

# Cross Boundary Bus Futures

## **Local Transport Authorities (LTAs)**

West of England Combined Authority

Somerset

Wiltshire

15.12.2021 via Zoom

# Brief Agenda

- 1) Welcome and introductions
- 2) Background to Bus Back Better (BBB) - National Strategy for England and update on buses – Peter (then Peter and Graham on Somerset and Wilts)
- 3) Immediate issues - moving in the opposite direction to BBB! - Graham
- 4) Issues and discussions about buses in WECA (and cross boundary issues of Somerset and Wiltshire) and bringing the bus user groups and stakeholders together.
- 5) Follow up activities. Objectives in transport terms. Who to contacts, what to say. Next meetings, etc

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Headline: Buses that run between WECA, Wiltshire and Somerset. We have been overtaken by short term issues which are overwhelming medium and long term plans:

- \* Now considering the immediate situation as well as longer term
- \* All welcome - adding in anyone concerned at their buses in the new year and not just future years
- \* Zoom code and geographic area remains unaltered (note some misleading sharing of shares that suggested we cover other areas – we won't – we don't know them, though some lessons are shared

# It's about the passengers!



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- Peter – BBB
- Graham – Option 24/7
- Peter - SBP

# BSIP highlights

Networks

Whippet superbuss corridors

Consultation

Electric and technology

Bus Quality

Bus infrastructure quality

Fares

Connections, cycle and train interchange

Sunday and Evenings

Reps in every area

Specialist reps

Inputs going ahead

Survey and learning

# Wiltshire Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan



## A message to our key contact representatives - 11th October 2021

Bus Service Improvement Plan published 29.10.2021: ([here](#))

### Documents referenced in Lee's letter

(draft) Main Bus Service Improvement Plan: ([here](#))

Draft Main Bus Service Improvement Plan: ([here](#))

Bus Service Improvement Plan (survey appendix): ([here](#))

Option 24/7 Master Document: ([here](#)) (Updated 24th Sept 2021)

Schemes chosen for improvement with finance in the current financial year: ([here](#)) and ([here](#))

Welcome letter of 9th September ([here](#))

Dear All,

Please find attached the latest draft of the Wiltshire Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). This evolves the earlier first draft of the BSIP that we sent you which was essentially ambitions, interventions and objectives in the form of a list of headlines, by expanding these out to explain what they would mean in practice, and including maps and other illustrative details that make it look far more like how the final BSIP will appear when it is sent to the Department for Transport. Some of this is based on the feedback that you have provided to us - Please don't however be unduly concerned if a particular part of your submission is not reflected in this draft. As you will appreciate, there is an awful lot to get through in a very short timeframe, and not everybody's input has yet been analysed.

Please also note that the BSIP will not contain the real nitty-gritty detail of the bus service timetables, fares, infrastructure etc that we would like to see introduced. These details will be discussed and negotiated during the next stage of the process - the Enhanced Partnership Plan phase - that we will provide direct input into between November 2021 and March 2022.



# Wiltshire Key Interurban Bus Network

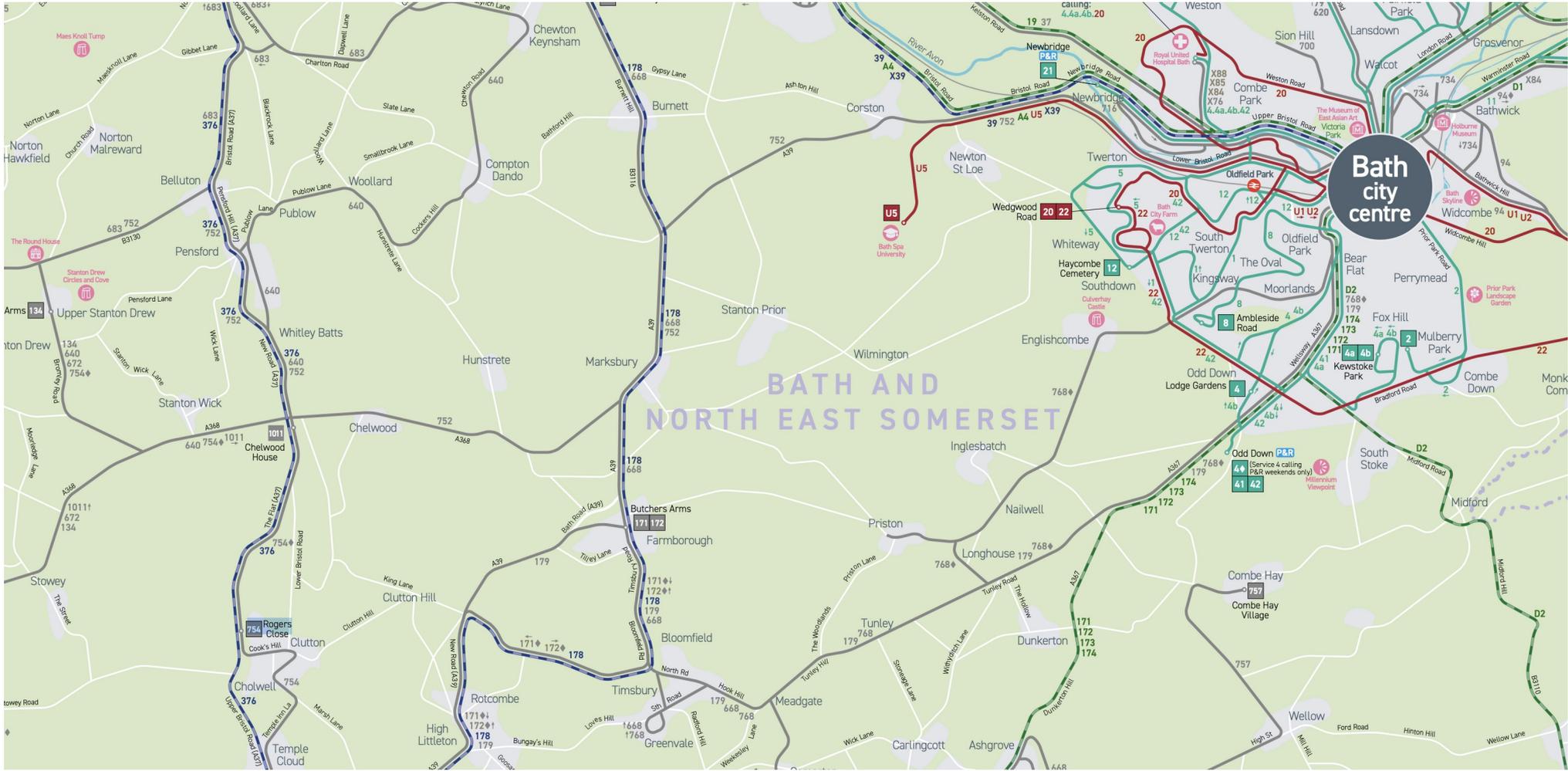
Diagrammatic Map – not to scale



Map correct as at July 2021

- Key:**
- Buses to/from Swindon
  - Buses to/from Salisbury
  - Buses to/from Chippenham
  - Other key bus routes
  - Less frequent bus services

The thickness of the lines indicates the frequency of each bus service (thick lines indicate a service that runs at least once per hour on Monday-Saturday). Local services and those that operate less than 5 days a week are not shown.



Bath city centre

# BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET



# Driver Shortage

“Regarding the subject of driver shortages, buses not turning up etc down your way....

we are having exactly the same problem [place]. my depot is running with 45 drivers short...Good enough wages but nobody is coming into the industry, what with early starts, late finishes, constant weekend working and pressure from management along with abuse from passengers !!!

Can you blame them for looking at other employment?”

“

Without regional funding and support for the operation of rural bus services; rural operators like ourselves simply cannot reach wage levels that compete with HGV, or indeed many of the local warehouse distribution operations and online delivery services, here in Lincolnshire”.

“It is with regret we inform our passengers, due to a significant reduction of drivers within our team and an extreme shortage of PCV drivers in Lincolnshire, we will be unable operate any Saturday bus services from the 01/01/2022 - 31/03/2022.

We had hoped to avoid this action taking intermediary steps on the 06/11/2021, adopting temporary reduced Saturday services. However, after further reductions in the team we find ourselves in the position whereby we must consider what is best for everyone in these exceptional circumstances.

This action is not in anyway taken lightly and we hope that it is temporary; it is a big decision for a local family business as we fully appreciate both the disruption and inconvenience it may cause to loyal passengers. It is being taken with our best intentions to ensure Brylaine are able to fully operate ALL SERVICE between Monday - Friday on the days they are most needed by the communities we serve.

# Lack of certainty on continued funding

Bus company income has been dramatically reduced by Coronavirus (or rather by the consequences of it) and although there is extra Government support it is reducing and as I write is due to end next March.

# Uncertain funding next year

Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) (WECA and Wiltshire in our area) have put in bids under "Bus back better" for 2022/3 funding, but we know that the **bids are five times the size of the pot of money** the government has allocated, and we probably won't know until the New Year who is going to get how much - we don't even know the formula for decision making. Could be each gets a fifth of what they have asked for, could be on the merits of bids, could be based on populations served, could be targetted towards "levelling up" or marginal constituencies.

Bus Back Better funding is (in any case) **supposed to seed-fund new and improved services, and it's still very unclear how prescriptive that will be**, and how much it will be able - if at all - to fund services that were commercial (or needed much less support than they do at the moment) after next March.

# And don't overlook

- \* Buses are always quieter early in the year - after the Christmas Party and shopping season and before the days-out and tourist trades return on longer and warmer days.
- \* Roads are getting busier again and some may be busier than ever before, and with peaks at different times of day. This is due to changing work patterns, and it can throw established bus timetables into chaos when jams turn up in the wrong places.

# So what are we seeing?

1. With fewer drivers, current bus services cannot all run and there have to be cancellations and/or part-routes. There may be fewer bus mechanics too, and so fewer vehicles on the road.
2. Bus companies are not going to invest in new vehicles at a time when they don't know the future prognosis for funding and their business - that means older vehicles that are perhaps more prone to breakdown, and a cutting back on spare vehicles
3. With less and unknown income, bus companies are registering services for early next year assuming a poor coronavirus outcome for travel, and very limited financial support. They need to register now - otherwise they can be penalised for not running services they can no longer staff / provide vehicle for / afford.

# So what do we see short term?

- a) Where two vehicles are in use on a route / route-group, cut it to a single vehicle and halve the frequency
- b) Where a route is constrained to single deckers because of low bridges, amend the route so you can run fewer but bigger buses
- c) Where a route is on the margins of being commercially viable, register to reduce it right back to a minimum or even close it if you know that your LTA will be minded to help with funding
- d) Where you have a town or city route running to the outskirts of a town, and another route running interurban from one town to the next, combine them so that one bus serves multiple purposes
- e) In the short term, reduce services to minimum - helps the "only go to your office if you have to" message, and might mean that the "gap" created has a good chance of funding under the Bus Improvement plan.
- f) Cut antisocial hours services - first and last journeys of the day - so that drivers have a better working day / environment, and are less likely to move to another operator who offers easier hours
- g) Introduce and publicise emergency timetables to take account of reduced driver availability - that being much better than emergency ad-hoc cancellations on the day, even if the next result is running fewer buses than you could.

# And practicality ...

ALL of these background / effects are being witnessed in WECA and Wiltshire as I write (11.12.21). I saw someone writing about 33 different service changes. Looking to "fix" such a high volume, in a short space of time, with so many unknowns, is a monumental challenge for our local transport authority technical team.

I will leave others in WECA to comment on how it's been approached there. Here in Wiltshire, over years with "Option 24/7" ( <http://option247.uk> and <https://www.facebook.com/groups/option247> ) and looking forward under Bus Back Better with the Bus Service Improvement Plan, we have a confidence that the significant influencers know the strategic outcome we would like to see. That worked when D3 and X72 transformed into 271/2/3 - I couldn't tell you if that was our influence or not - simply that everyone involved wanted similar goals and we all got more or less what wanted from that shakeup.

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- It is far from clear that everyone is supportive of public transport though ... from the Melksham News:

*Leader of Wiltshire Council, cllr Richard Clewer, described calls for the council to reduce the number of vehicles on the road by improving public transport as “a very strategically short-sighted approach”. The councillor explained that because of the increase in sales of electric vehicles, and the future end to sales of petrol and diesel cars, transport will “decarbonise itself over a comparatively short timescale”.*

# Even the DfT ...

On his web page, Andrew Murrison MP:

In the Commons today, Andrew called for the suspension of plans to close South Western Rail services for Bristol to London Waterloo vis Trowbridge pending a full consultation. Andrew was speaking after transport secretary Grant Shapps unveiled the Integrate Rail Plan for the Midlands and the North. After the statement, Andrew said: "Mr Shapps seemed open to a discussion and I will be writing to him accordingly. I'm pleased we are supporting the midlands and north, but the south-west is in danger of losing out, a point the Minister appeared to concede. We must make sure we don't become the poor country cousins of the new GBR network." **But the service CLOSED last Friday ...**

# An example

The D1, which is a trigger for the changes to this meeting, runs from Bath to Salisbury via Bradford-on-Avon, Trowbridge, Westbury and Warminster.

It's at the "Oh Sh\*\*" stage - with dozens of possible outcomes, rumours of which could frighten the bajeebas out of people, but are pretty improbable outcomes.

**Look wider**, and we're also looking at other Wiltshire services.

**Look back** over the years, and you'll find the Option 24/7 strategy laid out - and the Bus Service Improvement Plan is surprisingly close ( ;- ) in echoing it.

**Look forward** to early next year and there will be considerable evidence gathering to take us forward.

# And open discussion ...

- 4) Issues and discussions about buses in WECA (and cross boundary issues of Somerset and Wiltshire) and bringing the bus user groups and stakeholders together.
- 5) Follow up activities. Objectives in transport terms. Who to contacts, what to say. Next meetings, etc

# Sample – Bath Bus User Group

I write with concern about support for Bus Operations nationally and, in particular, with alarm about the reduction and removal of Bus Service Grants put in place to mitigate the effects of Covid-19. Those grants and a furlough scheme allowed transport operators to survive when lockdowns reduced the demand for transport.

Preserving and maintaining frequent and affordable bus services are crucial to the livelihoods of our population, especially the less well-off who cannot or are physically unable to use or own a car or use a taxi. It is also important to encourage all of us to use environmentally friendly modes of transport and reduce car use. Reducing support for bus use is hostile to meeting our environmental goals and levelling up the future of disadvantaged communities.

We are already seeing the threat posed by the first grant reduction in 2022. With a reduced subsidy, operators will be forced to cut costs and retain only commercially-viable services. We see plans to reduce service frequencies, truncate journeys, lengthening others to combine passenger groups but grossly increasing journey times, and fragmenting the network by separating termini that were previously shared by multiple routes.

A further challenge arose from a loss of trained drivers, encouraged by the Government to enlist as HGV drivers to ease a short-term supply chain problem. It is to be hoped that subsidies to bus operators are increased to pay for recruitment and training costs.

The new policy of voluntary lockdown (“Work from home where possible”) means that it will be some time before transport demand approaches pre-pandemic levels.

Now is not the time for subsidy cuts.