

# WEST DORSET WESTERN AREA TRANSPORT ACTION GROUP (WATAG)

## Minutes of General Meeting No.115

held on Zoom on Thursday 23 September 2021 at 6.30 pm

**Present (18):** Chris Addis (Bothenhampton & Walditch PC), Will Austin (Bridport TC), John Collingwood (Bridport), Bob Driscoll (WATAG Chair), Anna Dunn (Chideock PC), Paul Everall (Bradpole PC), Ian Gray (WATAG), Thomas Hughes (First Wessex), Gavin Maxwell (Bridport), Vince O'Farrell (Bridport), David Redgewell (Bus Users UK), Tony Reese (WATAG/Friends of service 47), Anne Sankey (Lyme Regis), Philip Sankey (Lyme Regis), Billy Shearer (WATAG), Jevon Smith (Bus passenger), Lucy Travis (FAVBUG), Kevin Wheeler (First Bus).

**Apologies:** Colin Divall, Chris Everidge, Sally Falkingham, Julie Leah, Chris Noon, Stewart Palmer, Janet Proctor, Tony Taylor, Guz Tidy, Alan Williams, Brian Wilson.

**1. Minutes and Introductions:** The Chairman, Bob Driscoll, thanked everyone for joining and explained the Zoom procedures. He added that this was the first General Meeting since January 2020, but WATAG had published a series of newsletters to fill the gap. Thanks were expressed to Billy Shearer for his work on this. He introduced two new representatives from First Wessex: Tom Hughes, Interim Operations Manager and Kevin Wheeler, Supervisor at Weymouth and also mentioned the death of Bob Gillis, Town Clerk of Bridport from 2007-2018, who had offered WATAG and other organisations great support and had played a key role in developing a town service (now the service 7).

**2. Bus matters (including National Bus Strategy):** The Strategy had been issued by the Government on 15 March 2021. WATAG had made a response, which is available on the WATAG website. The Chairman read out the report on the strategy from Dorset Travel (attached). They are using consultants WSP to help them. Chris Loder, the MP for West Dorset, mentioned the subject in his weekly column in the Bridport & Lyme Regis News and had also raised it at Prime Minister's questions. His full response is on his website. There was a feeling that the urban model (and mindset) behind the strategy did not fit the rural context. This was acknowledged but the strategy for the rural areas had not been developed or spelled out.

Paul Everall had attended a virtual stakeholders' meeting which he felt was well run. Will Austin said that Bridport Town Council had made a response, largely endorsing what WATAG had said but stressing the need for integration with other policy areas: climate change, parking, walking and cycling, new housing areas (eg Vearse Farm), the encouragement of modal shift and the needs in areas of deprivation.

David Redgewell pointed out that infrastructure improvements to facilitate bus services on the trunk A35 fell to National Highways rather than Dorset Council. He also felt that we should press for the retention of a bus station and depot in Bridport.

Tom Hughes of First reported that timetable changes at the beginning of the week on services 1, 2 & 10 had helped to stabilize the network and manage the driver shortage issue. The winter timetables would start on 3 October. A Sunday service would run on service X53 between Weymouth and Lyme Regis. Philip Sankey asked about the actual terminal points used in Lyme Regis. When a bus terminates at The Square, it then goes to the Holmbush Car Park to turn. It would be helpful if it was registered as far as the Car Park as passengers could then ride up the hill.

Tom confirmed that passengers could travel from Dorchester via Weymouth (10/X53) at the same fare as on X51. The roadside publicity was in preparation. David Redgewell emphasised that publicity should give the public a complete picture – both Buses of Somerset and First Wessex should publicize the complete 6/6A/6B and the connection from the 6B into Yeovil should be highlighted and also that between the X51/X53 at Axminster into Buses of Somerset 30 to Chard and Taunton.

Tom was asked about ‘breakdowns’, specifically on the 6A the previous Monday and Anna Dunn reported two occasions on the A35 where the broken down vehicle created traffic queues. He agreed that if this happened it also hindered their ability to get to the stranded vehicle quickly. He confirmed that they had had difficulties on the previous Monday that had caused the problems on service 6.

Philip Sankey said that Go South Coast had retained the Charmouth School Contract and was therefore continuing the Lyme Regis Town Service (71) with support from the Town Council. Stagecoach South West was also experiencing a driver shortage but the 9A (Exeter to Lyme Regis) had not been affected.

More generally, David Redgewell said that the RMT in the South West were campaigning for better wages to help overcome the driver shortage. He also suggested that we respond to a Somerset consultation on the future of the Taunton Bus Station.

Tony Reese said that Buses of Somerset are now running their last service 6 in the afternoon via Yeovil College in term time. This needed publicity.

**3 Rail Matters (including the SWR Consultation on their December 2022 Timetable)** The Dorset Council Report rail section mentioned Network Rail’s Dorset Strategic Study and the SWR consultation on their December 2022 timetable. WATAG had also made a submission to SWR. Without timings, it was impossible to know which connections would work well. It seemed that stock released by the withdrawal of Bristol – Salisbury – Waterloo and Yeovil - Weymouth services would be mothballed.

Sally Falkingham had informed the Chairman of a Network Rail closure between Yeovil Pen Mill and Dorchester West between 18 November and 3 December. Concern was expressed that the rail replacement buses should be fit for purpose – not too big to access stations and suitable for disabled passengers. David Redgewell asked whether First Wessex/Buses for Somerset would be contracted. Tom Hughes said that this would depend on there being spare vehicles and drivers available.

SERUG (Salisbury – Exeter Rail Users’ Group) had commented on the SWR timetable proposals. Both they and David Redgewell felt that the DfT as paymaster were setting the agenda with the whole emphasis on ‘savings’ rather than any attempt to grow the market and increase revenue. David Redgewell suggested raising this with Chris Loder and the Yeovil and Weymouth MPs.

The CPT (Confederation of Passenger Transport) had proposed a marketing campaign to rebuild bus use this summer but funding agreed by DfT was cut back by the Treasury.

#### 4 Any Other Business

Will Austin reported that Alan Williams had been working with the Town Council and DCT to redesign the Bridport Town service 7 to serve additional areas like the Wanderwell Estate and he hoped to make an announcement shortly.

David Redgewell felt that the discussions for a takeover of Stagecoach by National Express could reach a successful conclusion. If so, it might be important to make representations to the Competition & Markets Authority to protect the long-distance services from Weymouth/Dorchester as well as the (currently suspended) 190. As Megabus had briefly served Weymouth – this brings the matter under the CMA.

Dorset Travel had sent WATAG the Dorset Council Officer Report which was read to those present and is attached hereto.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their participation  
and the meeting closed at 7.50 pm.

**Chair:**

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## **Dorset Council Officer Report**

### **Public Transport**

The National Bus Strategy places new requirements on the Council to form Statutory Partnerships with local bus operators and develop a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). The timescales to develop and deliver the Council's first BSIP by the end of October 2021 and activate the Enhanced Partnership by April 2022 are challenging.

The first stage of the work has focussed on creating a network baseline to understand the current state network. A large amount of data has been gathered and analysed to create a picture of the current network and overlay this on top of demographic data to help identify any gaps. The bus operators are supporting the baseline work by providing data for their commercial and non-commercial operations. This demonstrates the operators' willingness to engage in this process and work constructively in partnership with the Council.

The BSIP is being developed in close collaboration with members, local bus operators, passengers, local community groups, local business groups, and more widely the public. To inform the BSIP, a bus survey was run during August to find out how local bus services can be improved and what would make people use buses more. In total 1,845 surveys were received and showed the main priorities for improving bus services are more frequent services, that serve more places, and operate for longer hours each day.

Two rounds of stakeholder engagement workshops have been held, including with the TAGs, and detailed meetings have also been held with local bus operators, rail and coach service providers, community transport groups, and Dorset Council Planning. The written feedback from stakeholders and the public have been reviewed and analysed, received via a range of media from email, social media, written / postal, and online survey. This analysis shows that the top three priorities are additional bus routes, higher frequency services / enhanced weekend services, and a cheaper simplified fare structure.

The focus now is on drafting the BSIP document and developing the future state network proposal. The Council is required to submit a business case with high level costings to the DfT alongside the BSIP. From October onwards emphasis will shift to the creation of the Enhanced Partnership which is the legal framework to deliver the BSIP. Although the current focus is on the deadlines set by Government, this is a long-term plan that will require ongoing work to develop the BSIP beyond its submission and the creation of the EP. The BSIP will be a 'live' document and is required by Government to be refreshed annually.

First Wessex will be running their planned winter timetables from 3rd October.

School transport services will remain closed to the public until further notice due to concerns over the spread of COVID. Dorset Travel is also monitoring available surplus seats on school buses.

### **Rail**

Dorset Council has submitted a response to the South Western Railway December 2022 Timetable consultation. The Council has expressed concerns about the continued reduced frequency of London Waterloo to Weymouth services before reinstating two trains per hour in December 2022, and removal of off-peak services at Sherborne and Gillingham, the loss of the summer only service from Salisbury to Weymouth and removal of shuttle services from Exeter to Honiton and Axminster. The Council is already working with Network Rail on their Dorset Strategic Study to identify the infrastructure improvements necessary to achieve long held local service improvement aspirations.