

SWT Scrutiny Committee - 13 May 2020

Present: Councillor Gwil Wren (Chair)
Councillors Libby Lisgo, Ian Aldridge, Sue Buller, Norman Cavill, Dixie Darch, Ed Firmin, Dave Mansell, Derek Perry, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Phil Stone, Nick Thwaites, Keith Wheatley and John Hassall

Officers: Dawn Adey, Alison North, Marcus Prouse and Andrew Randell

Also Present: Councillors Booth, Henley, Kravis, Lloyd Smith, Tully, Whetlor,

(The meeting commenced at Time Not Specified)

7. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor D Wedderkopp.

Councillor J Hassall attended as a substitute.

8. Minutes of the previous meeting of the Scrutiny Committee 5 February 2020.

(Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 5 February circulated with the agenda)

Resolved that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee held on 5 February be amended and considered for approval at a future meeting.

9. Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr N Cavill	All Items	West Monkton	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr J Hunt	All Items	SCC & Bishop's Hull	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Mansell	All Items	Wiveliscombe	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr H Prior-Sankey	All Items	SCC & Taunton Charter Trustee	Personal	Spoke and Voted

Cllr G Wren	All Items	Clerk to Milverton PC	Personal	Spoke and Voted

10. Public Participation

The following members of the public had requested to speak on item 5 on the agenda.

- 1) Mr David Redgewell - South West Transport Network and Railfuture Severnside.

“Dear Councillors,

Our main concern is the provision of high quality waiting facilities in Taunton town centre. The bus station provided a regional function for the south west both for short services to the town but more importantly for bus services to Minehead, Wellington, Tiverton, Bridgewater Burnham on Sea, Street, Glastonbury, Wells, Axminster and Chard. National Express Coaches operate services to Plymouth, Paignton and Cornwall. Services also operate to Bristol, Heathrow Airport, London Victoria coach station, Barnstaple and North Devon, Scotland, Manchester and North.

With the closure of the coach station there are no waiting shelters for coach passengers. The closed bus and coach station had a waiting room, cafe bar, travel centre facilities and toilets across the road in Castle Way as well as facilities for Coaches to use the wheelchair lifts. At present National Express Coaches stop in Tower Street without any passengers facilities being available.
Town centre waiting facilities

Following the closure of the bus station buses operate from stands in the town centre with very poor quality shelters in Castle Way, The Parade, and East Reach. At present services 21, 22, 28 operate from Castle Way along with Hatch Green. Dartline service 20 to Seaton, Devon and South West Coaches service causing passenger congestion on the bus stops and poor access for disabled people.

From the Parade which has very poor shelters, service 25 to Dulverton and other services around the town centre again have very congested stops with no proper waiting facilities.

Also departing the Parade outside the card shop, service 29 to Wells 30 to Axminster for Weymouth via Chard and Service 99 to Chard the same problem exists.

With the Bus station closed and social distancing regulations in place for Covid19, there is a need to mark out social distancing at bus stops meaning that the existing shelters will not shelter passengers from the rain and will be totally inadequate for their needs.

The buses under these regulations for Covid-19 will mean a double decker carrying 20 passengers and a single decker 10 passengers. This means that buses will not be able to be doubled up at bus stops in the town centre causing congestion unless plans are made to remove the private car from the central area similar to Exeter high street.

Question 1. As part owner of the bus station Somerset West and Taunton council could look at use of part of the old bus station to allow safe social distancing to and from country buses with marked out emergency bays. The use of Taunton Railway station as an interchange is to be welcomed but unlike Penzance and St Austell where there are proper bus station bays and passengers facilities and staff accommodation, in Taunton the interchange does not have enough bays for buses other than to West Somerset and no staff accommodation. One idea is to build a bus interchange on Kilkenny car park. In other councils in the south west a new bus station has been built in Gloucester with one under construction at Exeter bus station with another one being built in Weston super mare. Bus rail interchanges are planned at Dorchester South and Weymouth railway station. These are all being funded by the Department for Transport. All bus and coach stations have been regenerated in Cornwall at St Ives, Penzance, Truro, and Newquay with Government and EU grants. In conclusion we believe that Somerset County Council (the transport authority) and First Group and Somerset West and Taunton council should draw up a plan to invest in public facilities in the Town centre and a new transport interchange. If the bus and coach station is redeveloped then a small bus interchange could be incorporated in the site with shops and flats above the bus station. Similar to the bus and coach stations in Bristol and Oxford.

We need a solution with Somerset County Council, the transport authority and First Group and National Express Coaches to improve passenger facilities in Taunton town centre.

This is the biggest town in the West Country without a bus and coach station or interchange. Bridgwater bus station is owned by Sedgemoor District Council, Wells bus station is owned by Mendip District Council along with Shepton Mallet interchange and Frome coach station. This gives an example of a bus station in council ownership and this is required. The bus industry is being funded to the tune of 17 million pounds a week by Covid-19 bus operators grant Somerset county council is paying the grant to the bus operators in Somerset.

In Taunton any new bus and coach facilities need to be built and run by the local authority and leased to the operators i.e. First Group, National Express Coaches and Hatch Green to include full passenger's facilities, toilets, travel centre, cafe, waiting room, real-time information displays, staff accommodation and traffic office. Please read our statement to the committee. We also support TravelWatch South West stakeholder's consultation on Taunton town centre bus and coach interchange facilities.

1. The need for first group and the other bus operators to develop a plan with Somerset County Council The transport authority measures to protect passengers at bus stops in the town centre along the line of other Transport authorities with clear markings at Bus stops and the work on a plan to replace the town centre bus shelters in the parade, castle way and east reach with dry water proof sheets, of the designs in Weymouth kings statue or Plymouth Royal parade.
2. The bus stop need designing for more than one bus as a Double Decker to Wellington or Tiverton will carry only 20 passengers a and a single decker to Minehead just 10 passengers.
3. The bus stops within the town need real-time information system provided.
4. Proper facilities need designing for National Express Coaches service to the south west and the rest of the south west. In castle way or a car park location with water proof shelter close to Toilets and a cafe with wheelchair lifts facilities.
5. All bus stops should have castle kerbs for disabled access.
6. In line with Government policy more space should be used In the town centre for walking and cycling.
7. Close the Town centre to the private car and use the space for walking cycling taxis and public transport.
8. Provide a park and ride service that links Gateway Park and ride with silk mills Taunton Musgrove park hospital and the Railway station. This allows traffic to be removed from the town centre and improve air quality.
9. Provide evenings service to Wellington .first bus 22 To Bridgwater High bridge and Burnham on sea. First bus 21 to Minehead First bus 28 .and Sunday and evening service on route 1 around the town on Sunday a loop service around the town.
10. Look at leasing back the bus station as a temporary facility to provide social distancing and safe departure bay's for buses to provide extra buses and facilities for Coaches.
11. To look at improvements to passengers facilities at Riverside for megabus and falcon coach services, for Bristol Exeter and Plymouth and megabus Coaches to Plymouth Cornwall London Heathrow and Victoria. And the Midlands wales the North and Scotland. These services need through tickets with the park and ride service.
12. The council needs to bid with Somerset county council the local transport authority, along with the south west transport board. for. Money for public transport interchange facilities in the town centre. There is an option to bid for Regeneration money from Covid 19 recovery plan for the economy.

The county council will continue to receive a covid 19 bus operators grant to run the county bus service and most carry out public consultation on all bus services issue under Department for transport regulations.

Please bring our further comment to the scrutiny committee on bus station and town centre passengers facilities.

2) Ms Bryony Chetwode

Comment and Question from TravelWatch SouthWest

The challenges and opportunities presented to the Community by COVID-19 make previous comments submitted by TWSW urgent.

I hope you all can recall or have access to our earlier statements. For example, based upon the existing designs we still question whether the shelters are fit for purpose.

COVID has brought further safety concerns to light which will ultimately have a negative influence on community confidence in public transport, unless we design to enable comfort, space, information, and certainty.

These are all points made previously. But must be now also be addressed to enable Taunton's COVID-19 economic recovery.

We know the character of future journey flows are uncertain but, we can anticipate more working from home, and design requirements which influence passenger proximity.

Councillors are asked to ensure they work with the community represented to address issues around:

1. Practicality
2. Fear
3. Safety
4. Expectation
5. Environmental health

On this basis and representing the interests of the communities we request a series of collaborative and constructive workshops with local stakeholders. We can help you arrange this, and SWAT will benefit from collaboratively developed recommendations from the community, Local Government and business stakeholders.

This enables SWAT to develop well scrutinised options. TravelWatch SouthWest asks the Chair to seek agreement to handle the matter in this way and would welcome an approach to take this forward.

11. **Taunton Bus Station and Bus Transport in Somerset West and Taunton**

Alex Cater, Managing Director of First Bus presented an update in relation to Taunton Bus Station and Bus Transport in Somerset West and Taunton.

The changes and developments in service provision in Taunton and the South West was set out along with the situation around the Taunton bus station closure. Following the impact of Covid-19 on passenger numbers and update was given around the existing service provision and current capacity of services.

Debate

- Concerns were expressed over the closure of the Bus Station. Further information was requested on the details around the closure and the cost of maintenance.
- It had been determined that there would be a significant sum required for the Bus Station and its cost of repair to continue to maintain the station. It was acknowledged that the consultation of closing the station was minimal due to timescales. Both parties wanted to go through with the transaction.
- To provide the maximum level of quality service it had been determined that spending on essential costs would enable improvement and development and future services.
- Avoiding using public transport in the current context had been difficult in addressing long term service improvements. Future investment on routes and improving the fleets would be on the cards alongside extending services into the evening.
- Increased passenger numbers were usually determined on existing successful services.
- Securing funding from Somerset County Council was required to improve services in many instances.
- Central Government were covering the costs of the provision of the bus service to ensure the service broke even. The current level of service was 60% of the normal service across the district, the government guidance was 40%.
- Discussions were taking place on longer term funding of the service. The current Covid19 funding was for a period of 12 weeks.
- Bus operators would be able to restore services when reactivation on a normal basis when required from the government. Investing in additional fleet was not possible until the service was back to normal and generating a profit post any Covid-19 restrictions.
- It was recognised that some routes were running at a reduced service due to a lack of support funding. The future of services would be considered once out of the Covid-19 restrictions.
- Concerns were expressed over a spiral of decline of some services, it was recognised that this was a demand led service. Changing of habits and lifestyles post Covid-19. First Group were the only provider of a commercial service in the area.
- A realistic view of the climate still remained even with the emphasis of the Climate Emergency agenda. There was nothing to support the investment in the short term due to the lack of profit generation and growth in the service.
- It was determined that funding for Cornwall Council bus services was at a higher level than in Somerset historically due to securing additional funding and European funding.
- It had been acknowledged that the improvements in the economy of diesel busses had a greater contribution to carbon neutrality ambitions.
- It was determined at the current range, electric buses would not suit the operating environment of Somerset.
- The approach to gauging demand was based on history and previous traditional demand. Low fares pilots were being introduced in different parts of the countries.
- Route improvements to the 29 service was considered. This service had been retendered with the new provider being First Group following this exercise and the current timetable would be maintained with no plans to change this.

- The current services were indefinite, some services were contracted with differing lengths. Delivery could not happen without the local authority to help invest in the fleet. Willingness through policy and investment was needed.
- Supporting the park and ride was a good example, advanced signage was needed but this was achieved successfully elsewhere.
- Consideration of reopening the Taunton Bus Station would be considered if this was a possibility. Facilitation of this was requested by the committee.
- The committee thanked Alex Carter for his input and attendance.

The Scrutiny Committee Recommend that:-

1. Executive open up discussions with First Group were requested as a matter as urgency for the temporary emergency opening of the bus station with consideration of the Covid-19 situation.
2. A Task and Finish Group be set up with a shared objective to review public transport across the district.

12. **Annual Scrutiny Report. Report of the Scrutiny Chairman**

The Chairman of The Scrutiny Committee presented the Annual Scrutiny Report.

The year started with the publication of new Government Guidance seeking to clarify and broaden the role and influence of Scrutiny Committees. The Chairman and The Vice Chair were keen to ensure that Scrutiny Councillors gained a greater oversight of their work programme than was done previously. This was to give us a stronger voice over the Executive reports the committee wished to look at in detail and enable maximum influence to be exerted. The committee also aimed to be more proactive and investigate external matters which had a bearing on residents.

In the last year, the Committee discussed many issues of community interest and concern such as The Local Plan, Firepool, Watchet Library, Climate Change Strategy, Shared Legal Services, 5G, Financial Monitoring Reports and Budget Setting Reports, Performance Reports, Somerset Climate Emergency Framework and SWT Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience Plan, Voluntary and Community East Quay Wall and others.

However, while I believe we were able to add value to many of these topics, it was also clear that that being adequately sighted on emerging issues was not always straightforward. There were issues around the process for differentiating between topics for Briefing and items going to Scrutiny. As a result we have made some adjustments to the process of flagging topics and reports for Scrutiny. We have also refreshed the agenda setting process and the involvement of Committee members in that.

In order to reflect on our first year and help us focus our role and efforts we had planned a Committee 'Away Day' with an external Facilitator on 20th March 2020. This unfortunately fell foul of the current restrictions. However it is intended to re-schedule this as soon as possible as it will a key opportunity for the Committee to review, and build in a bigger and better suite of work to take up in the future such as Spotlight Reviews and Task and Finish Investigations.

Resolved that:- The Scrutiny Committee thanked the Chairman for his report were in agreement that the report be considered at Full Council without any amendments.

13. **Scrutiny Committee Action Plan**

(Copy of the Scrutiny Committee Action Plan, circulated with the agenda).

Resolved that the Scrutiny Committee Action Plan be noted.

14. **Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

(Copy of the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan, circulated with the agenda).

An update of the Climate Change Strategy was requested at a future meeting

A Scrutiny Committee agenda setting would be arranged in advance of 27th May.

Councillors were reminded that if they had an item they wanted to add to the agenda, that they should send their requests to the Governance Team.

Resolved that the Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan be noted.

15. **Executive Forward Plan**

The Commercial Investment Strategy was requested to be considered at a future Scrutiny meeting.

The Committee noted the Executive Forward Plan.

16. **Full Council Forward Plan**

The Committee noted the Full Council Forward Plan.

(The Meeting ended at 21:00)