the non-financial benefits of rural buses. However cuts in local-authority funding means that West Dorset's network now consists of basic, sometimes inadequate inter-urban services operated commercially, supplemented by community funded or operated rural routes. Many settlements are now cut off.
- Dorset County Council does not fully understand the commercial and operational complexities of the bus industry, leading to unnecessary hardship to users.
- Bus usage is probably reduced by disincentives such as traffic congestion, lack of reliable real-time information, printed timetables, and the lack of multi-operator ticketing. Some of these drawbacks could be mitigated without huge expense.
- The practical effects of the senior citizens' concessionary-fares scheme needs investigating in the context of an area like West Dorset which is subject to high levels of usage from outside the local-authority's boundaries.
- The Bus Services Act 2017 provides the incoming local transport authority, Dorset Council, with the powers to improve the rural network but radical change for the better is unlikely while the present financial regime persists.

## **Introduction**

1.1 The West Dorset Western Area Transport Action Group (WATAG) represents public-transport users in much of the area covered by West Dorset District Council. WATAG is a long-standing voluntary group, funded partly by small grants from the local transport authority, Dorset County Council (DCC), and other local councils. Our well-attended, bi-monthly public meetings provide a forum for users, bus and rail operators, local politicians and council officers, voluntary groups and anyone else with an interest in public transport. An advisory group of about a dozen WATAG members meets monthly and determines the group's strategies as well as maintaining close contact with DCC and operators over day-to-day issues.

1.2 Our part of West Dorset is predominantly rural, with scattered villages and hamlets centred on the coastal towns of Bridport and Lyme Regis. Ideally buses would provide fast direct services between these towns and the larger urban centres outside the area to

which residents (and visitors) need access for education, employment, health services etc., complemented by a comprehensive network of feeder services from smaller communities off these direct routes. However buses are now largely restricted to the inter-urban routes linking Bridport and Lyme Regis with Dorchester, Weymouth and Axminster (Devon). A handful of less-frequent services links Bridport with its hinterland, including the small town of Beaminster to the north, while, for example a solitary rural route runs from Lyme Regis through villages in Devon to Axminster. These buses offer interchange with trains at: Axminster and (infrequently) Crewkerne (Somerset), for services towards London, Salisbury and Exeter; at Dorchester South, for London, the South East Dorset conurbation, Southampton and Weymouth; and at Dorchester West for Yeovil, Bath, Bristol and Weymouth.

1.3 DCC has no bus quality partnerships within WATAG's area. Indeed service patterns are now determined almost entirely by financial considerations (level of profitability or revenue support), with little or no practical weight given to the wider social, economic, cultural, health or environmental benefits of providing a comprehensive network.

## **The Historical Challenges of Rural Bus Services**

2.1 Central government has long recognized the financial challenges of ensuring that rural populations have sufficient access to urban centres to enjoy healthy, fulfilling, prosperous lives. The now-forgotten but remarkably prescient (Jack) Committee on Rural Bus Services (1959–61) concluded that these had been in decline for a decade and that many only survived thanks to cross-subsidy within the industry. It nevertheless found that the wider socio-economic benefits of rural buses outweighed their monetary losses and recommended publicly funded capital- and revenue-support. Numerous studies show that these conclusions remain valid over half a century on.

2.2 Historically central government responded by granting local authorities powers to support rural networks through a mix of Treasury and ratepayer funding. However councils have never been under a statutory obligation to maintain rural buses. Almost inevitably, when money is tight local authorities have often chosen to cut spending on buses.

## **The Present Context**

3.1 Strategic public-transport planning in West Dorset comes under the *Bournemouth, Poole and Dorset Local Transport Plan 3 2011 to 2026* (LTP3) and the current (2017–20) *Implementation Plan* (IP3). These recognize that even in rural areas, bus services can and should provide an alternative to cars. We particularly welcome LTP3's commitment to:

- Building upon current public transport provision to improve the availability, quality, reliability and punctuality of services
- Developing a fully integrated public transport system which is easier to use for everyone
- Improving local accessibility and local connectivity for the most vulnerable groups and rural areas of Dorset. (IP3, p.6)

3.2 IP3 recognizes that “Access to jobs, education and services can be a problem for people in isolated rural areas who do not own a private car or where the distances involved are too long to walk or cycle”. But it also notes that “Decreasing budgets for public transport means that subsidies for rural bus routes could cease, resulting in a cut in services”. (IP3, p.19)

3.3 As we detail below, such financially driven cuts have shaped West Dorset’s bus network since at least 2015. LTP3 and IP3 are long on rhetoric but short on deliverable proposals adequate to meet the needs of rural communities. Instead of conventional stage-carriage buses, IP3 proposes the further development of voluntary and social-enterprise Community Transport Schemes (CTS) in this and other rural parts of Dorset. (IP3, p.22, 24)

3.5 The sums that central government and local transport authorities choose to spend on rural buses are obviously matters of judgement. Nevertheless we note that contrasts between councils of nominally the same political complexion can be quite marked. For example, although both controlled by the Conservatives Devon County Council spends far more than Dorset.

#### **4. Network problems**

4.1 Notwithstanding political choices over finance, we believe that the attrition of West Dorset’s buses has been made worse by two factors:

- the split between commercial and supported services introduced by the Transport Act 1985
- DCC’s lack of understanding of the commercial and operating realities of the bus industry – in particular the interactions between tendered school services and marginal routes.

4.2 The sharp legal distinction between commercial and supported services has weakened DCC’s resolve to maintain an adequate service on two key inter-urban axes, the X51/X53 (formerly 31) Axminster-Dorchester/Weymouth. In 2011 DCC contracted with Yellow Buses (the main provider in Bournemouth) to operate these routes. This prompted First Group to register parallel services on a commercial basis, requiring DCC to rescind its contract with Yellow Buses. While neo-liberal market theory would hail this as a success (entrepreneurial private capital replacing public subsidy), First soon deemed the original service pattern unaffordable. It reduced frequencies, hours of operation, and in 2017 ceased services entirely on ‘winter’ Sundays (defined as starting in late September!), leaving Bridport and Lyme Regis cut-off from other towns and the national rail network for considerable periods. WATAG knows that this has caused, and continues to cause, considerable hardship, including loss of employment. While in theory DCC could choose to pay for supplementary evening and Sunday services, in practice it maintains a rigid distinction between routes deemed to be ‘commercial’, however poor the service, and those that are not. The resulting service pattern on what DCC itself once called ‘strategic’

routes ignores the reality that West Dorset is a seven-days-a-week economy, including evenings: the council generally only supports day-time services running Monday to Friday.

4.3 DCC spends very considerable sums on providing statutory bus (and taxi) services for school pupils and in the past West Dorset has benefited from the willingness of operators to provide public services at marginal cost during those times of the day when staff and assets would otherwise be underemployed. However DCC does not always seem to understand the likely effects of re-tendering school buses on these public services. An early warning came in 2011 when First Group lost a schools contract, leading it to transfer away some of its smaller vehicles. It also lost the contract for some public rural routes. Together these factors led to the withdrawal of two largely 'commercial' operations: the 45 linking Burton Bradstock and Bridport; and the 40 between Bridport and Beaminster. Fortunately the new schools operator, Damory (Go Ahead), extended the short tendered section of the 45 (Bridport Hospital-Bridport Town Centre) to Beaminster as a commercial operation, absorbing into it the existing Bridport to Yeovil service (47). However in 2017 Damory lost its schools contract, closed its West Dorset depots and withdrew the Bridport-Yeovil service. This had already been identified by DCC as part of its 'strategic' inter-urban network, yet Damory's action caught DCC unawares. After intensive public pressure DCC tardily provided a skeletal, temporary service as 'operator of last resort'. Well over a year later this 'strategic' corridor is still very poorly served, Mondays to Fridays only, by a combination of a marginal commercial service from Bridport to Beaminster (First Wessex 6) with an infrequent council-operated service (40) to Yeovil 'maintained' by unreliable connections.

4.4 DCC decided in 2015 to progressively remove all revenue support from rural feeder services and concentrate the remaining money on 'non-commercial' inter-urban routes. Significant retrenchment in West Dorset thus started in 2015, gathered pace in 2016, and finished in July 2017 with the withdrawal of all remaining feeder routes. The frequency of these had varied from five-days-a-week to (more commonly) once or twice a week. As noted, DCC's policy is to encourage community groups, social enterprises, and other organizations to fill gaps in the network. Notable CTS achievements include a Saturday service from Beaminster to Bridport, operated by volunteers and funded by Beaminster Town Council, and an experimental market-days (Wednesday and Saturday) contract service connecting Bridport with the adjacent villages, funded by the town council. A voluntary group continues to support Dorset Community Transport services from the village of Thorncombe (Dorset), into Devon (Axminster) and Somerset (Chard). But many other villages and hamlets remain isolated from urban centres, with as yet little-understood consequences for the well-being of their often elderly, disabled or economically disadvantaged inhabitants. It is also unclear what effect such cuts will have on the social composition of such settlements. Villages seem increasingly likely to become the preserve of the better-off, and perhaps second-home owners for whom life without a car is unthinkable. It is already obvious that users and potential users are worried about the long-term sustainability of routes run by volunteers or under-resourced town/parish councils.

4.5 WATAG's involvement in these changes leads us to the conclusion that the oversight nominally offered by the Traffic Commissioners is no longer fit for purpose. Too often our

complaints about issues such as breaches of statutory periods of registration or deregistration have gone unanswered or have been dealt with so slowly as to be otiose. We also note that the Traffic Commissioners' standard for bus punctuality is probably inappropriate for services which, like that from Bridport to Yeovil, rely on connections between two operators. One operator might be unwilling to wait for a late-running service if this runs the risk of generating an adverse report. We hope that the new Dorset Council unitary authority, due to take power in 2019, will take up the opportunities available under the Bus Services Act 2017 to correct these shortcomings.

## **5. Other Issues.**

5.1 Traffic congestion. The surviving DCC-designated inter-urban services in West Dorset (First Wessex X51, X53, 6; DCC 40) can be badly affected, particularly in the high season, by traffic congestion chiefly, although not entirely, in and on the approaches to Bridport, Lyme Regis, Dorchester and Weymouth. Even though operators plan timetables accordingly, passengers cannot rely on them when planning time-critical journeys such as those for hospital appointments or making rail connections. The problem is exacerbated when journeys require a change of bus, such as Lyme Regis to Dorchester (change in Bridport) or Bridport to Yeovil (Beaminster). Delays also increase operating costs. While urban geography (especially in Lyme Regis) sometimes militates against priority measures such as bus lanes, there does not seem to be any willingness on the part of DCC as the highway authority to consider, let alone implement, alternatives such as remote triggering of traffic lights.

5.2 Real-time information is important for giving passengers confidence in the likely progress of their journey. While we accept that smart devices will become increasingly important for accessing bus-related GIS, it should be possible to get this information at principal bus stops. While DCC has made significant investments in real-time screens at bus stops, a combination of financial cuts and operators' apparent reluctance to make updates means that the information provided is far too often wrong. This is arguably worse than having nothing at all.

5.3 Hard-copy timetables also continue to be important, particularly for the more elderly demographic which makes up a very significant proportion of West Dorset's bus ridership. While First Wessex and Stagecoach continue to produce attractive timetable booklets or individual route leaflets, in recent years these have frequently been published very little in advance, or even after, the start of a new schedule. We particularly regret the loss of the comprehensive area timetables produced by DCC until 2015. WATAG tries to mitigate these losses by producing timetables covering more than one operator. We also maintain the timetable boards at many bus stops. We are grateful for the modest sums local authorities give us in support of these goals. However we do not regard our voluntary efforts as an appropriate or sustainable way of delivering key information about such an essential socio-economic service.

5.4 Senior-citizen concessionary fares. Although WATAG recognizes the considerable benefits to older people of the national concessionary fares scheme, we are not convinced

that its effect in our area is entirely positive in terms of network development. A very large proportion of bus passengers travel at concessionary rates, especially in the high season, and of these a significant percentage are holidaymakers from outside the area. The system that theoretically allows DCC to recover this money from holidaymakers' local authorities is bureaucratic and represents a considerable practical barrier to doing so. We do not have access to the data that would allow us to analyse the consequences, but we suspect that DCC is spending money on discretionary inter-urban journeys which might otherwise have been available to support the now-withdrawn rural feeders.

5.5 Neither DCC nor operators are committed to multiple-operator ticketing within WATAG's area. This is less of a problem for travel wholly within West Dorset as First Wessex is the dominant operator and offers day and family tickets. However the lack of multiple-provider tickets causes problems around Lyme Regis, where Stagecoach operates, and might discourage travel more widely within the county and elsewhere, for instance to Exeter. Moreover long-standing through bus-rail ticketing along the Axminster-Lyme-Bridport-Dorchester/Weymouth corridor was withdrawn without notice late in 2017 and only reinstated, with minimal publicity, in August 2018 after pressure from WATAG: marketing is non-existent.

5.6 Politicians are prone to suggesting that rural bus services are obsolescent and will disappear. In 1963 Ernest Marples, the minister of transport who received the Jack Committee's report (and Beeching's into railway closures), thought the problem "transitory.... (as private transport takes over)." Fifty-five years later autonomous vehicles sometimes take the place of the car as a reason for dismissing the longer-term need for a rural bus network. While WATAG recognizes the potential of radical technological change, we also note that similarly optimistic pronouncements in the 1960s about how new technologies might curb *urban* traffic congestion have largely come to naught – where are the personal jet backs and monorails?! Truly autonomous vehicles are almost certainly much farther into the future than their proponents would have us believe.

## **6. Conclusions**

6.1 The present public bus network in West Dorset consists of a mix of marginally commercial and DCC-funded/operated inter-urban routes supplemented by a small number of local services giving some rural communities access to Bridport. Beyond the 'commercial' routes, the network is determined by Dorset County Council's increasing reluctance to fund even inter-urban services, and the willingness of voluntary groups and town/parish councils to provide the practical and financial resources needed to run community-transport and other alternatives to withdrawn rural buses.

6.2 We suspect that the wider social, economic, cultural, health and environmental costs of the cuts to inter-urban and rural feeder buses in West Dorset in recent years outweighs the direct financial savings, although we do not have the resources to carry out the benefit-cost analysis (BCA) to show this. To return briefly to the past, the situation is analogous to the Beeching programme of railway rationalization in the 1960s, when the failure to carry out BCA probably meant some lines closed that should have stayed open.

6.3 We note that the Bus Services Act 2017 provides local transport authorities like DCC and the incoming Dorset Council with the powers to mitigate many of the issues we have raised. However the Act – and the DfT’s policies that supplement it – do not change the fundamental context within which rural bus services have struggled to survive for well over 50 years. There are no statutory national standards governing the provision of rural networks, and in their absence and that of adequate levels of ring-fenced capital and revenue support, many local authorities will not prioritize rural buses.

WATAG, Bridport, Dorset  
23 September 2018