

## **Cllr Fiona Gourley – Rural buses**

In October campaigners from across B&NES gathered in Keynsham to demand that decision makers restore regular local buses. This preceded an important transport meeting of the three Local Authorities and WECA. A petition signed by 1300 people, including cross party support, continues to gather momentum: [www.bathnesbuspetition.org.uk](http://www.bathnesbuspetition.org.uk)

The three Local Authority Leaders signed the petition, and jointly presented an amendment which included restoring regular services to stranded communities.

Despite eloquent speeches from Cllr Kevin Guy, Cllr Claire Young from South Gloucestershire, and Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees, the WECA Mayor vetoed the amendment. He has unilaterally decided to use unspent funds from his vanity Birthday Bus scheme to extend the failing Westlink and to make frequent bus routes even more frequent.

B&NES Council was very grateful for the cross-party support to try to call in that decision. WECA again brushed it off, but we are pursuing the validity of that response.

Sarah Warren, I, and our excellent transport team continue to meet WECA staff to seek ways to implement the proposal we presented in July: to improve Westlink and to restore key bus routes to stranded communities. So, we welcome recent changes to Westlink: a trial to “tether” a minibus at fixed times to serve Salford and Keynsham commuters; tweaking the zones to make Westlink more efficient, and hopefully to include key stops such as Bath University and the RUH. We understand that there have been fruitful discussions with WECA, the Paulton Labour and Parish Councillors and redoubtable campaigner, Clive Turner, about a potential new route which could restore a service to communities in the Somer and Cam valleys. The 94 bus from Trowbridge to Bath via villages in Bathavon South continues to run for now, thanks to Wiltshire County Council, so I continue to try to persuade WECA to resume funding for it. However, the Chew Valley has no reliable public transport, despite the best efforts of Jackie Head and others to work with the WECA team. Other campaigners are having even less traction, with no commitment to reroute the 522, or even consider jointly funding the 414/424 from Frome to Westfield as advocated by Cllr Jackson.

We also continue to be disappointed by the Mayor’s behaviour and the decision-making on BSIP funding, which appears to be strongly influenced by politics. The overpromoted Birthday bus scheme is strongly skewed to urban areas where more potential voters live, whilst Westlink, which was meant to provide rural transport, was badly planned, unpublicised, and unreliable. Despite the government’s permission to use BSIP for regular buses, WECA continues to refuse to do so, to the detriment of all our rural residents.

The impact on our communities is already being felt. The loss of independence and camaraderie is taking its toll on young and old. We have heard about older people having to move away, villages no longer attracting families and working people, young people who cannot drive unable to get jobs, people with low incomes forced to buy a car, and children having to give up extra-curricular activities. These long-term losses are profoundly unfair when there is £57m which could be better spent.

Finally, I want to say that I have greatly appreciated the wisdom and experience of Cllr Eleanor Jackson as we have jointly tried to lobby WECA, to make better use of the BSIP funding for all our residents, and not waste it on vanity projects and photo opportunities by the Mayor and his dog.  
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Cllr Fiona Gourley, Bathavon South 29/11/23