

Cllr Sarah Warren Statement – Buses in North East Somerset

13th July 2023

As many residents are aware, several essential bus services in North East Somerset have now stopped running due to an ongoing funding crisis, including services 82, 179 and 768, and further services are currently at risk. I want to provide an urgent update on the work that we are doing to address this situation.

The West of England Combined Authority is the regional transport authority responsible for planning bus services in cooperation with local bus operators. The combined authority has a budget of many **tens of millions dedicated solely to transport and to economic development.**

Bath and North East Somerset Council pays an annual contribution towards the provision of supported services – those that are not deemed financially viable - through the regional Transport Levy. In this financial year we have increased our contribution by 30% to **£1m**, recognising the significant increases in costs to provide bus services. Unfortunately, however, the prices of our bus services increased by some 200%.

Like other councils, B&NES has no significant funding for buses over and above that which is already transferred annually to WECA as our transport levy. The remainder of our budget is fully committed to other purposes (including statutory services that we **cannot** choose to withdraw), such as social care, children's services (which together consume the vast majority of our budgets), housing, parks, waste management, libraries and so on, so there is very little remaining for discretionary expenditure such as on buses.

We now need the Metro Mayor to contribute a portion of the **£57m** of bus service improvement grant that he received from government **specifically and solely for bus services**, on our lost and at risk services, as the Secretary of State has **indicated** he should. Other local authorities, who are not part of the West of England Combined Authority, have been able to do this – including North Somerset and Gloucestershire.

In the New Year, we were informed that the Metro Mayor planned to commission several new rural buses throughout North East Somerset. The 522, designed without consultation by the West of England Combined Authority,

was introduced, and takes far longer than previous buses, travelling through areas with good bus services rather than villages with none.

The Mayor also decided to put a large proportion of his Bus Service Improvement Plan funding into the Westlink Demand Responsive Transport (or DRT) service. As many residents have found, DRT in its current form is not working. Westlink has proved unreliable and hard to access, and as the vehicles are usually seen almost empty, must be costing **much** more per passenger journey than the bus services they replaced, and that residents are desperate to see returned.

The Mayor has also chosen this month to commit **some £8m** to free travel on buses for residents in the month of their birthday. This birthday bonanza is of huge benefit to Bristolians with frequent bus services, but is a further insult to our more rural residents, having recently lost all access to public transport and some now newly confined to their homes.

Residents in North East Somerset have been left with a public transport service which simply isn't working, some communities with frequent bus services and others with none. This is a deeply unsatisfactory situation and residents of all ages are impacted.

To address this desperate situation, my team and I have spent the last few months talking to B&NES and parish councillors from across North East Somerset, Cabinet leads from neighbouring councils, bus experts, campaigners and residents, as well as to the Metro Mayor and his staff. We have developed a proposal that provides a cost-effective solution to improve local services.

Key elements of the proposal are:

- Targeted new bus routes to help re-connect towns and villages that have been abandoned by the Metro Mayor
- Additional Westlink services along fixed routes at key commute and school times - to build trust in the new service, and to support other services.
- Funding solutions: including working with neighbouring councils on cross-boundary routes.

These proposals will safeguard threatened buses, and fill gaps where services have been lost – connecting communities with Bath and Bristol and between larger towns and villages in B&NES. We are very keen to work with the Metro

Mayor to find a solution. This week, Cllr Guy has written to him to put our innovative ideas forward, and we hope he will respond positively to our constructive proposals.

We encourage members of the public who are concerned about bus services to write to the Metro Mayor to ask for his support.