

EXETER & DISTRICT

BUS USERS GROUP

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DECEMBER 2021 NEWSLETTER

Turning the Tide

For many years, the bus industry has been in a slow decline. Every now and again, the Government has tried to put a stop to this – nationalisation, deregulation, protection during the pandemic and now a National Bus Strategy for England - ‘Bus Back Better’. It remains to be seen if Boris’ attempt to reverse the industry’s fortunes will be any more successful than his predecessors’.

In accordance with the ‘enhanced partnership’ arrangement dictated by the Strategy, Devon County Council has been working with the county’s bus operators since June to plan their response. At the end of October, it released version 1 of its ‘Bus Services Improvement Plan’ (BSIP). This now goes to the Government for perusal alongside the other 78 Plans from local transport authorities across the country and will determine how much of the £1.2bn it will receive from the Department of Transport for the next three years.

Over the next few months, key stakeholders and members of the public will be invited (through a formal consultation process) to comment on the BSIP. Details of this will be released in due course. Meanwhile, you can access the Plan by pasting this link into your search engine - <https://devoncc.sharepoint.com/sites/PublicDocs/Transport/Travel/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2FPublicDocs%2FTransport%2FTravel%2FBSIP%20%2D%20Published%20Documents%2FBSIP%20%2D%20Devon%20County%20Council%20v1%2E%2029%2E10%2E21%2Epdf&parent=%2Fsite%2FPublicDocs%2FTransport%2FTravel%2FBSIP%20%2D%20Published%20Documents&p=true>

The County Council has also prepared an ‘Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme’ which was completed earlier this month and each of the operators now has a month to lodge any objections, after which a public consultation begins. The Partnership is due to come into operation in April 2022.

The BSIP covers the area under the County Council’s control and so excludes Torbay and Plymouth, although the County has consulted with all adjacent authorities over some of the proposals. It is intended that the Plan will be updated every six months and its aim is to “deliver a step change in bus service provision, helping to grow patronage and making buses an attractive alternative to the car for more people”.

There are some long standing problems to overcome. Ridership in 2011/12 was 26.3m; in 2019/20 it was 23.3m, a drop of 11% in 8 years. Then covid struck and in 2020/21 there were just 8.1m

trips, a further drop of 65%. Passenger numbers have recovered significantly since then, but it will be a long time before they reach pre-covid levels.

Reliability of services is badly affected by traffic congestion, as illustrated by the 57 service from Exmouth to Exeter during the morning peak, when the normal 45-minute journey time becomes 76 minutes, a 69% increase. Compare this with other modes of transport in the same peak – car (35 mins), rail (29 mins) and cycle (58 mins). In response, the partners will establish a bus punctuality group to monitor future performance and aim for improvements.

Chapter 3 sets targets for improvement by 2025. These include 97% passenger satisfaction (up from 95%), 5% modal shift (up from 3%) and 92% of services on time (up from 73%). Other targets cover journey speed, punctuality and passenger numbers.

Chapter 4 describes the ‘future offer’ to passengers:

- Expanding the network – new routes across Devon to link people with the main employment areas and railway stations.
- Increased frequency – the main inter-urban routes near Exeter will have frequencies up to every 15 minutes and there will be more evening, late night and weekend services.
- More bus priority schemes – more 24 hour bus lanes and linked traffic signals.
- More integration with rail – more direct connections between train and bus.
- More ‘attractive’ fares – a new Devon and Cornwall £8 day ticket, a zone X £6 day ticket covering the Exeter area and extending as far as Newton Abbot, Okehampton, Tiverton, Honiton and Sidmouth. These are in addition to the present £4 day Megarider ticket in Exeter and also come with weekly variants, child and family options. 16-18 year olds will also be able to use Term Rider tickets.
- Improved bus information – easy to read timetables at main stops, more real-time information displays and next stop announcements on buses.
- Consistent branding – all buses to use a ‘Devon Bus’ or ‘Devon Lynx’ livery.
- Better rural services – more trials of demand responsive services.
- Zero carbon buses – Exeter’s route A to go electric first; all buses to go green by 2035.

We wonder how much of all this can be afforded. Devon has bid for £34m, but first indications are that the funding has been over-subscribed by more than six times and that shire counties like ours are unlikely to receive more than £5m per year.

The National Express Bid for Stagecoach

Earlier this month, NX’s bid was finally published and it now goes to the Competition and Markets Authority for scrutiny. It seems that in an effort to stave off objections, it was decided that Falcon and Megabus services will be transferred to ComfortDelgro, a major international transport group which runs the Metroliner bus fleet in London and other operations around the country. Meanwhile, Stagecoach’s bus brand will continue and it is unlikely that passengers will notice the difference. Watch this space!

While on the subject of express coaches, we note that shelters have now been installed by the Stover Court car park in Bampfylde Street (east) and we expect the coaches will transfer from Sidwell Street to their new stops early in the new year.

The Exeter Guide

If you have picked up a copy of Stagecoach's new 'Exeter Guide' leaflet recently, we would be interested to know what you think of it. We in the Core Group prefer the previous version produced by the County Council, which was based on a street map of the city and better defines the exact routes. As you might expect, the leaflet only shows Stagecoach routes and ignores those of other operators and we think this goes against the ethos of the enhanced partnership that is supposed to have been developed. Perhaps the partnership does not extend to inter-operator co-operation.

The Guide contains a thumb-nail sketch of the city centre roads (with the surprising exception of Queen Street) with all the bus stops and their stop numbers. This prompted us to do a survey of the stops and the types of information on display. We commend Stagecoach for many of the information panels on the bus shelters, but there are a few exceptions and we have drawn these to the attention of the company. We are particularly concerned that stop 40 in Sidwell Street, which is the starting point for most of the independent operators, does not have any vestige of a shelter, whereas there is a shelter at stop 36 nearby (used by Stagecoach) which is devoid of any information at all, and appears to be redundant. Surely a bit of joined up thinking is needed here!

Finally, we wish all our readers a very happy Christmas and a better New Year, from the Bus Group Core Group. Keep safe and avoid Omicron as far as you can.

The Exeter and District Bus Users Group exists to represent the views of bus and coach passengers in the 'Greater Exeter' area and if you have any concerns that you would like us to take up on your behalf, please do not hesitate to contact us. The Core Group currently consists of Suzanne Cosgrave, Robert Crawley (chairman), Geoff Kerr, David Nappin and Peter Nickol. If you would like to join us, please get in touch by email or phone. If you no longer want to receive our newsletters, please reply to this email and let us know.