

# BUGS Chairmans report 2024

Chairman Chris Danpure

As I look back over the last year of the local bus services in Stevenage, I really feel that the overall service is very poor and unreliable and with the now commonly used phrase "Not fit for purpose." I personally have been using more taxis to get to appointments, and to the rail station when I have to be on a certain train to get to a meeting or on a rail ticket which permits me only use of the ticket on a specific train.

So why are we in this mess? As you all know Arriva was sold by its previous owners Deutsche Bahn state owned German railways in 2023, with its new owners an American finance company based in Miami new taking full ownership in April 2024. Since then changes have been made obviously to make it more profitable with Arriva's Aylesbury and High Wycombe garages being closed at the end of July, although it took until September to distribute the usable buses to other bus garages like Stevenage.

Since the beginning of September, I have noticed an improvement in the bus service with newer vehicles in Stevenage garage like Mercedes vehicles being cascaded down from the closure of Aylesbury entire Wickham garages. Also at Stevenage garage talking to senior bus drivers they have mentioned that the staffing levels are better and what appears now to be the problem is lack of serviceable buses again. We've heard this before it's like a merry go round. But unfortunately it gets worse in Hertfordshire Interlink and Arriva's poor communication with passengers and groups such as our own and lack of response for ideas for meetings.

So with all that bad news what is going on in the rest of England with their local buses. This week was the news report from Norfolk County Council that they had an increase of 16% in ridership in their local bus services over the past year. It appears someone is getting it right. Then this week the governments passed legislation enabling all local transport authorities to have power to franchise services by franchising bus operators in a coordinated process like all one same fare on a route where two operators are running the service and passengers can use a return ticket on all operators on that route like in London, Manchester and Cornwall where bus services are reliable information on services like real time is available and in Cornwall and excellent printed bus timetable is also available.

400 new vehicles have been ordered by Stagecoach for its bus network across the UK all electric Arriva have ordered a smaller number of vehicles for its London bus contracts to keep up with new TfL rules for all electric buses in the future.

Taking a look at my journeys around the UK this year, I've found so many improvements to bus services I travelled on, such as in East and Central Cornwall where I took the 73 bus to Loos real time screens showing up-to-date bus times and bus movements for all services, and even at small village bus stops there were real time screens operating in St Keyne and Duloe.

At the bus station adjoining St. Austell rail station there were new large 3 feet plus screens displaying bus information, again real time. Cornwall's transport for Cornwall is moving forward on integrating with the rail network for bus services with integrated ticketing so you can buy a return ticket say between Truro and St Austel on the bus and return by train.

In Devon they are still printing yearly bus timetables for all the county, increasing real time bus screens across the county and increasing integration with the rail network.

In Dorset in the Wareham Poole and Swanage area there is widespread use of real time bus screens even in small villages like Corfe Castle and on the number 40 bus I took from Wareham to Swanage there was bus stop identification on the whole journey of 41 minutes right through all the local villages. And on top of all that, yes, they print a very attractive pocket sized bus timetable showing more bus services in Weymouth area, Wareham area and Bournemouth Poole area. This must be one of the best bus services all round for information and a lot of new vehicles as well.

Up in Cumbria they're still printing a very good bus timetables for the areas around the Lake District but not too much in real time information. Here I feel there might be problems due to the physical landscape of the area with narrow valleys and high fells all causing a problem with data transmission.

Finally near home in Bedfordshire the bus operator Stagecoach put out a consultation for views on its bus network from the public. I wonder what would happen if Arriva put out one for Hertfordshire, might be interesting to read the public comments but it's funny to note that Stagecoach up to a few years ago was owned by Jim Souter and his sister sold out to a German investment group and now he's seeing a lot of new investment. Like these 400 new electric buses and asking for public comments like in Bedfordshire, there might be hope for the bus service in Hertfordshire.