

# EXETER & DISTRICT BUS USERS GROUP

Tel: 01395-567795 Email: [eanddbug@gmail.com](mailto:eanddbug@gmail.com)

## MARCH 2022 NEWSLETTER

### The state of the bus service in Devon

There is nothing more annoying than waiting for a bus that either arrives late or does not turn up at all. This has certainly been our repeated experience lately and it is so sad that the hope of an improving service heralded by the Government's new Bus Strategy for England has been derailed by a shortage of drivers and the after effects of Brexit and the Covid pandemic. Stagecoach has been publishing a list of cancelled services on a day by day basis on its website, but even this does not tell the full story, and If you try to check on the arrival of the next bus on your smartphone, all you get is the timetable data, not real-time information.

So it is no surprise that things have got to such a state that a pressure group has been set up here in Exeter to collate bus users' recent experiences and with that information to bring pressure to bear on the local politicians – The Exeter Area Bus Action Group (or TEABAG for short) – and we're sure you will have seen or heard about it in recent weeks. The group has been set up on Facebook and has achieved over 1,000 members already, which is a good indicator about just how difficult the situation is currently for many bus travellers. This is a national problem and a complex one without a simple or quick solution - regrettably.

Even Exeter City Council has joined in the protests, unanimously passing a resolution about passenger transport at its meeting on February 22<sup>nd</sup>. The wording is as follows:

*"This Council is concerned to learn from Stagecoach about the reductions to bus services in Exeter from 24 January and also from South Western Railway (First Group) to broadly half the number of trains and make a change of trains at Salisbury necessary for passengers to and from London Waterloo from 17 January 2022, noting that these reductions are apparently due to staff shortages related to Covid.*

*However, this Council also notes the imminent lifting of Covid restrictions by HM Government and the encouragement to employees to return to their workplaces rather than working from home. These developments, along with the continuing expansion in the area,*

*are very likely to encourage car usage to at least pre-Covid levels and, in consequence, a rise in congestion and emissions running counter to Council policies on carbon reduction.*

*This Council considers that radical solutions are needed to public transport in Exeter in addition to the reversal of the above-named cuts. It calls for a wide-ranging examination by the Exeter City Council Transport Working Group of the possibilities, for example, of Council run bus services (as existed in Exeter 1904-1970), bus and train performance contracts, electric buses, a city-wide tram system, emission charging for road vehicles and workplace charging levies to fund transport improvements."*

Here in the Exeter and District Bus Users Group, we are in for the long haul and are continuing to pressure Stagecoach to improve both its infrastructure and services, and to encourage Devon CC as Local Transport Authority and author of its 'Bus Services Improvement Plan' to invest in as many upgrades to the County-wide bus services as funding will allow.

## **April cuts (nearly!)**

Emergency funding for the bus industry during the pandemic was originally due to finish on March 31<sup>st</sup>, leaving many in the industry wondering what would happen afterwards. Some leaders were predicting that because passenger numbers have not yet returned to pre-covid levels, services would have to be cut by up to 30%, in which case notice of withdrawal by operators would have to be given to the Traffic Commissioners by mid-February. However, on March 1<sup>st</sup> the Transport Secretary Grant Shapps belatedly announced that a final tranche of energy funding would be made available to cover costs over the next six months. The statement says:

*"As the sector continues to deal with the ongoing effects of the pandemic and the emergence of new travel patterns, the financial challenges faced by the bus and light rail sector remain. The department recognises the importance local transport services have to the people and economies of the areas they serve and understands that the removal of funding now would create a 'cliff edge' with the prospect of overnight reductions in services. Such an outcome would undermine our aspirations set out in the [National bus strategy](#) ..... white paper to improve transport connectivity.*

*I can therefore announce that [we will provide over £150 million in further financial support to the local transport sector](#). This will fund bus operators and local authorities responsible for bus and light rail services from April until October and is the final COVID-19 support package the government will provide to the sector."*

## **Public consultation on the BSIP**

If you recall from our December newsletter, once the Bus Services Improvement Plan was published at the end of October, Devon CC was planning to carry out a public consultation

on its proposals. However, we understand that DCC has since been formally notified by Government that the funds available have indeed been oversubscribed as anticipated, so the Council is now waiting for an announcement about how much it will actually be awarded. It then needs to decide which of its proposals can be afforded and only after that can a realistic plan be put out to consultation. In the meantime, the deadline for setting up the 'enhanced partnership' arrangement between the Council and bus operators has been put back from the original April 1<sup>st</sup> date. It seems that in one way or another, Boris's National Bus Strategy is gradually becoming unstuck.

### **Problems with the new bus station**

Ever since the new bus station was opened last summer, we have been pressing Stagecoach for completion of the outstanding works and for rectifying some of its management practices, so far without a great deal of success. Some problems arise from the small size of the building, resulting in too many buses having to use the wrong bay. This would not be an issue if the public address system were put into use; it would save drivers having to round up passengers waiting elsewhere and lead them to the alternative gate. We also find that destinations and 'via' points are sometimes misleading and that facilities for visually disabled people are incomplete. Let us know if you have a problem there and we will take it up on your behalf.

### **The new express coach shelters**

You may have noticed that the new shelters have been erected in Bampfylde Street (east) opposite the Undergrad café and be wondering when they are to be brought into use. If you look closely, one of the end panels is still missing and we gather that this is holding up their commissioning. We will let you know when express coaches are likely to transfer there from stop 31 in Sidwell Street.

*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, Sue Musyoki, 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.*