

The decline of rural buses: A Joint Inquiry by the County APPG and CCN

Evidence submitted by the West Dorset Western Area Transport Action Group (WATAG)

Summary

- Post-coronavirus buses will remain essential for many people's well-being in West Dorset, a rural area centred on two small towns with large hinterlands.
- West Dorset needs a resilient hub-and spoke network connecting these towns with larger centres outside the area, supplemented by feeders serving settlements off the trunk routes.
- Dorset Council recognizes the non-financial benefits of rural buses. However drastic cuts in revenue support mean that even West Dorset's trunk services are inadequate. Because feeder routes are restricted to community funded and operated services provision is highly uneven and many settlements are cut off.
- No-one has assessed in detail the damage to people's well-being but it is likely to be significant. Similarly Dorset Council does not appear to understand the effects of transport cuts on other aspects of its spending.
- The provision of an adequate bus network is highly unlikely until this is made a statutory requirement supported by ring-fenced, central government funding.
- Some improvement to the network would be possible if Dorset Council were to fully understand the bus industry's commercial and operational complexities and engage more with transport professionals and users.
- Relatively low-cost measures might mitigate the effects of: traffic congestion; lack of reliable real-time information and printed timetables; the lack of multi-operator ticketing on levels of bus usage.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Western Area Transport Action Group (WATAG) represents public-transport users in much of the west of Dorset ('West Dorset'). WATAG is a long-established voluntary group partly funded by small grants from the local-transport authority, Dorset Council (DC), and other councils. Our well-attended, bi-monthly public meetings provide a forum for users, public transport operators, local politicians and council officers, voluntary groups and anyone else concerned about public transport. A small advisory group of WATAG

members, some with extensive professional experience of public transport, meets monthly to set priorities and provide feedback to DC and operators on strategic and day-to-day issues.

1.2 This part of Dorset is rural, often deeply so, with scattered villages and hamlets centred on the small towns of Bridport and Lyme Regis. Thus ideally buses would be organized as a hub-and-spoke network based on these towns. Reliable, frequent – at least hourly – direct services throughout the day and evening would connect the towns with larger centres, such as Dorchester, at or beyond the area's boundary where residents and visitors access education, employment, health services etc. Trunk routes would be complemented by less-frequent (and not necessarily daily) services mostly giving smaller communities access to the hubs of Bridport and Lyme and thus to destinations along and beyond the trunks.

1.3 By contrast service patterns immediately before the coronavirus crisis were determined almost entirely by financial considerations (profitability or revenue support), with little or no weight given to the wider social, economic, cultural, health or environmental benefits of a more comprehensive network.

1.4 While the post-virus demand for public transport is unknown, it is already clear that the priorities and scale of central government spending will be very different. This represents an opportunity as well as a threat to the development of an adequate bus network for West Dorset.

2. The decline of bus services in West Dorset, and the impact this is having on residents and growth

2.1 Central governments have long recognized the challenges of connecting rural populations with the facilities needed for healthy, prosperous and fulfilling lives. The prescient (Jack) Committee on Rural Bus Services (1959–61) concluded these had been declining since at least 1950, many surviving only through cross-subsidy. It nevertheless found that buses' wider socio-economic benefits outweighed financial losses and recommended publicly funded capital- and revenue-support. Numerous recent studies show these conclusions are still valid.

2.2 Local authorities have never been required to maintain public rural bus networks, although they have long had powers to do so financially. But when money is tight local authorities often cut discretionary spending on buses. By comparison with other shire authorities in the South West, DC and its predecessor, Dorset County Council (DCC), have pursued an aggressive policy of withdrawing revenue support.

2.3 The early effects of these cuts in West Dorset is starkly illustrated by these network maps dating from 1989 (L) and 2014 (R):



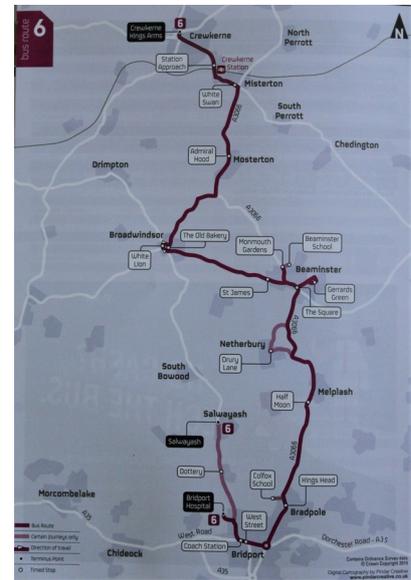
2.4 Deep financial cuts have more recently inflicted very significant damage to the network. In 2015 DCC decided to remove all revenue support for feeder services, concentrating funding on non-commercial trunk routes. Retrenchment started in 2015, gathered pace in 2016, and finished in July 2017 with the complete withdrawal of funding for feeders. These had varied from five-days-a-week to (more commonly) once or twice weekly.

2.5 Hence with the exception of two in-town services – Bridport’s 7 (WSO) and Lyme Regis’s 71 (M-F), run under contract to the town councils – West Dorset’s pre-virus network consisted of little more than DC’s designated ‘strategic inter-urban’ routes:

- the commercially operated (First Wessex) X51/53 (M-S; Su summer only), connecting Axminster (Devon), Lyme Regis and Bridport, where the service splits continuing to Dorchester (X51) or Weymouth (X53);
- the partly DC-supported (First Wessex/Buses of Somerset) 6 (M-F), replaced SO by the volunteer-operated CB3. These erratically and unreliably linked Bridport, the small town of Beaminster and other intervening settlements with the Somerset centres of Crewkerne and Yeovil.

Before the crisis the commercial element of the 6 (First Wessex) was due to be withdrawn in early May 2020.

2.6 These buses also offered (increasingly poorly timed) interchange with trains at: Axminster and (infrequently) Crewkerne, 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.



2.7 DC's policy is to encourage third-sector organizations to fill gaps in the network. However pre-virus the only other stage-carriage services with significant route mileage in West Dorset were the:

- 14 (ThO) Birdsmoorgate and Thorncombe to Chard (Somerset);
- 688 (ThO) Thorncombe to Axminster (Devon), both operated by Dorset Community Transport (DCT) with support from Devon County Council (688), parish/town councils and voluntary groups;
- plus a handful of term-time school services open to the public.

2.8 DCT also operated four PlusBus services, two weekly and two fortnightly, serving Bridport's hinterland. Each consisted of a return trip allowing roughly two hours in the town. DCT also operated two similar weekly services linking villages in West Dorset with Dorchester.

2.9 Thus even pre-virus most of West Dorset's smaller settlements were isolated from the main towns and the three trunk routes. Even on the latter timetables were sparse and – particularly with the 6 – failed to serve known travel flows.

2.10 These severe cuts sit uneasily with the commitments to rural connectivity in DC's Local Transport Plan (LTP) 2011–2026 and the current Implementation Plan (2017–2020). The latter 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”; and seeks (p.6) to improve “local accessibility and local connectivity for the most vulnerable groups and rural areas of Dorset.”

2.11 WATAG accepts that the Implementation Plan also notes (p.19) that “[d]ecreasing budgets for public transport means that subsidies for rural bus routes could cease, resulting in a cut in services”. Yet the scale of cuts is partly a matter of local political judgement. WATAG believes that DCC cut revenue support without a clear idea of the likely consequences for West Dorset’s often elderly, disabled or economically disadvantaged inhabitants. Transport budgets seem to have been set with little regard for possible deleterious effects on other areas of council spending, such as adult social care, let alone on wider economic, social and cultural aspirations. After budgets had been cut DCC held a one-day (26 February 2018) Integrated Transport Review (in which WATAG participated), intended partly to address such issues. However DC has not made developing this review a priority.

2.12 It is therefore impossible to say overall how much damage service cuts have caused to people’s well-being. Nevertheless the minutes of WATAG’s public meetings detail some of the all-too-common consequences of people, for example, losing jobs or educational opportunities. In the Appendix we examine the shortcomings of the pre-virus route 6.

2.13 No-one can know what long-term effects the coronavirus crisis will have on demand for bus travel in West Dorset. Fewer tourists, more home deliveries, on-line access, and even the re-establishment of local facilities might reduce demand. But it would be foolish to plan on this basis, and in any case people are still likely to want to travel for social, cultural and leisure reasons, all of which are not only valid in themselves but also often contribute to economic resilience.

2.14 Politicians have often suggested that rural buses are obsolescent. In 1963 Ernest ‘Beeching Axe’ Marples thought the funding problem “transitory.... (as private transport takes over).” Now autonomous vehicles (AVs) threaten to supplant cars as a reason for dismissing buses. While WATAG recognizes the disruptive potential of technological change, transport history is littered with similarly optimistic pronouncements which have largely come to naught – where are the personal jet backs and monorails of the 1960s?! Truly autonomous vehicles are much farther into the future than proponents would have us believe. Indeed some transport professionals suggest that post-crisis it will be easier to show that buses meet stringent hygiene standards than AVs.

3. The additional powers or levers that would make the biggest difference to provision of bus services in West Dorset

3.1 WATAG believes that the damage to West Dorset's network has been made worse by:

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

3.2 The sharp legal distinction between commercial and supported services has weakened the local-transport authority's resolve to maintain adequate services on the X51/X53 trunk route. In 2011 DCC contracted with Yellow Buses to operate the X51 (then numbered 31). This prompted First Group to register a parallel service on a commercial basis, requiring DCC to rescind its contract. First soon deemed the original service pattern unaffordable. It progressively reduced frequencies, hours of operation (there are now no buses in the evening), and in 2017 ceased services entirely on 'winter' Sundays (defined as starting in late September and continuing until after Easter!). A similar story, starting in 2013, applies to the X53. WATAG knows that all this has caused, and continues to cause, considerable hardship, including loss of employment. In theory DC could pay for supplementary 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 services on what DC classifies as a strategic route ignore the reality that, particularly in the holiday season, West Dorset is a seven-days-a-week economy, including evenings: the Council generally only supports day-time services, Monday to Friday.

3.3 DC spends large sums on providing statutory bus (and taxi) services for school pupils, and in the recent past West Dorset has benefited from operators' willingness to provide public services at marginal cost when staff and assets would otherwise have been underemployed. However the transport authority does not always understand the likely effects on these public services of re-tendering school buses. An early warning came in 2011 when First Group lost its schools contracts, 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 network, yet Damory's action caught DCC unawares. After intensive public pressure DCC tardily

provided a skeletal, temporary service as ‘operator of last resort’. As detailed in the Appendix, this strategic corridor is still very poorly served.

3.4 WATAG’s contends that the Traffic Commissioners’ oversight is no longer fit for purpose. Too often complaints about issues such as breaches of statutory periods of de-registration have gone unanswered or been dealt with so slowly as to be worthless. We also note that the Traffic Commissioners’ standard for punctuality is probably inappropriate for services which, like the former Bridport–Yeovil route, 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.

3.5 DC has the powers under the Bus Services Act 2017 to ameliorate all of these shortcomings. But it does not seem to have the resources, expertise or political will to use them; nor to engage with the wider community to ensure that limited resources are used most effectively (see Appendix).

3.6 *Traffic congestion.* West Dorset’s trunk services can be badly affected, particularly in high season, by traffic congestion chiefly in and on the approaches to Bridport, Lyme Regis, Dorchester and Weymouth. Even though operators plan accordingly, passengers find it difficult to make time-critical journeys (e.g. for hospital appointments or rail connections). Changing buses exacerbates the problem; e.g. Lyme Regis–Dorchester (change in Bridport). Delays also increase operating costs. While street geographies (e.g. in Lyme Regis) sometimes militate against measures such as bus lanes, WATAG would like DC, as the highway authority, to consider long-established alternatives such as remote triggering of traffic lights.

3.7 *Real-time information* is important for giving passengers confidence in their journey’s progress. WATAG accepts that smart devices will become increasingly important for accessing bus-related GIS. However this information should also be available on the existing screens at principal bus stops. All too often it is either absent or wrong: this is arguably worse than nothing at all.

3.8 *Hard-copy timetables* are also important, particularly for West Dorset’s more elderly bus users. Commercial operators produce attractive timetable booklets and individual route leaflets, but these are often published little in advance of, or even after, the start of a new schedule. WATAG particularly regret the loss of DCC’s comprehensive timetable books and network maps. We try to mitigate this by producing multi-operator timetables and maintaining timetable boards at many stops. However we not regard our voluntary efforts – supported financially by town councils – as a resilient way of delivering such essential information.

3.9 *Senior-citizen concessionary fares.* WATAG recognizes the considerable benefits to older people of the national concessionary fares scheme. However we are not convinced that its effect is entirely positive in terms of West Dorset's network. A very large proportion of passengers travel at concessionary rates, especially in the high season, and of these a significant percentage are incoming holidaymakers. The system for recovering this money from holidaymakers' local authorities is bureaucratic and a considerable barrier to doing so. We do not have access to the data that would allow us to analyse the consequences, but we suspect that DC is spending money on discretionary seasonal journeys which could otherwise have supported feeders.

3.10 *Multi-provider ticketing.* There is no multi-provider ticketing within West Dorset. This is less of a problem for travel wholly within the area as First Wessex is the dominant operator and offers day and family tickets. However it is a problem around Lyme Regis, where Stagecoach operates, and might discourage travel more widely within the county and elsewhere, for instance to Exeter. Moreover long-established 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.

4. Conclusions

4.1 The pre-crisis bus network in West Dorset consisted of marginally commercial and council-funded/operated trunk routes, supplemented by a tiny number of feeders giving a few communities access to Bridport and Lyme Regis. Beyond the 'commercial' routes, the network is determined by Dorset 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 feeders.

4.2 We suspect that the social, economic, cultural, health and environmental costs of the post-2015 cuts to West Dorset's bus network outweigh the financial savings, although we cannot undertake the benefit-cost analysis to show this. More worryingly, Dorset Council apparently does not know. To return briefly to history: the situation is analogous to the Beeching railway cuts of the 1960s, when the lack of benefit-cost analysis meant some lines closed that perhaps should have stayed open.

4.3 We note that the Bus Services Act 2017 provides Dorset Council with the powers to mitigate many of the issues raised here. However the Act – and the central-government policies supplementing it – do not change the fundamental political and financial context within which socially essential rural bus networks have struggled to survive for over 60 years. There are no statutory national standards governing network densities, service

frequencies and so on; and in their absence and that of adequate levels of ring-fenced, long-term capital and revenue support, many local authorities will not prioritize rural buses.

4.4 On a more optimistic note, the coronavirus crisis has overturned many of the assumptions about what is politically and financially possible. WATAG supports the devolution of planning rural networks to local-transport authorities but contends that this will count for naught if councils do not have the financial resources either to develop professional expertise or to support socially necessary services.

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Bridport, Dorset
12 May 2020