

Statement from Jackie Head to B&NES Cabinet meeting 9/2/23

Chew Valley Area Forum Climate & Nature Emergency, Sustainable Transport Working Group, have been working with officers in B&NES and WECA since 2021 to try to secure improved public transport services in the Chew Valley. We began with a valley wide survey which showed an appetite for more travel by bus, a desire to decarbonise transport options and in particular for a shuttle bus to take passengers around the valley and out to the transport corridors of the A38 and A37/9. Reliability, connectivity and reduced carbon were of key importance.

Thank you for lobbying the WECA Mayor about the 5 new BSIP routes proposed to WECA, designed by them, tendered and bid for, before they were dropped in January. 3 of them have a direct impact on the Chew Valley area (517, 526, 527) . We hope you are successful in this lobbying, as we believe they are the best way to make the transition to DRT work and thus help to achieve the modal shift towards buses and decarbonisation that we so desperately need. We believe together they will enable a profitable bus service for the area in time.

However, if you are unsuccessful in your lobbying, the Chew Valley will no longer have a spinal route within the Valley to support DRT, and would only have the 376 bus on the A37/9, a service run by First Bus, allegedly every 30 minutes, but in practice it is unreliable. First Bus' reputation is at an all time low, partly because of this service but also in relation to supported bus services that they currently run.

Since we have heard about the 672 being cut, there has been a huge reaction from local people who rely on this service for their daily living, whether that be regularly for commuting or shopping (remember most villages in the Chew Valley don't have a shop and don't have a safe walking route to a shop) for their medical appointments at GPs, dentists or Bristol hospitals. They may only use the route once a week or once a month but it none-the-less forms an important service, despite the fact that it has been paired back to the bone in terms of service frequency.

One key point has emerged: Eurostar provides a reliable and trusted service in the 672, and there is a community amongst those who use it. We are concerned that this valued service is essential travel for some whose jobs are vulnerable, given that they are already feeling stretched by the present cost of living crisis. We are concerned that many such people are not on the internet and don't have smartphones, and will be using bus stops without real time information, and thus may be less supported than others who can track their DRT ride. We are also concerned that some people will become socially isolated and may really struggle to make the transition to DRT services. This includes Ukrainian refugees, young people, working families and the elderly for whom it is a lifeline.

Secondly the only sensible bus corridor for the Chew Valley DRT is the A37/39 which does not appear on the DRT document as one that will be enhanced, even though the 376 service delivered by First Bus has a poor reputation for reliability and service.

We understand that WECA only plans to move to begin community engagement about DRT in March, and we fear this will be too late to prevent people, who are currently angry and anxious about bus cuts, and particularly the 672 being cut, in some cases contemplating buying a car when they do not currently or increasing car use, or fearing being stranded with no car, all of which would be a retrograde step in B&NES journey to net Zero plans. As a group we would like to set up community meetings to allay fears and assist the transition to using DRT at an earlier stage but we have no funds and only volunteer capacity to do this.

We believe B&NES needs to plan to continue to fund the 672 if the 517, 526 & 527 do not run or it will have a far greater issue on its hands with financial hardship, social isolation and carbon increases in transport. We would like you to consider these costs to weigh in the balance of the cost of delivery.

Many thanks
Jackie Head