

Statement to Full Council — Cllr Sam Ross, Clutton & Farmborough

Councillors, I want to speak today about the managed decline of rural bus services — and what it means for the communities we are here to represent.

In 2023, the withdrawal of the 179 service removed a direct link from Farmborough into Bath — a journey that once took around 30 minutes. The 522, introduced with WECA Bus Service Improvement Plan funding, was presented as a replacement, but routing via the Somer Valley turned that journey into one of up to 90 minutes. The 522 also serves only one part of Farmborough — the other end of the village is over a mile from the nearest stop, not walkable for older residents, people with disabilities, or parents with small children. WESTlink, promoted as the solution, does not serve Farmborough because the 522 is deemed sufficient. It is a no-win situation and a degradation of service dressed up as progress.

In the recent timetable adjustments, both the 522 and the 172, which serves Clutton, have faced significant cuts. On the 522, following my open letter and a student-led petition, the morning services have been partially reinstated — and I want to acknowledge the role residents played in making that happen. But evening services remain reduced, and the 172 now faces similar cuts — pushing the first departure from Clutton towards Bath from 07:56 to 08:59, and moving the evening return from Bath over an hour earlier. Care workers, sixth formers, students with additional needs, and people with health conditions have told me these are not timetable adjustments. They are the removal of services that people depend upon entirely.

This is what managed decline looks like. Remove the most-used journeys, reduce passenger numbers, cite those numbers as justification for further cuts, and eventually withdraw the service altogether. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy — and in teaching the next generation that public transport is not worth depending on, we store up decades of car dependency and carbon emissions that we can ill afford.

I must also raise the issue of engagement — or rather, the lack of it. For three years I have been told by the Cabinet Project Lead responsible for Sustainable Rural Transport that "we need to have a conversation about buses." I am still waiting. Not once have there been meaningful discussions with local councillors before services have been cut. We find out when our residents do — after the decision has already been made.

The Forgotten Valley Bus Campaign, spearheaded by Dunkerton and Tunley Parish Council and supported by neighbouring parish councils, has put forward a detailed proposal to reinstate a revised 179 route, running hourly, seven days a week. It is a thoughtful, community-led solution, and I would urge the Cabinet Member not only to support it but to make clear to WECA the vital importance of restoring meaningful bus services to these communities.

Finally, the Leader of the Council currently holds the deputy mayoral position at WECA and also chairs the new Transport Advisory Board. I would urge the administration to use these positions of influence — to engage with fellow councillors

(regardless of political affiliation), demand meaningful consultation before services are cut, and ensure that communities to the south and west of Bath are not systematically deprioritised in favour of Bristol. The evidence is there in the timetables. The question is whether we have the will to act on it.

Thank you.