

NOTES OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GROUP HELD ON WEDNESDAY 25th FEBRUARY 2026 AT 7.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillor: R Buscombe (Chairperson) Presiding
M Joyce (Vice Chairperson)

Councillors: L Cooke
C Davieson
A Hall
A Ineson
C Parker
M Ryan
L Wood

By invitation: Peter Knight, Managing Director of Stagecoach South West

Officers In attendance: Linda McGuirk - Principal Administrator
Pierre Doutreligne - Projects & Strategy Officer
Nigel Canham - Communications Advisor

Also, in attendance Freeman Mike Hocking
Freewoman Carol Bunday
Emily Farrell, Newton Abbot CIC Business & Community
Development Manager

39. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

All members of the Community Engagement Group were in attendance.

40. INTERESTS

None declared.

41. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Community Engagement Group meeting held on 8th October 2026 were received and signed as a correct record.

42. PRESENTATION – STAGECOACH SOUTH WEST

The Chairperson, Councillor Richard Buscombe, welcomed a representative from Stagecoach South West, who delivered a detailed presentation covering the following key points:

- Stagecoach is the UK's largest bus operator and has served Devon for over 25 years.
- The company aims to keep communities connected, providing access to employment, education, healthcare, leisure and shopping.

- Commitment to achieving Net Zero, including investment in 110 zero-emission buses across Devon (£45 million investment), saving approximately 98,847kg of CO₂ compared with diesel vehicles.
- Post-COVID challenges, including a loss of up to 95% of patronage overnight in March 2020.
- The impact of congestion and un-coordinated roadworks on journey times and service reliability.
- Overview of the Exeter Bus Network.
- Some services are financially supported by Devon County Council where they are not commercially viable.
- The Devon Bus Enhanced Partnership (a statutory requirement).
- Stagecoach Corporate Solutions, including a workplace travel app for subsidised employee travel.

Discussion points raised by Councillors included:

- Commuter ticket pricing and options between Newton Abbot and Exeter.
- Partnership working with Newton Abbot Community Transport.
- Provision and rollout of electric buses in Newton Abbot.
- General operational issues affecting services locally.
- Reliability of Route 77 and 77A, including reports of buses not turning up, extended waiting times (up to 1.5 hours), and route alterations during roadworks.
- Timetable co-ordination and suggestions regarding the frequency of the Number 12 service.
- Concerns regarding the functionality of the bus app and customer service telephone availability.
- Recruitment and retention of drivers, with sickness and attendance remaining a post-pandemic challenge.
- Improvements to the vehicle tracking system and the importance of meaningful and direct communication.
- Pricing strategy and fare zones, including the proportion of older persons' concessionary pass holders.
- The impact of the Local Government Review on funding of vital services.
- Servicing of large-scale residential developments in Newton Abbot.
- Wheelchair priority over prams.
- Driver welfare, including whether drivers experience abuse or violence.
- Operational matters such as visibility of bus stops and road surface conditions affecting ride quality.

Members expressed concern that Newton Abbot was receiving a comparatively poorer service than Exeter, particularly in relation to reliability. It was noted that many older residents rely heavily on bus services and require a dependable service.

Freeman Mike Hocking, who sits on the Devon Bus Forum through Newton Abbot Community Transport, spoke in support of Town Council representation at the Forum. He highlighted ongoing concerns regarding Route 77A evening services and confirmed that a complaint had been raised but a response was still awaited.

The representative from Stagecoach confirmed that congestion, roadworks co-ordination and wider highways network performance remain significant operational challenges.

Members expressed their thanks to the Stagecoach representative for attending the meeting and acknowledged the efforts of bus drivers operating in challenging conditions.

The Chairperson, Councillor Richard Buscombe, indicated the Council's willingness to work collaboratively and maintain ongoing dialogue. The Stagecoach representative encouraged Members to report operational issues in real time where possible to enable prompt investigation.

Members expressed their thanks to, want to work with you and keep in contact, can we help you – please keep in touch. Please report in real time and he can sort them out.

43. **AGE FRIENDLY TOWNS**

The Principal Administrator reported that in December 2025, the SLCC, NALC and the Centre for Ageing Better shared a Town and Parish guide to supporting ageing communities, as circulated prior to the meeting. The guide sets out practical steps for local councils to support older residents and create more inclusive communities.

Members were reminded that the needs of an ageing population are one of the initiatives arising from the revised Community Plan, the Age Friendly guide provides an opportunity for the Council to give some thought to its role in this area.

It was suggested that the Community Engagement Group carries out a survey of the community and representatives from age-related groups in Newton Abbot to ask for their views on what the Town Council could do to support older residents. The survey will also be available at the Annual Town Meeting with results reported back to the Community Engagement Group meeting in July.

During the lengthy discussion, Members emphasised that while loneliness among older residents is a significant concern, the needs of younger people must also be considered.

Points raised included:

- The importance of ensuring support is inclusive of all age groups, particularly 16 to 25 year olds, who are experiencing increasing challenges.
- Whether similar guidance exists to support younger people.
- The need to manage expectations carefully and avoid committing to actions that the Council may not be able to deliver.
- The potential to explore youth engagement initiatives, including youth councils, cadets and other forums, to better understand what young people want from the town.
- Opportunities to foster intergenerational links between younger and older residents.

- The Council's existing role in signposting services for both young and older residents.
- Exploring apprenticeship opportunities within the Town Council.

In principle Members supported the Age Friendly guide but agreed that further research should be undertaken to identify whether equivalent guidance exists to support younger people in Newton Abbot, particularly 16- to 25 year olds.

Members **agreed**:

- In principle, to support the Age Friendly Guide.
- That officers investigate similar guidance and opportunities to support younger people in Newton Abbot.

A discussion took place regarding National Apprentice Week and the potential opportunities for the Town Council to explore offering apprenticeships.

44. HOT TOPICS

Members were advised that representatives from the Environment Agency will attend the April meeting to provide an update on the River Lemon Fish Migration Project.

Members agreed the following items for future discussion:

- Devon & Somerset Fire and Rescue Service – including the possibility of arranging a visit/demonstration.
- Annual review of the Community Engagement Group's work, including outcomes achieved and feedback from community groups.
- Young People

45. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next scheduled meeting is Wednesday 15th April 2026.

Meeting closed at 20:50

CHAIRPERSON..... Date.....