**Bus meeting, Tatworth Memorial Hall – July 1, 2025**

I introduced the meeting as the local ‘Bus Champion’. It was organised by the Somerset Bus Partnership, represented by Tony Reese and Linda Snelling. First Bus was represented by Stuart Bailey.

Also present were Evie Potts-Jones, a Somerset councillor, now working for Adam Dance MP, and Les Mattey from the Parish Council.

About 30 local residents attended, all but one of them from Tatworth. I think it’s fair to say that all were over 60 years of age.

The meeting focused essentially on the no. 30 bus service.

Tony and Linda introduced the meeting by talking about the origins of the Partnership, and appealed for support (and ideally a financial contribution from the Parish Council). After that, it was largely a question of the audience making points and Stuart, for the most part, responding.

Key points:

1. Stuart tried to explain the various models under which bus companies operate. His explanation was a little technical, but the main point is that First is a commercial operation. Regardless of any backing it gets from government central or local, it has to be viable. It’s hard to keep rural routes going, because they represent relatively long distances with relatively few passengers. It’s easy to see where there could be a lot of improvements, but the company has to look at its bottom line.
2. There was general dissatisfaction with the bus service and with the new timetable in particular. The Partnership team said that they had had little time to give their input when it was put to them, and Stuart said it was impractical for every community to be asked to make representations whenever the timetable was reviewed (which is twice a year). There was a general consensus that it was a rushed job.
3. Just two buses are dedicated to this route, and the current timetable was designed, with AI input, to ensure that the buses were used as efficiently as possible. Following the introduction of the new timetable, punctuality and reliability are said to have improved significantly. However, from the passenger perspective, the improvements are not apparent, and in most respects the service is now worse. Reliability was a major criticism.
4. What was most disliked about the new timetable was probably the fact that the first bus into Chard or Taunton on which a concession card can be used now leaves at 1037. The Partnership is petitioning for the Council to change its 0930 rule and allow the card to be used on the service leaving at 0851. Each council sets its own rules for the use of the card, and exceptions can be made. However, the bus companies make less money when concession cards are used, and Somerset Council would probably be expected to compensate for any loss of revenue.
5. Other concerns about the timetable included the fact that, if it wasn’t bad enough that buses only ran every 90 minutes, it’s not even precisely 90 minutes – there is no regularity at all. Stuart maintained that the current timetable was designed for greater efficiency. (He also said that, if an hourly service were to be introduced, for it to be viable there would need to be 4,000 passenger trips per week instead of the current 2,000.)
6. While speakers generally focused on issues likely to be of particular concern to older residents, concern was also expressed that services were not ideal for younger people travelling to and from school or college, and certainly not for people wishing to commute to work in Taunton, for which the bus is just not realistic.
7. Another point was the obvious lack of a broader, longer-term policy for a joined-up approach to public transport in Somerset. As it is, the no. 30 bus doesn’t connect with other transport services. Improvements here are likely to be a long way off.
8. Concern was also expressed about the way in which contractors and bus companies handle road closures and their implications for bus services. This could be greatly improved.
9. The no. 30 could perhaps be more popular if it didn’t take circuitous routes to serve particular housing estates. Presumably the company would have to weigh up whether any changes would lead to a greater nett gain, with more people opting in and using a faster service as opposed to those opting out because they wouldn’t want to walk a little further to use it.
10. First is investing, with government support, in a series of expensive new electric buses. The oldest diesel ones will be decommissioned.

I would suggest that the key takeaway from the meeting was that First need to consider passengers’ needs as well as those of the company – the last revision to the timetable clearly didn’t do that, and we need to try to ensure that, when future revisions are made, we do have a voice in the decision-making process.

Peter Chapple, ‘Bus Champion’