

Taking Control of the Future

With the Government's devolution settlement high on the political agenda, it is very important that Bath does not miss out on devolved powers to run its own bus and rail network jointly with the Bristol City Region along with the ability to take executive control over the planning and delivery of all local transport. The current discussions may allow us to make real improvements to the bus network around (and attached to) the proposed Bathampton Park and Ride facility, particularly in view of the enhanced transport options available with the planned rail platform.

RailFuture, Bus Users UK (Sevenside), South West Transport Network, TfGBA and FOSBR and the public transport unions have been calling for a fully integrated MetroBus/MetroWest rail and bus network across Greater Bristol to be fully integrated into a public transport system for the City Region as the Green Capital of Europe 2015. All the listed groups are also pressing for the urgent establishment of a combined transport authority as soon as the enabling legislation allows us to set up a Western Powerhouse, with the support of North Somerset, BANES and South Gloucestershire. We also need to set up a Public Transport Forum for Bristol and the City Region as supported by the Mayor and Bristol Full Council.

The Direct Award from the DFT will allow the Secretary of State to devolve rail and public transport powers to Devon and Cornwall and the Bristol/Bath City Region travel to work area (extending into the counties of

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BaNES Cabinet on 4 November 2015

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Somerset, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Swindon including the Weymouth line into Dorset) so it is important to take up the Government's offer to create a combined authority for the Bristol/Bath City Region taking over the powers of the West of England LEP on transport, planning, strategic housing and waste management. This would give the Combined Authority specific responsibility for public transport delivery, which in the context means taking overall control of the MetroBus and MetroWest projects along with the Greater Bristol bus network.

The new Buses Bill, following consultation in Bristol and Exeter over the last few days, has revealed that the Government intends to press for Combined Authorities and Joint Transport Boards. These authorities will work in statutory partnership with the bus industry and public transport operating groups, local authorities and passenger groups, to take control of the bus network through quality contracts or quality partnerships including through-ticketing and smart-cards allowing modal interchange with rail and ferry services. This will also take full control over franchising and regulation of the bus network including working with, or optionally taking over the duties of, the traffic commissioner.

With the South West Trains franchise due for re-letting in 2017 and the Great Western franchise in 2019, one of the options is for Combined Authorities at regional level across the networks to be able to specify the details of train service, frequency, station improvements and access for all. (This would give us an equivalent body to Transport for the North — i.e. Transport for the South West).

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The current problems with funding local bus and rail services and the impact this is having on the MetroWest project whose successful delivery is vital for the economic development of the whole city region, means that this is an issue which demands a proper devolution settlement. The Bristol and Bath City Region is in real danger of being left behind by more adventurous regions like the North, the Midlands, Devon and Cornwall and even Bournemouth and Poole! We would urge the Leaders Board to carry out full consultation on devolution across the city region. We would remind the board that devolution can also involve strengthening the roles of parish and town councils to deliver more public services as part of the settlement. For instance, this could involve giving greater powers to Weston-super-Mare town council or creating a new town council for Kingswood and Staple Hill (perhaps combined with the current Hanham town council).

Unless we go forward with some urgent proposals for devolution we will be in danger of being one of the last parts of the South West to be under direct Whitehall control for transport and local government.

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