

West of England Combined Authority Audit Committee meeting on 17 November 2022

Statements received from the public

1. James Campbell
2. Katherine Anthony
3. David Redgewell on behalf of Somerset catch the bus campaign; Railfuture Severnside; South west Transport Network.
4. Joe Aldous
5. David Redgewell/Robbie Bentley on behalf of Bristol Disability Equality Forum

1. James Campbell re FirstGroup bus services

I make my statement clear and unambiguous: **FirstGroup's bus services are egregiously poor and WECA must take action urgently.**

I commute once per week up to the University of Bath, my place of work. FirstGroup operates the 8:30 U1 bus service between Bath's valley floor and the University of Bath's Claverton Down campus. As I only commute once per week, the impact FirstGroup has on my life is fairly minimal compared to a lot of people, but every Thursday I absolutely dread having to get the 8:30 bus because the service is so unreliable. The last three times I have commuted up to campus, I have stood at the bus stop for 30 minutes in the rain waiting for a bus to arrive. On one of these occasions, the bus did arrive, I activated the 'digital ticket' on my phone, only for the bus driver to let three people aboard the already rammed bus and then drive off again. The digital ticket lasts for 10 minutes, so when another bus finally appeared 9.5 minutes later, I had to practically leap aboard to get it scanned in time. This was a needless, anxiety-inducing problem before I had even managed to get into the office. I have been late all three times the last three weeks as a consequence, meaning a journey that should only take 15 minutes (with a 5 minute walk on either end) is looking to take me 1:15 minutes if I want to avoid being late in the future, and there is no guarantee that the 8:00 will show up either.

Getting to work via bus should not be this difficult. I cannot afford and do not want a car, and the journey (up a very steep hill with heavy, high-speed traffic) makes cycling unsuitable. Public transport is my only option and it's abysmal.

I have been moved and angered by many of the stories from friends and strangers alike who have been negatively impacted by the buses, either in real life or via social media. Where is the response, the outrage, from WECA at how poorly FirstGroup is serving our communities? Again, I only have to commute once a week but there are stories about poor people spending hours of their day getting to and from work, leaving no time in the evenings to spend on themselves or with their families, just because they have no other option but to take the bus. Think about elderly people, or those with disabilities.

I see the only option available as cancelling FirstGroup's contract with its respective councils or with WECA and bringing buses back into public ownership, where profits are ploughed back into the services. Even better, I urge WECA to invest in trams or light rail, which are better for the environment, better for those with accessibility issues and far more reliable. A tram with its own designated infrastructure is a clear and profound shift away from road-based public transport which is all too easy to underfund and cut-back. Please consider the successes seen in Nottingham and various cities in France with their recent roll-out of modern tram systems.

2. Katherine Anthony re FirstBus

I am proud whenever I read about Bristol's commitment to the environment and quietly support the new clean air zone plans. What has become clear to me over the years however is that the councillors who make decisions about public transport quite clearly don't regularly use public transport themselves, and certainly not in the rush hours. I therefore would like to bring to your attention the shocking lack of functional public transport in Bristol.

I live in Whitchurch, south Bristol and work in Redland, which is about six miles away. This would be a two-hour walk each way. It's almost a two-hour bus journey each way too. In a car, it's a 30-minute drive.

I don't have a car because I think it's unreasonable to live in a large city and drive, plus I want to minimise my environmental impact as much as possible. However, because of the unreliability of buses, the sheer stress of trying to get to work, and the length of travel time, I will be buying a car next year and adding to the traffic chaos, and yes, air pollution. I have no other choice.

I will give you just one example of a recent journey I made with FirstBus, because when you make decisions about public transport in Bristol, I would like you to remember that misery like this is frequent, not rare. I'm lucky that my employer is understanding because otherwise I would have lost my job by now.

I don't live exactly near a bus stop, but a number of buses pass by, so I'm about 10 to 25 minutes' walk from various bus stops. The issue is that each bus is on a different route, so once I'm at that bus stop, I'm committed to that particular bus. Most of those buses run every half an hour, and one bus is hourly. I live in Bristol, by the way, not some deeply remote village where one can expect the bus service to be patchy.

I left the house at 07.23 to get to a bus stop to catch the 07.30 number 92 bus to town. Which just didn't show up. So I walk to another bus stop to catch the 516 at 07.42 bus. Which also doesn't come. So I walk to yet another bus stop to catch the 8am bus. Which does come.

I get off this bus on Victoria street at 8.32 to transfer to the next bus that'll take me through town and on to Redland. The first possible bus was scheduled for 8.35 but was cancelled. The next bus was scheduled for 08.47 but just didn't appear. The next, next bus turned up at 08.55 but instead of going on to Cribbs Causeway as it was scheduled to, it was only going as far as the centre. I finally get on a bus at just after 9am. That bus is heaving busy (on account of it being the first bus to make that run in almost half an hour) and has the 'bus full' sign by the time it reaches the bottom of Park St.

I got to work just after half nine. That's two hours and 10 minutes to get across the city. There were no major traffic issues, no demonstrations, no bad weather; just FirstBus' inability to run any kind of bus service. Incidentally, apart from one cancelled bus, all of the other buses were showing on the app and on electronic sign boards.

I stress to you once again that this is not a one-off event. My employer allows me to work from home two days a week, so I only need to struggle to get in to work three days a week, and yet – despite leaving home at 7.30 every day – I'm late to work at least once a week.

If WECA and Bristol City Council are serious about the environment and clean air, then you can't penalise people for driving cars when they have no reasonable alternative. That alternative has to be public transport. I would like you to stop pouring millions of pounds into vanity-driven projects such as feasibility studies for an underground system*. That money should go into running buses.

I implore all at WECA to use that money to launch a separate bus service. As the country's sixth largest city, we deserve better public transport than we currently have.

*while I would love to see an underground in Bristol, the millions, if not a billion or more pounds that it would cost, would more effectively be spent on better buses unless you secretly have a lot more money than you claim to have. If you can get private investors to pay for everything, that's perfect, but public money is scarce and shouldn't be wasted. We're constantly being told that local councils don't have enough money for services, so you already know you don't have enough money to build an underground.

3. David Redgewell, Somerset catch the bus campaign; Railfuture Severnside; South west Transport Network.

Whilst we welcome the findings of the Audit commission and governance review and the closer working together of the unity councils of the city and county of Bristol, South Gloucestershire council and Bath and North East Somerset council.

With the metro mayor Dan Norris

The recommendation for chief executives Patricia Greer the chief executive officer of the west of England mayoral combined Authority and west of England local Enterprise partnership to work together is very much in the interest of travelling public and stakeholders.

It must be remembered the metro mayor Dan Norris is an Elected Regional politician who is elected to oversee Regional Public transport and the Transport Network Regional, planning.

Housing, skill and economic development in partnership with the combined Authority leaders

There are a number of issues of governance that need addressing the co production of public transport Network scheme across the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority

Staff being transferred from Unity councils to the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority.

To improve and provide bus and coach stop maintenance realtime information displays etc and services delivery

With the private sector

The concessionary passes issue puts red flags on the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and the mayor staff not having clear oversight of the service.

Bus service improvements Network planning and railway services planning

All the functions of The metro mayors Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester Steve Rotherham in the Liverpool city region. Andy Street in West Midlands combined Authority

All have clear transport Board and planning Boards of local Authority members and leaders.

and funding Audit.

These are made up of Transport executive. Councillors Don Alexander Bristol city council Sarah Warren Bath and North East Somerset. Steve Reade transport Executive South Gloucestershire county council and Steve Hogg North Somerset council.

The Auditor governance report is very good in suggesting way of the local Authorities leaders working together for the residents of the Greater Bristol and Bath city region.

And clear working together is important.

Co production.

At council leadership and chief executive officer leave .

With Bristol city council mayor Malvin Rees, councillor Kevin guy Bath and North East Somerset council and councilor Toby savage South Gloucestershire county council

Joint working with councillor Steve Bridger North Somerset council as part of the joint committee. West of England mayoral combined Authority and south Gloucestershire council and Bath and North east Somerset council.

The must be clear oversight.

Of public spending of £ 540 million of the city region Transport deal .

£ 92 million pound of money on Bristol Temple meads station and Temple quarter.

It what not does mentioned worrying us metro west phase 1 1 a with North Somerset council. £ 150 million pound to reopen the Bristol Temple meads station to Bedminster, Parson street, pill and Portishead with bus interchange

Which now has a Development consent order and planning permission.

The money spent in covid 19 bus operators recovery grant and the money pay to operators.

The lack of staff in the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority to Deal with the concessionary passes is very worrying theses staff should be transferred from Bristol city council South Gloucestershire council , Banes and North Somerset council.

The concessionary passes issue with the Governance with west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council.

To the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority.

What is the role of West of England mayoral combined transport Authority North Somerset council joint committee to oversee these issues and bus service improvements plan and metro west railway service plans

The Audit and governance for funding for metro west railway Network

Bristol Temple meads station to pill and Portishead.

Bristol Temple meads station to Henbury.

Bristol Temple meads to Bath spa and Westbury.

Bristol Temple meads to Gloucester central charfield station.

Weston super mare to Bristol Temple meads station and Severn Beach.

Or Bus service improvements plans joint with North Somerset council are not show in the report.

Both North Somerset council and the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority has awarded 15 million pounds to metro west phase 1

the £ 150 million pounds has now had a Devopment consent order granted .

How will the Audit of the railway Development contracts be overseen.

Both the bus service improvements plan being £ 105 million with north Somerset council

Or money allocated to a mass transit system.

The governance report is it a framework for the unity councils and the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority to work in partnership.

It not clear on governance and working with North Somerset council.

And the Transfer of key of public transport Network offer from Bristol city council , South Gloucestershire council Banes and North Somerset council.

For Bus services improvements plan work on bus service delivery and infrastructure.

Similarly Railway infrastructure offers.

4. Joe Aldous

I'm based around Bristol. Every morning I have to walk 5 miles to work, because the three buses that you supposedly operate to get me in for 9am NEVER run. This is a central road that runs from North Bristol to the centre, mind you. It's not a rural hideaway - though that'd be no excuse, even if it was. My mental health is deteriorating as I waste my life away waiting for buses that never come. Explaining to my boss why I'm late, every day. Losing my whole evening to the sands of time, because you don't care one iota about what you're doing.

So. To FirstBus I say: You have failed Bristol time and time again. You don't run the buses in the morning. You barely run them in the evenings. And you're rewarded for, by all metrics, running an objectively failed service. I use the term "service" for convenience of course, because you are a burden on the city. You are a burden on the country, and you should all be ashamed by yourselves. We are. We all are. Ashamed and, quite rightfully so, hateful of you. FirstBus, you are a cancer and nothing more. Public transport is meant to be a lifeline to so many, and you don't even come close to delivering. You have sapped it of all value. The disabled, the elderly, young families; the vulnerable. All to the chopping block so you can make a quick buck.

To BCC and the broader WECA;

I'm no fan of private sector involvement in public utilities, even less so a complete monopolisation. But if this is the model that you advocate so fiercely for, then you are responsible for running it in a way that makes it effective. Supposedly, the point of the private sector is to create a competitive playing field that the community benefits from as a result of companies vying for better price and quality. Correct? So where are the challenges to First? If you can't achieve that, or more likely can't be bothered to; tough luck. This is the job. It is the job you campaigned for, so do it or resign.

"A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It's where the rich use public transportation". - Gustavo Petro

Or, in a way you may understand better (or I suspect care more about): it turns out it is actually more economically beneficial for a city if public transport works effectively. Who would've guessed? Not you, clearly. Hell, I do not go to town for anything except work now. I get my hair cut much less regularly. I've stopped visiting anywhere near as many independent shops. All my food is bought online, instead of through grocers or butchers. And I'm not alone. Same story every time from friends, family, customers - anyone forced to rely on the bus: "not going to risk it."

Again, so you can really wrap your head around it: you are enabling First Bus in killing the city.

I can hear all of you already too: "it's not our responsibility to fix it", but less directly and in more words. Nonsense. You are all perfectly poised to advocate for the system in place; at the very least, you can largely guide who runs the contracts. First Bus cannot. It will not. It's time for First to ship out. In the long term, we need a publicly owned transport network that benefits the community foremost.

Don't worry about the preposterous notion of an underground subway network in Bristol either (it'll never work and is just another means for you lot to pump more money into unscrupulous pockets). Let's just start for now with what we do have: buses, light rail, trains, and most importantly walking and cycling options. For, as I've no doubt you're extremely eager to say in a dismissive and entirely derisive tone, "it can't be solved overnight."

5. David Redgewell/Robbie Bentley on behalf of Bristol Disability Equality Forum

We are in principle pleased with the Auditor governance report and joint working or co production between the west of England mayoral combined Authority and the city and county of Bristol mayor, Banes council and South Gloucestershire council.

On public services like Regional Transport, Planning, Housing and economic Development.

We welcome close working between the chief executive officer Patricia Greer and the council chief executives.

And the leaders of councils mayor malvin Rees, Councillors Kevin guy, Toby savage.

With the mayor chairing a Transport Board member Council Sarah Warren Banes Councillors Don Alexander, Steve Reeda and Steve Hogg from North Somerset council.

As North Somerset council is part of the local Transport plan .

We need clear working arrangements through a joint committee

Other west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council arrangements are .

metro west railway Network and

Bristol Temple meads station Bedminster, parson street, pill Portishead.

£150 million pounds

Bristol Temple meads to Lawrence hill Stapleton road Ashley Down Filton Abbey wood Filton North Area Exhibition station Henbury for Cribbs Causeway. £ 50 million

Bristol Temple meads station Filton Abbey wood, Bristol Parkway, Yate Charfield station, Cam and Dursley stonehouse, Bristol Road Gloucester central and Cheltenham spa.

£ 6 million for Charfield station.

Bus service improvements plan

£ 105 .5

£ 540 million pounds for City Region Transport plan.

£ 92 million pounds for Bristol Temple meads station.

The Bristol Disabled Equalities Forum.

Believe the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority and the Metro Mayor Dan Norris.

Should move to taking over complete control of the public transport Network

Like in the Mayors in the West Midlands councillor Andy Street, Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester and Steve Rotherham of Merseyside.

With control over bus and coach services.

Railway station and services.

Tram services.

Ferries and mass transit.

Main roads

Bus stations and interchanges.

We also support the government policy on giving more money and control to Metro Mayors like Dan Norris.

And local Enterprises partnership being merged into the combined Authority along with North Somerset council.

And Precepting powers .

As the Transport level is too low to fully fund bus and coach services and local trains

The other combined Authorities have precepting powers for the mayor .

From an equalities perspective we welcome the report on concessionary passes scheme for older and disabled passengers.

But are concerned that the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council should have full control and oversight of this scheme by west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and North Somerset council staff .

The agency arrangements with Bristol city council, South Gloucestershire council and Banes officers have no connection the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority.

This will continue with the city region transport plan project .

With the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority using the unity councils staff and charging the

West of England mayoral combined transport Authority for their time .

This makes public financial accountability of Public money more complicated when the staff should just transfer to the Regional mayor and Transport Authority

As in the west Midlands combined Authority Greater Manchester and even Peterborough and Cambridge.

At present we have £ 5 million pound of Taxpayers money to spend on Transport infrastructure bus shelters bus boards and drop Kerbs.

But in terms of Governance and values for money we are asking the local council to rebuild and improve bus shelters with west of England mayoral combined transport Authority money.

With agency arrangements making the audit process much more difficult with no economy of scale .

Of course this should be included North Somerset council.

We welcome closer working together and co production of services between the west of England mayoral combined Authority and the unity councils of the city and county of Bristol, Banes council and South Gloucestershire.

And on Transport Authority issue and Local Enterprises partnership issue with North Somerset council.

But as the metro mayor Dan Norris is Elected with a 40 000 majority.

Power should transfer from the 4 unity councils to the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority with North Somerset council as full member.

Region Planning economy growth and development and skills

Police and Health services are also included in Greater Manchester.

We welcome joint working but with the aim of Transferring services on Transport economy growth and regeneration and Housing to the combined Authority.

End