

## **CABINET MEETING – 7<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2023**

### **STATEMENT FROM CLLR FIONA GOURLEY (MEMBER ADVOCATE FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES)**

An update to Cllr Warren's Emergency Statement about rural buses at the July Cabinet meeting.

A month ago, I met the WECA Mayor to discuss the urgent issue of public transport in North East Somerset and presented him again with our Rural Bus Proposal. He promised to look at it and respond quickly but so far, he has refused to accept our plan and not taken urgent action to solve the problem. This is despite having the authority, funds, and permission from Government Ministers to use the £57m Bus Service Improvement Plan funding for regular buses.

Meanwhile the 672 in Chew Valley has now stopped, and the 94 only continues because Wiltshire Council is currently fully funding it. Residents in the Somer and Cam Valleys are stranded and find that Westlink is not a reliable alternative. Currently at least 40,000 people in North East Somerset are impacted along the lost or at-risk bus routes. We know of North East Somerset residents living less than 20 minutes away forced to give up work in health and social care because they cannot get reliable public transport into Bath. As people return to education and work after the summer, this situation has become even more critical.

Councillor Warren, our Transport Officers, and I continue to talk to WECA staff, neighbouring authorities in Wiltshire and Somerset, and North East Somerset Councillors of all parties and none. This is not a game of "bus bingo" as he claims, but a serious attempt to try to influence/encourage/persuade the WECA Mayor to adopt our comprehensive plan to support threatened buses, to regularise Westlink, and to divert existing buses through abandoned communities, i.e., to provide the rural transport network our residents need now.

With these initiatives, it appears that the WECA Mayor is bending to public pressure as he acknowledges in his reply to Cllr Guy's letter that "he has more work to do" although his response is not speedy. He is "setting up a framework and an independent assessment to agree how best to use limited funds to support the bus network now and in the future." His first action in B&NES is to organise a meeting in Bishop Sutton on 12<sup>th</sup> September at 7pm – ironically unreachable by public transport, and without inviting local councillors!

His plan is to launch another round of "big questions" to assess demand and value for money. We will make the point that social isolation and loss of independence should count and reducing rural transport to a cost per passenger journey compared to city services (with lower costs because of denser populations and shorter distances), completely misses the point, when residents have no alternatives. In addition, regular services are likely to be better value than random on-demand services, particularly at peak times. B&NES has already given £1m to support non-commercial buses this year, more per head than the other local authorities. It would

only cost around £2m annually to fund the lost buses. So, he should not spend £4m on cosmetic branding or £8m on “free birthday buses” promotions, when entire communities have lost their last service.

So besides encouraging Chew residents to attend the meeting in Bishop Sutton, we want to encourage all North East Somerset residents to put more public pressure on the WECA Mayor, by launching a rural bus petition this month. This will be sent out across North East Somerset, via all ward and parish councillors, bus activists, and other community groups. It aims to be a cross-party initiative as all our residents are affected, regardless of who they vote for. Which is a point that will not be lost on the WECA Mayor. I urge you to give this your support.