

DATE 23 September 2025

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TO ALL SWESTRANS BOARD MEMBERS

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Dear SWestrans Board Member,

SWestrans Board – 26 September 2025

I enclose for your attention the report marked to follow for consideration at the meeting of 26 September 2025 which was not available at the time of the original despatch:

9. LOCAL BUS NETWORK UPDATE (Pages 3 - 14)

Yours sincerely

Claire Rogerson
Secretary to the SWestrans Board

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LOCAL BUS NETWORK PROCUREMENT UPDATE

1. Reason for Report

1.1 To update the South West of Scotland Transport Partnership (SWestrans) Board on the go-live of the re-procured Dumfries and Galloway bus network on the 7 August 2025 and the issues identified and amendments introduced since that time.

1.2 The report also updates the Board on the proposed next steps with the development of the bus network in future, responding to feedback from members of the public, as well as actions from the Notice of Motion presented to Dumfries and Galloway Council on 26 June 2025 and the Special meeting of Dumfries and Galloway Council on Monday 11 August 2025.

2. Background

2.1 The contracts for bus services for home to school transport let by Dumfries and Galloway Council expired at the end of the last academic year in June 2025 and the subsidised local bus network contracts held by SWestrans expired on 6 August 2025. The local bus network went live on 7 August 2025, with new contracts in place following the procurement process that took place during the period from April to August 2025. The home to school transport contracts commenced on the first day of school on 21 August 2025.

3. Key issues identified since the commencement of the bus network

3.1 In the six weeks since the commencement of the new local bus contracts, SWestrans and Dumfries and Galloway Council have received a significant amount of feedback and correspondence relating to the new bus services that are now in place. Furthermore, two petitions have been submitted, one with over 2,000 signatures was received by the Council on 24 July 2025 detailing “Save our Buses – Route 415, 416 and 359”. A further petition has been received from Langholm residents with 250 signatures, regarding changes made to the town bus and the merging of the 120 and 124 services. SWestrans and Council officers attended the meeting of the Langholm, Ewes, and Westerkirk Community Council on 1 September 2025, to discuss this petition in more detail.

3.2 The SWestrans team has replied and responded to the large quantities of correspondence and has used the feedback to develop an ‘Issues Log’ based on the feedback received. There has been a variety of feedback relating to individual services, as well as issues that affect the bus network as a whole. A summary of the key issues that have been identified through the correspondence is outlined below, along with the efforts that have been made to introduce changes or improvements to resolve these where possible within existing resources.

3.3 In many cases, we have been able to engage with the bus operators, who have been helpful and supportive in introducing amendments without additional costs. In other cases, we have had to explain that as a result of the bus network procurement process and the withdrawal of Western Buses Ltd, there is no available budget or bus operator capacity to support any changes at this time.

Fare increases across the bus network

3.4 A particular issue that has been raised with SWestrans and the Council through correspondence is the increase in the cost of bus travel in Dumfries and Galloway. The 500 service (Dumfries to Stranraer) has seen the most notable increase in costs and a significant number of complaints have been received relating to this.

3.5 Through the procurement process, we made the decision to maintain fares at the same level as they were in previous contracts. As such, the price of a single trip is the same now on all services in the region as prior to the 7 August 2025. There are examples, e.g. the D4 Dumfries Town Centre to Lochvale, where the service is operated by two different operators, one during the day and another in the evening. In these instances we are working with these operators to explore the potential for a shared return ticket.

3.6 Moreover, the cost of bus travel has increased as a result of the withdrawal of Western Buses Ltd, who offered daily and weekly saver tickets. These reduced cost saver tickets provided a more attractive cost for regular bus users in the region, and the small to medium sized bus operators have not in all cases (for example Houston's Coaches and the 500 service) been able to introduce equivalent saver tickets.

3.7 With Western Buses Ltd having previously acted as the principal bus operator in the region, bus passengers are now facing rising costs of bus travel through needing to make journeys involving multiple services and operators, or thorough multiple operators running a service at different times of day. This has meant that operator saver tickets that do exist are not available for use across different operators.

3.8 We are actively exploring a solution to this issue and are in discussion with bus operators on the potential to introduce a multi-operator ticket. This is a piece of work that will take some time to complete, but we will continue to engage with operators to implement solutions as quickly as possible.

Former Western Buses Ltd Commercial Services

3.9 We have received significant amounts of correspondence regarding the withdrawal of previous Western Buses Ltd commercial services, including the morning 74 service from Moffat and Beattock to Dumfries, and the 75 (Stranraer to Newton Stewart) service.

3.10 As the Board will remember, without additional subsidy budget available and limited by bus operator capacity, the decision was made at the 23 July Board meeting to let these services lapse. We have assessed the need for these services, with students from Stranraer travelling to Douglas Ewart High School in Newton Stewart on the X75 and a small number of commuters travelling from Moffat to Dumfries on the 74.

3.11 We will continue to identify opportunities to reinstate these services in future, including through continued engagement with community transport operators, however without additional subsidy budget there is no opportunity to introduce replacement services at this time.

Cancellation of the commercial 383 service (Annan to Lockerbie)

3.12 The current commercially run 383 service (Lockerbie to Annan) operated by Houston's Coaches has been identified for withdrawal by the operator. Houston's Coaches have submitted paperwork to cancel the service from 16 November 2025, as they state it is not commercially advantageous to continue to operate. It is the responsibility of the SWestrans Board to consider whether to incorporate this service into the subsidised bus network.

3.13 In the last 12 months, the 383 service carried almost 42k passengers, an average of 163 passengers each day of operation (Monday to Saturday). The service provides the only link from Annan to Eaglesfield, whilst the 382 provides an alternative service from Eaglesfield, on to Castlemilk, Kettleholm and on to Lockerbie. 46 per cent of the passengers on the 383 are under 22-year olds, with 23 per cent under 16. 24 per cent of passengers are over 60 years old. These figures suggest that the service provides an important service to the local population that will not be available following its withdrawal by Houston's Coaches.

3.14 We will make known to other operators in the region the opportunity to operate this route on a commercial basis. However, on the expectation that other operators do not choose to operate the service commercially, and due to the SWestrans subsidy budget being fully committed, the Board is asked to consider the withdrawal of the 383 service from the Dumfries and Galloway bus network.

Transport of entitled and non-entitled children on the local bus network

3.15 Whilst this service responsibility sits with Dumfries and Galloway Council, a particular challenge that has faced the bus network over recent weeks has been the number of entitled and non-entitled school children that use the local bus network to access education.

3.16 In some cases, children that are entitled to free school transport are travelling on subsidised (and in some cases commercial) bus services, whilst in other cases children not entitled to free home to school transport are using local bus

services to travel to schools outside of their catchment area. This is putting particular pressure on some services e.g. the 246, 236, 381 and 382, whilst the number of non-entitled children has exposed elements of the bus network that are no longer available e.g. the X75 service from Stranraer to Newton Stewart for Douglas Ewart High School children. For non-entitled children travelling to Douglas Ewart High School, the 500 service (Stranraer to Dumfries) arrives at Dashwood Square at 0655 or 0945, a significant period of time before or after school commences.

3.17 SWestrans and the Council have continued to work through these issues, and have put in place solutions to maintain a level of service for children accessing education. For example, a second dedicated school transport service from Kirkconnel and Kelloholm to Sanquhar Academy has been introduced to address timing issues on the commercial 246 route, which some pupils had been using. In addition, a trial second bus has been introduced on the 246 route at school times to support pupils travelling to Wallace Hall Academy, running Monday to Friday until the October school holidays. Currently, payment for these additional services is not budgeted and the payment for the additional bus on the 246 service is not available beyond October half-term. Discussions with the operators regarding the additional buses on these services are ongoing with no certainty of continuation beyond October.

Introduction of up-to-date timetables at stops

3.18 The process of updating Novus, the system that stores bus timetable data, is still ongoing. With continual changes across the entire network to incorporate and challenges in terms of the capacity of the team, this process has taken longer than expected. As this manual process is still ongoing, SWestrans is not yet in a position to have bus stop timetables printed and distributed to bus stops across the region.

3.19 Good progress is being made with the exercise and once the process is complete in the coming weeks, timetables will be printed and distributed, commencing with Dumfries and Stranraer, and continuing across more rural parts of the region.

3.20 Paper copies of new timetables are available at local libraries and Customer Service centres.

4. Improvements to bus services that have been introduced or are in development

4.1 In addition to the issues highlighted above, the SWestrans team has been working in partnership with the bus operators to highlight issues that have arisen through correspondence and feedback from elected members, MPs, MSPs, and the public.

4.2 The following table provides an overview of many of the service issues identified along with the amendments that have been put in place or that are ongoing.

Service Number	Issue identified	Service Amendment/update
D1/D2 (Dumfries Town Centre to Locharbriggs, (Dumfries Town Centre to Heathhall)	Bus passengers were frustrated at the merging of these routes, reducing capacity and limiting frequency to Heathhall and Locharbriggs.	Feedback was passed along to Houston's Coaches. Upon additional capacity through new vehicles and operator licences, the D1 and D2 were once again split to separate routes.
8 (Dumfries Town Centre to Cargenbridge)	Feedback related to the timings of this service not being early enough to allow secondary school pupils to travel to Dumfries schools.	Feedback was passed to Houston's Coaches and a new 8.25am service has been introduced from Cargenbridge to support secondary pupils travelling to school. Whilst there was a request for an earlier service than 8:25, this is currently not possible for Houston's rota without additional subsidy funding for an extra driver.
D10/D12 (Dumfries Town Centre to Lochside / (Dumfries Town Centre to Linsteaden)	Bus passengers were frustrated at the merging of these routes, reducing capacity and limiting frequency to Lochside and Linsteaden.	Feedback was passed along to Houston's Coaches. Upon additional capacity through new vehicles and operator licences, the D10 and D12 were once again split to separate routes.
117 (Lockerbie to Hightae and Dumfries)	The service has been reduced meaning passengers from Hightae to Lockerbie to shop now face a long wait before returning to Hightae. This will affect elderly residents using service to go to Tesco.	Discussions have been held with McCall's and efforts are being made to revise the timetable to support a more reasonable amount of time shopping for Hightae residents.
246 (Dumfries to New Cumnock)	Timetable not servicing Cumnock, changes in timings affecting commuters, frequency reduced.	Feedback on the commercial 246 service has been passed to the operator McCall's Coaches for them to consider future amendments to the

Service Number	Issue identified	Service Amendment/update
		timetable. We continue to engage with them on the transportation of non-entitled children as per 3.16 above.
359 (Newton Stewart to Girvan)	Local communities are frustrated by the timetable which removed a return journey earlier in the day, meaning the return from Newton Stewart is 5 minutes after the first bus arrives.	DGC Buses is now inviting public feedback on the timetables it operates in Wigtownshire, via a feedback form. The campaign launched on 19 September 2025 and opportunities will be sought to make changes to timetables following its closure on 17 October 2025.
372 (Dumfries to Dalbeattie)	Passengers were concerned that the 372 was not stopping in Southernness to take school children to and from school in Dalbeattie.	Service 372 has reintroduced Southernness as a regular stop on both morning and afternoon journeys, Monday to Saturday. The morning route now includes stops at Kirkbean and Southernness en route to Sandyhills and Dalbeattie. The afternoon service includes a scheduled layover at Southernness from 16:25 to 17:01, before continuing toward Dumfries via Carsethorn and Kirkbean.
381 (Lockerbie to Dumfries)	Passengers highlighted that with changes to the service, the bus was overcrowded, including with children both entitled and not entitled to free home to school transport.	DG Buses has introduced an additional bus to take entitled children to school on this route, relieving pressure and capacity challenges on the 381.
415 (Port William to Newton Stewart)	Passengers of the 415 contacted SWestrans to complain that the service no longer suited travel from port William to Newton Stewart	DGC Buses agreed to revise the service to operate with the original timetable.
500	Concerns were raised regarding the first service of	Service 500 departing Stranraer at 06:20 will now

Service Number	Issue identified	Service Amendment/update
(Dumfries to Stranraer)	the day not stopping at Lochfoot as well as the DGRI, and not arriving at Dumfries in time to connect to the 08:45 service to the Barony College.	leave at 06:10, Monday to Saturday. This adjustment resolves previous timing and connection issues and allows the bus to serve Lochfoot and Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary. In addition, it will now connect with the 101 departing Dumfries Whitesands at 08:45, which serves Barony College.
Langholm town services	The local community is concerned about the merging of the 120 and 124 service and its implications on punctuality, as well as the timetable for residents from the north of the town accessing the CoOp at the south of Langholm.	We are actively engaging with Telford's Coaches to understand what opportunities exist to amend timings of the service to better suit the local community. Punctuality of the service will be monitored as part of regular operator performance monitoring.

4.3 There continues to be requested service improvements that cannot be accommodated because they would require an additional subsidy that is not available within SWestrans' budget. In these cases, we have recorded the request through the Issue Log and where appropriate have engaged with community transport operators to understand their potential to support.

4.4 Examples include discussion with Wigtownshire Community Transport regarding local transport services previously provided by service 410, 411 and 412, with Galloway Community Transport for local transport in and around Castle Douglas (following withdrawal of the 512 service) and with Annandale Community Transport regarding transport from Moffat and Beattock to Dumfries, previously served by the commercial 74 service.

4.5 Discussions with these operators are ongoing and SWestrans Board will be kept apprised of any updates relating to community transport operators backfilling withdrawn local bus services.

5. Financial Outlook

5.1 Following the procurement process, which was ongoing up until the 7 August 2025, when new contracts commenced, the exercise of confirming the budget position of the SWestrans local bus subsidy funding has continued.

5.2 The contractual arrangements with commercial bus operators are confirmed and operators have invoiced SWestrans for the first two months of subsidised bus services.

5.3 It is anticipated that the SWestrans bus subsidy budget is fully committed and that there is no remaining capacity in the budget to support the contracting of further services. Once the budget position is finalised, the SWestrans Board will receive confirmation of this, along with updates as part of regular revenue budget monitoring reports.

6. Communications regarding the bus network

6.1 External communications throughout the period from August to mid September focused on supporting the launch of the new bus network; promoting the Council's investment of £2.66 million in new vehicles for DGC Buses and informing the public about service changes made in response to feedback.

6.2 The campaign began in early August with announcements regarding the investment and the publication of new timetables, ensuring stakeholders and the public were informed ahead of the network changes introduced on 7 August. Following the Full Council meeting on 11 August 2025, when elected members committed to further improvements, messaging was subsequently revised to encourage public feedback.

6.3 On 29 August 2025, a comprehensive Q&A was published on the Dumfries and Galloway Council website and actively promoted to address public queries. This was accompanied by an update outlining service changes made in response to feedback. These included route adjustments and new school transport services.

6.4 A feedback form has been developed and uploaded to the Council website, in order to attract and collate feedback on the bus network across the region. The responses to the feedback form are being added to the issue log and will be used to inform future development of the bus network.

6.5 Messaging was delivered across all council channels: press releases, Latest News articles; Community Bulletin/Council News emails and social media channels (Facebook, X and WhatsApp). Elected members and other key stakeholders were kept informed throughout through the established email cascade. The Council's website has been utilised to raise awareness of service changes to maximise reach.

6.6 We have been in close contact with the Customer Service Centre in order to make them aware of any service disruption, and have asked bus operators to make SWestrans aware as soon as possible, so that the Customer Service Centre can be informed.

6.7 Media engagement throughout this period was considerable, both proactive and reactive. Notable coverage included a live interview with Cllr John Campbell, the Chair of SWestrans, on BBC Radio Scotland (7 August); a feature broadcast on ITV Border (28 August) and a BBC News article reflecting on the first month of the new network which incorporated several key messages. Cllr Campbell also provided a live radio interview on the morning of 22 September on bus services across the west of the region.

6.8 In the next period, communications will continue to support ongoing service developments, including the promotion of timetable availability at bus stops and on Traveline Scotland once available. The most recent major campaign focusses on DGC Buses, which is now inviting public feedback on the timetables it operates as sole provider in the west of the region.

7. Contract Management and Engagement with Bus Operators

7.1 A Bus Operator Forum was held on Tuesday 29 July 2025 in order to discuss the upcoming contract start date of 7 August with the operators. This provided the opportunity for bus operators to feedback on the procurement process and for SWestrans and the Council to set out expectations and levels of service required from operators in future. The Forum provided the opportunity to explain vehicle specifications, payment schedule, service levels and key performance indicators for the local bus routes.

7.2 SWestrans and the Council (for procurement and contract management support) will continue to engage with the operators more closely, including through the quarterly operator working group and one to one meetings, which are all scheduled for the coming fortnight. These meetings will discuss potential efficiencies, improvements, and ways to build bus patronage and network improvements within the scope of the current contracts.

7.3 Bus operators have been asked to submit bus passenger and fare revenue data, alongside data relating to the performance metrics agreed through the general terms and conditions for contracts. These metrics relate to punctuality, operation of services, health and safety, statutory compliance etc and SWestrans will discuss performance levels at the operator one to one meetings, with performance improvement measures agreed where performance is below the expected standard.

8. Further development of the Dumfries and Galloway Bus Network

8.1 Following completion of the procurement process that has put in place sustainable, longer term bus contracts across the region, we are looking ahead to the opportunity to further enhance the network and introduce improvements.

8.2 At the Full Council on 26 June, a Notice of Motion was passed that agreed to:

- begin work immediately to develop a publicly owned and operated bus service, with the capacity to deliver routes and support wider community transport provision across the region, in partnership with local transport providers;
- bring forward an urgent report to the appropriate committee setting out practical options for establishing a council-run bus operation. This should include short-term contingency planning, medium-term fleet acquisition and development, staffing requirements, partnership opportunities, and potential funding sources;
- prioritise working with SWESTRANS to deliver long-term stability, affordability, and accessibility in public transport for the people of Dumfries and Galloway;
- write to the Scottish Government, calling on them to properly fund and support the implementation of the provisions in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, to enable local authorities to deliver publicly run bus services effectively.

8.3 Further to this, a Special Full Council meeting was held on 11 August 2025 to review and investigate the recent process of procuring the Dumfries and Galloway bus network. The meeting of the Full Council:

- agreed to write to the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland to seek additional funding;
- recognised the gaps in bus provision that have emerged during the current process and the public concern over timetable and capacity changes and therefore the urgent need for improvements to the network;
- noted and reaffirm the decision of full Council on 26 June 2025 to bring forward a report to committee setting out practical options for establishing a Council-run bus operation;
- agreed that a public transport needs assessment for all local areas affected by the withdrawal or reduction of commercial services since June 2025 is carried out in line with statutory duties; and
- agreed that a review of transport procurement processes is undertaken jointly between the Council and SWestrans, in line with statutory duties, and reported to the relevant Committee.

8.4 The process of taking forward the work outlined in the commitments above has commenced. However, due to the lack of staff resource within SWestrans and the Council's Transport team to progress these significant pieces of work within appropriate timescales, this cannot be accommodated within existing team capacity.

8.5 Dumfries and Galloway Council's Economy and Infrastructure Committee (2 September 2025) and Enabling and Customer Service Committee (16 September 2025) agreed to make available up to £250k funding to procure external resource (a

transport specialist working with a public transport consultant) to support in the progression of this work.

8.6 This piece of work will be led by the Council and next steps include the development of a brief for a consultancy to support in the development of this work. The SWestrans Board will be kept closely apprised of the work to commission a consultant and then during the consultancy project itself, with the Board receiving regular updates on the work over the coming 12 months.

8.7 Whilst the scope and specification for the work has not yet been developed, it is anticipated that it will be strongly informed by the recent Notices of Motion relating to the further development of DGC Buses as a municipal bus operator, as well as the various commitments from the Special Full Council outlined in 8.2 above.

9. Recommendations

Members of the Board are asked to:

- 9.1 note the feedback received from members of the public since the commencement of new local bus contracts on 7 August 2025, and the efforts of SWestrans to introduce improvements,
- 9.2 consider the withdrawal of the 383 service (Annan to Lockerbie), recognising that SWestrans' bus subsidy budget is fully committed but that the 383 provides an essential service for many passengers,
- 9.3 note the lack of available budget to provide subsidy for the operation of the X75 Stranraer to Newton Stewart, or for continuation of additional buses on the A76 corridor, in support of non-entitled school children to access Wallace Hall Academy,
- 9.4 note the proposed next steps to introduce further improvements to the bus network across Dumfries and Galloway, with £250k investment in local bus network planning.

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2025

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BACKGROUND REPORTS –

Bus Network Retendering update, 23 July 2025

Bus Network Retendering update, 27 June 2025

Bus Network Retendering update, 6 June 2025

Bus Network Retendering update, 28 March 2025

Bus Network Retendering update, 31 January 2025

Bus Network Retendering update, 29 November 2024

Local Bus Network Review, Report to Board, 27 September 2024.