

REPORT TO: WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY AUDIT
COMMITTEE

DATE: 4 MARCH 2024

**REPORT
TITLE:** WESTLINK LESSONS LEARNT

**RESPONSIBLE
OFFICER:** STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OF INFRASTRUCTURE

<u>Key Decision</u>	No
<u>Purpose of Report</u>	
This report provides a background to the <i>WESTlink</i> Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) bus service and how lessons have been learnt since the service launched on 3 April 2023.	
<u>Recommendation</u>	
That Audit Committee:	
1. Note the comments of the report.	
<u>Reasons for recommendation</u>	
To provide Audit Committee Members with the opportunity to review the work undertaken into the DRT lessons learnt.	
<u>Voting arrangements</u>	
The voting arrangements of the West of England Combined Authority Audit Committee as set out at page A51 para. A20 of Part A of the West of England Combined Authority Constitution (as amended 17.3.2023) are not applicable as the West of England Combined Authority Audit Committee is asked only to review the report.	
<u>Publication Requirements</u>	
For Publication.	

Background

1. The main aim of the *WESTlink* DRT service, is to offer opportunities to link users to transport interchange points, which in turn, link into the existing bus network and major destinations (e.g. hospitals & major employers), in areas that are currently not directly accessible by public transport. The ambition of this service is to strengthen the existing bus network and increase its overall viability and attractiveness through increasing patronage on existing commercial services.

2. The intention is that DRT will play an important role in filling gaps within, and connecting people to, the wider public transport network to make onward journeys. It is also important to note that the 'go anywhere' nature of *WESTink* means that many residents of the West of England who previously had no access to a bus service, now do.
3. DRT is one of the key elements of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) programme. In April 2021, the Government announced the national guidance for bus delivery called Bus Back Better. One of the requests was for all Local Transport Authorities to deliver a BSIP setting out how it would respond to Bus Back Better and provide a key list of deliverables.
4. The West of England BSIP was drafted in 2021 in partnership with North Somerset Council (NSC) and shared with the Joint Committee in October and a final version submitted to central government. In April 2022, confirmation was received of acceptance from the Department for Transport (DfT), but with further refinements required. In July 2022, the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) Committee accepted the bid and provided delegations to the MCA Director of Infrastructure, Strategic Director of Resources, and the NSC Director of Infrastructure.
5. As the programme is a partnership between the MCA and NSC, bespoke governance had to be developed. This involved joint decision notices with the delegations as set out above and a joint BSIP Programme Board that was not a decision-making body, but ensured that all decisions were escalated through that Board before going to the delegated Directors for approval. The Board is made up of various stakeholders, including appropriate officers from within the constituent highway authorities in the MCA area.
6. The BSIP Programme runs from 2022-2025. Services for DRT were tendered in late 2022 and confirmed at the MCA Committee in January 2023, with services commencing in April 2023. DRT was intended to provide services to rural and suburban communities which have not historically been part of the wider regional bus network. However, at the same time as the launch, almost 50% of the supported bus services in the region were withdrawn due to rising costs and fixed budgets. This created pressure on DRT services to fulfill a larger role than was originally intended, however DRT was not intended to provide a replacement for those bus services which were removed due to reductions in the bus levy contribution. The timing of the introduction of the service at the same time as the levy reductions has led to some confusion about DRT's purpose.
7. DRT was intended to be a trial with lessons learnt during the lifespan of the project and live adjustments made. This is within the context of two service change dates each year (April and September). The aim was to provide a longer-term model that could be sustained once the BSIP funding ends.

8. The BSIP programme remains a DfT led initiative. The DfT approved the final bid with funding allocated annually subject to specific conditions. For example, to enable the draw down of funding for 2024-25, we were required to submit a Project Adjustment Request (PAR) setting out more detail for the previously agreed deliverables, a breakdown of core bus budgets for the Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) and an update to the BSIP document initially developed in 2021. We report quarterly to DfT on deliverables as well as reporting monthly through both MCA and NSC processes. If changes are requested to any deliverables, these must be submitted to DfT for approval, such as the PAR submitted to DfT in June 2023 for Fares Package 2 (Birthday Bus and Care Leavers fares offers).

Lessons Learnt

9. As the DRT service is a trial, the project team was aware that monitoring would be required at regular intervals. To date, this has covered the first three months and six months of operation. Reviews were undertaken of the performance of the service and to identify if there were any aspects that could be adjusted to improve the efficiency and sustainability of the service in the future.
10. Since the launch on 3 April 2023, it has been acknowledged that *WESTlink* has faced challenges which have limited performance levels, including:
- The speed at which the service launched.
 - Short lead times to secure the required vehicles for service.
 - A challenging driver recruitment market, with a national shortage of bus drivers.
 - The need to win over the public's trust in an on-demand transport system as a credible transport mode that can be relied on to the same extent as fixed-route bus services.
 - The lack of a full marketing and communication/promotional campaign due to concerns that, without improvements to the operation and an increase in the driver supply, the service would not be able to meet the potential increased demand that such a campaign would generate.
11. A review of the first three months of operation of the *WESTlink* service was undertaken and took the following approach:

Approach	Feedback Types
Identification of recurring themes in feedback – key issues / challenges defined	Public / passengers (via <i>WESTlink</i> email inboxes)
Review of operational data to verify feedback and extent of the issues / challenges	UA officer feedback
Recommend updates to the service	Community groups (regular MS Teams meetings & 100-day report).

12. This review highlighted several challenges; the most significant of these were:

- Driver shortages resulting in fewer available shifts and equating to fewer vehicles on the road, meaning that the service was unable to meet demand. At the time of the writing the review, however, improvements were being observed.
- Long journeys, with 7% over 10 miles in distance has adversely affected both the operation and the public perception of the service by assuming that very long journeys were possible when they should not have been.
- App functionality and User Interface (UI) issues, including booking return journeys and scheduled rides.
- Some areas inaccessible by the service as they were excluded from the operational zone, including Hungerford Road in Brislington and Ashton Vale.
- Through / multi-operator tickets not accepted.

13. Due to the infancy of the project, small scale changes were undertaken, to make immediate changes to the service. A list of larger scale improvements was carried forward to the next review, when the service would have the full fleet of buses in operation, and which could then be evaluated further.

14. When the service had been operating for six months, the service was evaluated again using the approach undertaken at three months of operation, this time with more data available and the addition of the results of a passenger survey. This survey was issued to all app users via push notifications within the app, on 6 October 2023. All registered users also received an email containing a link to the survey, along with paper copies provided on *WESTlink* buses. The survey lasted for 6 weeks, between 6 October to 17 November 2023 and received 1751 responses.

15. The key findings from the survey were that:

- Those people who have not yet taken a *WESTlink* journey have either not been able to get a ride, or have found the booking process confusing or difficult. They are outside of the current boundary (a common concern for the Backwell area).
- The most popular time of day for journeys is 0900-1600, and the middle of the day.
- The most common journey purpose is leisure, especially shopping, and to connect to other public transport services.
- Most people agree *WESTlink* can be used to connect people to existing public transport services.
- The reliability of *WESTlink* to provide people with a ride is considered the principal factor, followed by pre-booking.
- The most common method of how people found out about *WESTlink* was word of mouth.

- Twenty two percent of respondents said they would not be able to travel without *WESTlink*.
16. There is a strong reliance on the service and public transport in general for females, especially within the age ranges of 35-59 (with mention of childcare pressures and space for pushchairs) and 60-74 (mostly retired), with females also being the majority user.
17. As a result of the findings from the data analysis, a selection of recommendations has been considered and discussed, to improve the operation of the service. Some of the current recommended adjustments to the service scheduled to be implemented in April 2024, in line with the bi-annual service change dates, are as follows:
- Changes to the zone structure (smaller zones).
 - Improving app functionality to enable alternative travel options to be offered for requested journeys that are possible using the existing bus network when demand cannot be met to fulfil the journey request (known as anti-cannibalisation parameters).
 - Introducing cross-service tickets on *WESTlink* buses.
 - Roll out of a wider engagement plan with stakeholders.
18. This is the first opportunity to make significant changes of this kind to the service, because each service change date is subject to a 70 days' notice period. To have made these changes sooner (in September 2023) would have resulted in preparation sometime in June 2023, when the project was still very much in its infancy.
19. It is hoped that, with these changes, the service will become more responsive to demand, enable more rides at shorter distances, and allow better integration with the wider timetabled bus network and, as a result, improve the value for money of the service. Ongoing monitoring of the service, post-implementation of the foregoing scheduled updates, will allow us to understand the scale of the impact those improvements have made.
20. The project team is constantly learning lessons about how the service operates and what users want from it. This, in turn, leads to ongoing scrutiny of the service parameters and subsequent recommended adjustments to improve performance. It is anticipated that the monitoring and service adjustments will continue for the life of *WESTlink* and funding availability, in response to the changing demand for the service.

Alternative Options

21. As part of the ongoing monitoring and evaluation process, the MCA worked closely with a variety of stakeholders and used their input to inform potential changes to facilitate improvements to the service, to understand all remaining barriers to successful operation. The process was undertaken to capture all stakeholders' ideas on how any identified barriers can be overcome and what opportunities exist to increase the likelihood of sustainability.
22. The options investigated considered different operating models, including an alternative zone structure, vehicles of different sizes and extended pre-booking periods. Wider options are being considered and will inform the ongoing development of the service.

Consultation and Engagement

23. DRT was part of the BSIP bid that was developed in partnership with the UAs. The *WESTlink* project, specifically, was also developed with input from the UAs. UA officers were involved in the development of the system and in helping to set up the tender process. They were then part of the launch team which met weekly from late January 2023 to late April 2023, and they will continue to play a role in any future changes.
24. The *WESTlink* team reported to the BSIP Programme Board on service performance in July, September, October, and December. Data relating to *WESTlink* performance is shared monthly with Cabinet leads and Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
25. Furthermore, the project team liaises with UA officers on a regular basis; to date they have been part of the five workshops that we have hosted to help develop and update the programme, they attend the monthly BSIP Programme Board where they can discuss specific items, and there are also informal monthly meetings with them; there are also ad-hoc and project specific meetings.
26. The project team also meet monthly with Transport Cabinet leads in each UA about the wider BSIP programme and update them, plus a monthly programme report is shared with specific data relating to *WESTlink*.

Key Risks

27. The current key issues for the *WESTlink* DRT service are:
 1. Large zones, allowing long distance journeys.
 2. Failing to improve value for money.
 3. Poor passenger experience.
 4. Ongoing driver recruitment challenge.

5. Operating model failure, resulting in withdrawal of the service to certain parts of the region.
28. To mitigate these, the team is regularly monitoring the operation of the service to inform recommended improvements, such as those set out in the Lessons Learned section of this report.
29. The *WESTink* DRT team is also working to organise lessons learnt and process evaluation workshops. These are currently in the process of being scoped.
30. It is also pertinent to note that the *WESTink* DRT initiation phase will be included in the MCA 24/25 Audit Plan. Therefore, further lessons will be captured and learned from, as part of that audit.

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Implications

31. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) was undertaken for *WESTink* to consider the impact of introducing a demand-responsive transport service on service users with protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act 2010. The following outlines the conclusion from the assessment:
 - *WESTink* provides members of the community with access to economic and social activity, including local shopping areas, places of work, education, places of worship, health care, and local hospitals plus with a range of benefits supporting economic, social and health/wellbeing benefits and sustainability goals.
 - *WESTink* was introduced at a similar time to major changes in the local bus network. It provides a more flexible service that adapts to people's needs. It operates longer hours than most of the withdrawn fixed-line bus services in the operational areas and provides public transport connection to parts of the region that have never had a bus service.
 - The MCA will seek to reduce the potentially adverse impacts on those with protected characteristics by seeking to prioritise solutions for the affected groups.

Climate Change Implications

32. *WESTink* is contributing to the improvement of public transport, which can help to reduce car dependency and the associated greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution and congestion. However, with any transport scheme there is the potential for environmental impacts, and these require assessment, reduction, mitigation, and management. For example, there is likely to be greater carbon emissions per capita from under-occupied buses with internal combustion engines (ICE) than from smaller vehicles at capacity fuelled by a low carbon

source (noting the need to consider capacity for passenger growth to enable more people to switch from their private ICEs). Such considerations should inform decision-making where possible (noting that vehicle size was part of the investigated options).

33. The MCA is developing its corporate carbon management plan and *WESTlink* will need to provide data for the carbon management plan where possible.
34. The West of England Climate and Ecological Strategy and Action Plan sets out the environmental priorities for the region. In summary these are: net zero carbon by 2030, nature recovery and climate resilience. The MCA is reflecting these environmental priorities in its infrastructure programmes and requiring environment assessments and climate risk assessment (subject to exception, and in addition to carbon management). *WESTlink* should consider these requirements and budget for any requirements it needs to undertake.
35. *WESTlink* could also consider the opportunities to help users access nature and the potential benefits for physical and mental wellbeing.

Financial Implications

36. By incorporating the suggested updates outlined in the Lessons Learnt section of this report, we anticipate a decrease in the cost per passenger journey. This metric serves as a key indicator for assessing the value for money of the scheme.

Legal Implications

37. On the assumption that all BSIP's activities are conducted within the delegated authority granted in July 2022, there do not appear to be any legal implications which arise directly from this report.

Human Resources Implications

38. There are no direct human resource implications of this report.

Commercial and Procurement

39. The DRT project was issued via an open procedure process to the market in line with procurement regulations, submissions were evaluated accordingly and a recommendation to award was approved by the relevant authority. The procurement was delivered against tight timescales and many lessons have been learned for any future tender process.

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