

## **Portishead Residents Bus Service Meeting – Notes 17.08.22**

### **60 Attendees in the Hall - 20 Attendees Online**

#### **Councillor Bob Bull, Portishead Town Council**

- Welcomed all attendees to the fourth bus meeting and thanked them for attending.
- The intention of the meeting is to agree next steps forward following recent media coverage around cuts to bus services in the local area.
- Requested honest reassurance from those speaking this evening that a bus service would run from Weston, Clevedon, Portishead, Avonmouth station, Cribbs Causeway and Southmead hospital. If not possible, residents may need to consider civil protest action.
- Requested that anyone asking questions or making comments keeps them civil. Also a limit of one question per person to ensure all people who want to can speak.
- Read out statement from Patricia Sterndale who is a Trustee of Nailsea and District Community Transport (NDCT). The No. 56 bus service which runs from Clevedon to Portishead is being cancelled at the end of August. Some people have been told that the route is being taken over by NDCT. This categorically will not happen. NDCT have not received a request to do so and will not provide this service as they do not have a license to provide scheduled bus services. Attendees can find more information about becoming a member of NDCT on the leaflets that have been provided this evening. Anyone wanting to use NDCT services must pre-book and be a member.
- Asked attendees from First Bus and NSC to introduce themselves. Attendees included:
  - Chris Hanson – Operations Director at First Bus
  - Ashley Robbins – Staff Manager for Weston-Super-Mare Depot who provide the X4 and X5 bus service
  - Councillor Steve Bridger – Yatton Ward Councillor and Leader of North Somerset Council
  - Carl Nicholson – Public Transport Manager, North Somerset Council

#### **Councillor Tanya Slatter, West Ward, Portishead Town Council**

- Lives in area with family, including 18 year old son due to start at Weston University Campus in September. Tanya and her family are therefore personally affected by the proposed cuts.
- The X5 was axed by First Bus in 2018 and then again by Stage Coach in 2020. John Crockford-Hawley, a Weston-Super-Mare Councillor, made it clear that NSC should refuse to support the campaign to reinstate the bus.
- However, this overlooked the importance of the X5 bus service and the fact that it enables residents to access Cribbs Causeway, which is a huge employment and leisure area. There is also an eye hospital treatment centre in this area, which patients often cannot drive to, and onward bus links to important services such as Southmead hospital and Bristol Parkway station. This bus service is particularly important given that there is no railway link to these areas from Portishead.

- Earlier this year, First Bus, which has a monopoly on transport in the region, announced that they would no longer offer a direct service for half the residents of Portishead and Clevedon, living in the upper parts of the towns, in the either direction which would affect a large number of commuters, students and other residents.
- Now, First Bus are telling us that the bus that half of Portishead and Clevedon can no longer easily use, is being completely scrapped due to lack of demand and financial viability.
- First paid £500 million to shareholders last year and made £30 million profit, up from around £20 million the year prior. First are predicted to make significantly higher profits next year.
- Bristol is currently the only place residents without a car can travel to easily. This will now become more difficult given that one of the buses is being removed.
- NSC and PTC often receive planning applications for developments with few parking spaces. PTC are told they can be approved because a train link will be built or because there is a bus stop nearby. However, there are no buses visiting some of these bus stops.
- Two of the five elected Portishead District councillors cannot get to the Town Hall for meetings to represent the town that elected them, as they do not drive.
- Don Davies, previous Leader of North Somerset Council, said that he would prefer for money to be spent for users within the district. But it is now looking like we are not going to have any bus services for travel within the district. So will North Somerset Council put their money where their mouths are, and step up to campaign for and support travel within North Somerset? Will they also refuse any new developments until we have a half decent public transport option?
- In the 2021 West of England Bus Improvement Plan, which is supposed to be a joint plan between WECA and NSC, Doug Claringbold, MD of First Bus, committed to supporting the proposals in the plan. Proposals included improving the speed and predictability of bus journey times across the region, focusing infrastructure and service frequency along core corridors, improving information and facilities for bus users, targeted fare reduction. One key commitment is to make the bus convenient, taking residents where they want to go, at the times they need to travel, by extending the current network, enhancing frequencies and optimising services. Tanya asked the representatives of First Bus and NSC how any of what residents are hearing about ties in with that statement.

**Chris Hanson, Operations Manager, First Bus.**

- First Bus are currently in a consultation process and proposals have changed. NSC are to deliver this news during this meeting.
- First recognise the statements read out from the Bus Improvement Plan. Statements which were designed to get money as part of the WECA and NSC bid, which was successful. However, that money has not yet been received and will not be received before the new FY. Additionally, funding which has been received since Covid expires in October.
- First Bus are a PLC and therefore a business. First are a bulk operator in the area and face a challenging situation. Each bus route must financially sustain

itself. Many of the local bus routes did not sustain themselves pre-Covid. For example, the X5 has been running at a loss. The X5 was removed in 2018. The X5 service was then replaced and run by Stagecoach. Then Stagecoach removed the service in 2020. As part of ongoing Government funding, First reinstated the service on a temporary basis whilst the funding continued. The funding is expiring in October.

- First, along with the wider bus industry, are also facing a significant labour shortage. The West of England is currently short of 160+ drivers. This means that First cannot run all services that they are mandated to run per the requirements for the funding regime that they are under. First have a lack of bus driver applicants due to a number of reasons. They are addressing this with pay rises, increasing flexibility of working conditions, working with Trade Unions, recruiting via agencies. First are losing more staff than they are recruiting. All operators in the South West and Wales are operating with a circa 10% shortage of bus drivers.
- First are in a position where they have had to reject funding because they do not have the driving resource to operate the bus services.
- First cannot operate services at a loss due to Competition Rules.
- Apologised to anyone who has waited for a bus which has failed to turn up.
- First is doing everything they can, including working with the government and local authorities to improve quality of service.

#### **Carl Nicholson, Public Transport Manager, North Somerset Council**

- Despite doom and gloom, many of the bus services in the area have stabilised, which First can take some credit for.
- NSC recognises the importance of the X5. Particularly to enable access to education for young people.
- There have been negotiations on the X5 service in recent weeks, particularly because if it is not running people will have to make a 2 hour journey instead of a 40 minute journey which is not acceptable.
- An alternative X5 service has been secured. The service will start at Portishead High St, pass through Clevedon and terminate at Worle interchange where there are options to switch onto other services. This will be funded until April when there will be a further review of resources.
- The service will interchange with the X4 to enable users to get to Bristol.
- The X5 is scheduled to run until the 8<sup>th</sup> October 2022, the revised X5 will start on the 9<sup>th</sup> October 2022.
- Cribbs Causeway will not be on the alternative X5 service route. This is due to lack of staff resource. There is slim chance of this happening in the Spring. NSC wants to manage expectations given that the issue is beyond the Council's control.
- This has only been possible because NSC have persuaded DfT to award the first part of their BSIP funding.
- The BSIP funding is hoped to be confirmed with the DfT over the next couple of weeks. The money should be received in the Autumn. Spending can commence in October.
- Chris stated that at the Worle interchange, there will be seamless onward bus options, e.g. the X5 will become a No. 7 bus which provides a continuation to Weston Hospital and Weston College.

- The X4 is already registered and has a timetable so cannot be changed, but the X5 timetable is to be moved to ensure that it fits in with the X4 timetable.

**David Wherret, Member of Public and Member of 'All Aboard the 56' Group**

- The All Aboard the 56 group are interested in the No. 56 bus. It travels for free between Portishead and Clevedon. Many people in Portishead know this bus as the ghost bus because there are no timetables on the route and it has not been advertised by NSC.
- The No. 56 has been funded by NSC.
- The Group want to know why there was a notice stating that the bus will be discontinued at the end of August. There will not be a connection between Portishead and Clevedon once the X5 is cut.
- The No. 56 is the only bus that goes through Walton Bay, mistakenly referred to as a caravan park. Many people live in this area.
- Questioned why the bus is being discontinued by NSC, when they have been funding Weston Community Transport to the *estimated* amount of £39/40k. Believes that this is a misappropriation of funds. This money should be used for bus services in other areas of North Somerset.
- Questioned whether NSC have notified Clevedon Town Council that they are discontinuing the No. 56.
- Carl: wanted to put on record why the service is being terminated. The No. 88 contract that used to run through Walton Bay expired during the pandemic. NSC could not find a bus big enough to go through Walton Bay with the resources in the pandemic. The only option was to serve a different contract which became the No. 57, 58, 59. There was no turning facility by the 'caravan park', so a big bus could not be run on that route. During the pandemic, NSC used government money to introduce a temporary free shuttle service. This funding expires in October and there is no driver resource beyond August. This service will therefore stop. There is no NSC money to replace it. Alternatively, NSC is looking to find a form of demand responsive service to serve that unique section of the District. NSC do support a Dial a Ride (NDCT is a pre book membership service) to serve Portishead and Clevedon and people are encouraged to use this service in the interim. NSC cannot charge for the current service because the licenses are not in place to do so. The service was not previously advertised because of the pandemic. However, there was a timetable on the Council website.
- Another member of the public noted that a sign appeared on the No. 56 bus two weeks ago stating that Weston Community transport were stopping the bus, but that it would be taken over by Nailsea and District Community Transport.
- Councillor Bull stated that this statement was categorically untrue.
- Carl stated that NSC worked with Weston District to put a notice on the bus but had not noticed that it incorrectly implied that there would be a replacement service provided. It should have directed people to use community transport facilities which NSC do partly fund (including Dial a Ride in that area which require a small membership fee).
- Councillor Bull and the member of the public both responded that these are not scheduled bus services.

### **Member of Public**

- Noted that Portishead is second largest town in North Somerset and yet residents are being ignored. There are unnecessary services being run in areas like Weston-Super-Mare, she also referenced the U1, U2, U3 which wait for students. Metros driving around with few people on. Park and ride. Young people and elderly people need to get around. Money being centred on Bristol should be diverted to provide public transport for local people. Public transport also helps us address climate change. Called on NSC to better use its resources.
- Chris responded that it is not a fair comparison between the U1 and the X5. The U1 is funded directly by the University of Bristol, also known as a gross cost contract, where they pay for it and specify what they want. First then carry out the service. Other services referenced are provided on a commercial basis, on same basis as X5. However, these services turnover a profit and the X5 does not. As a business, First has to put their resources where they make money. Under Competition Commission rules, First are not permitted to run loss leader buses, particularly those which make a loss of a quarter of a million pounds per year. First agree that there is a social need to go to these places and that certain locations such as Cribbs Causeway are more attractive. However, First has to work with transport authorities. These authorities need funding. This boils down to funding and a gap between October and April. The X5 does have a future. Cuts are not personal to Portishead; First are making cuts to 10 or 11 different bus services all over Somerset. First ran the service to Cribbs Causeway for 30 years and it never paid for itself.

### **Councillor Steve Bridger, Yatton Ward Councillor and Leader of NSC**

- There is a gap between when the central government bus recovery support grant runs out at the beginning of October and the point at which NSC gets some of the DfT money it has been allocated.
- NSC aims to provide solid, reliable and well-run services along key routes in North Somerset. NSC is looking at many solutions for this.
- NSC is working to connect Portishead to Bristol by rail.
- NSC is facing a budget gap in the next year of over £10 million. Efficiencies, or cuts, will have to be made.

### **Councillor Bob Cartwright, Portishead Town Council**

- Request for clearer and better communication on bus services.
- Offered to drive the No. 56 bus himself.
- Noted that First Bus is now advertising on primetime TV which must have cost money.
- Chris responded that it is not unusual for public companies to advertise, that the advertisement was funded by the central First group and that it has resulted in increased passengers on certain routes. Additionally, the X4 is currently in the best financial position it has been in.
- Suggested that First should be looking to transition towards more sustainable buses.

- Chris responded that First are looking to increase their presence in the electric market. The 22 buses delivered in 2022 are the last diesel buses that First will order into the West of England. The First Group has pledged that by 2030 they will have removed 90% of diesel buses from their fleet, removed 100% by 2035.

**Councillor Caritas Charles, Portishead East, North Somerset District Council**

- The provisions for the X5 are positive but not good enough.
- First are not to be thanked for this, the local residents should be thanked.
- NSC does not have a great deal of power and cannot influence the bus companies, especially those with a monopoly.
- Encouraged residents to write to and lobby their local MPs and request local control of our public transport so that it serves the interests of our local communities.
- Carl responded that local Councils outside of London are banned from a franchise, where they would have jurisdiction over services. NSC's only option is to enter into an enhanced partnership, which they will do in October. At this point, NSC will have more say over how road space is used and frequencies, but will still need to work with private providers beyond that.
- David Wherret said that his group has been in contact with MP Liam Fox, who is disappointed that NSC is taking action to remove the No. 56. This bus could be somewhat amalgamated with the X5.

**Becky Stubbs, Online Question**

*"I'm interested to know, out of the £150m that our government provided in March 2022 to support the bus services, how much did North Somerset Council get? What it was spent on?"*

- Steve responded that John Penrose MP had said the same thing to him the previous day.
- Steve clarified that the figure is actually £105 million. There is a pot of £48 million for capital funding which NSC should see later in the year. This should fund things like bus lane privatisation and bus shelters, but not bus services. The other amount is around £50 million which results from a joint bid by NSC and WECA for revenue, which can be spent on bus services and other things. NSC will receive a proportion of this, hopefully in excess of £10 million. This money has not been received yet. The government bus support grant to commercial bus operators ends at the beginning of October. BSIP funding will not be received until after that point. NSC has asked the government for some flexibility to bridge this gap.
- Steve hopes that there is time for community input into what a reliable bus service looks like for North Somerset. It is important to service the main routes, demand responsive transport is a part of this.

**Member of Public**

- Asked whether First Bus would negotiate with management at Cribbs Causeway, in a similar way that they have done with Universities and Colleges, to put on a subsidised bus service to and from Cribbs.
- Chris responded that he would be happy to discuss with Cribbs but at the present moment, First does not have the driver resource to put on a service to Cribbs.

- Carl commented that Cribbs Causeway company went bankrupt during the pandemic because people were not travelling. Prior to the pandemic, passenger numbers were too low to sustain the X5. Putting an alternative in place is a priority for NSC.

### **Becky Stubbs, Online Question**

*“First Bus, how do you feel you can attract more drivers to work for your business? It seems like driver shortage is a big problem so what is the solution? Thanks”*

- Chris said that there are lots of different things that First are doing to attract people to their business. Currently, there are not enough applicants for the job vacancies. Until this increases, First cannot offer the services that they want to. First are looking to correct the situation where people are waiting for buses that do not turn up. First want to run a reliable service on the network. Around 6% of First journeys do not run due to a lack of staff.
- Carl stated that if First do not cut routes to create a reliable service, the Traffic Commissioner will do this for them.

### **Councillor John Cato, Portishead West, North Somerset District Council**

- Said residents are right to be angry and upset about cuts to bus services.
- Appreciative that representatives from First Bus and NSC have turned up to the meeting, as have all the residents and many councillors and district councillors.
- Noted however that MPs were missing and had not come to the meeting and are making comments, such as John Penrose MP who commented that NSC is not stepping up. Councillor Bull noted that Liam Fox MP was invited.
- Urged residents and all attendees to listen to what was said here, do their own research and write to their MP's. It is central government who must be lobbied. Residents need to put forward their solutions to their MPs. This will mean public transport is more likely to be able to serve the needs of local residents.

### **Councillor Caritas Charles, Portishead East, North Somerset District Council**

- First Bus community consultation has been appalling. There have been numerous meetings held and Councillors have not been informed of developments in a timely way.
- Caritas only had 11 minutes advance notice (prior to the public) of the recent round of cuts.
- Request for guarantee from Steve that they will not have conversations with First unless they agree to a firm community consultation with NSC so that the Councillors and the public are kept informed of changes to bus services.
- Request that First divert some of their shareholder dividends to increase bus driver salaries and secure more bus drivers.
- Request for better advertising on bus services, particularly on scheduling and inter-connectivity between buses.
- The Government will not provide funding to NSC for non-profitable bus services. Request that First state that the X5 could be profitable so that funds will be released.
- Request that residents write to their MPs.

- Carl responded that NSC has secured some funding from central government for the X5, albeit temporary funding. Plea for residents to keep using the X5 and to inform NSC if there is anything wrong with the service so that it can be corrected before April.
- Chris responded that First will do what they can to work with the community to make the X5 work. If this involves changing the way that they communicate, then they are happy to do this. As far as consultation goes, First have attended this meeting and the last 3 meetings. However, he understands that First can do more. First will commit to further consultation and Chris is happy to meet residents.
- Steve responded that as part of the enhanced partnership, there is an ongoing workstream which is focusing on communication, bus user groups and embedding better communication culture.

### **Heather, Member of Public**

- Has sent numerous emails to Liam Fox MP over the last few years. Each email has been passed to Baroness Vere at the DfT. She has sent negative replies. Liam Fox has been generally positive.
- Steve noted that Liam Fox has also been helpful with Metro West.

### **Member of Public**

- Asked whether there are plans to alter the X4 route, as drivers do not think the bus route will go up West Hill in future.
- Chris responded that First are not planning to change the X4 route.
- Councillor Bull noted that the bus will stop going up West Hill during the planned road works. Councillor Nicola Holland has been lobbying to get West Hill sorted and has had assurances that it will be started in Autumn.
- Chris commented that the current X4 is financially sustainable for the first time during his employment. Time has been saved by not going through the marina. There are also twice the number of customers to pick up. There are discussions to be had about how to better serve both halves of Portishead with bus services.
- Member of the public noted that what residents could do is get off the X4 at Coombe Road and cross over to Iceland and then get the X5 or Stage Coach bus down. However, these buses do not connect by around 3 minutes. Chris responded that First are aware of this and are looking to rectify the timetabling issue.

### **Member of Public**

- Requested a covered bus stop at the Sainsburys stop.
- Carl responded that NSC, in theory, has the money to do this and is looking to work with Sainsburys on this.

## **Other Online Questions – Awaiting responses from First Bus and North Somerset Council**

*Claire & Freya –*

*I have a question about the revised X5 – for onward connections in Portishead to X4 will the ticket still be valid or will customers need to pay again?*

*Richard Lewis –*

*Will this new service to Worle ensure Weston college students connect with college bus to other sites on time which run once per day? Or they miss the whole college day?*

*Kate Parsons –*

*Please can I request that the stop at the end of Sheepway (Conference Close) remains in situ if possible.*

*Claire & Freya –*

*I'm grateful for the work NSC and First have achieved to save the skeleton service linking our towns together especially for young people who study courses at Weston college.*

*Richard Lewis –*

*There is also the disability service in Cribbs Causeway part of North Bristol NHS trust, that staff and patients cannot get to and the eye centre. Southmead hospital staff have no way to get to work due to time taken to go into centre and out for shift at early morning or late night.*

*The X5 is so unreliable many people have to try and find other ways to get to work and college or change jobs thus numbers using the service will continue to dwindle due to bus company inefficiencies despite huge profits announced.*

*Kate Parsons –*

*The online app is utterly unreliable anyway!*

*Pixel C –*

*As children need to remain in full time education until they are 18 and they are unable to drive, you have not delivered on the train station yet, I think a bus to their local college should fall under a statutory service.*

*Olwen Jones –*

*Both the council and the operators should be advertising their services better to encourage people to use public transport.*

*Olwen Jones –*

*Central government should prioritise local public transport because of the climate emergency, but they're only interested in grand gestures such as HS2. It will be many, many years before petrol & diesel vehicles are off the roads. Therefore improving public transport and encouraging people to use it is crucial.*

*Claire & Freya –*

*With the slimmed down X5 will there be reliability improvements for the X4 i.e. will the drivers be redeployed to fulfil that timetable as published.*

*Mr Griffiths –*

*Please can Mr Chris Hanson advise when the electronic display at Bristol Bus Station for Portishead 'Bay 12' will be fixed? As it hasn't worked for many months. Thank -you.*

*Richard Lewis –*

*Please can you confirm that Weston college students will get to college on time to enable them to get college connecting buses to other sites that run once a day such as puxton park.*

**Councillor Bull, Portishead Town Council**

- Thanked NSC and First Bus for attending the meeting.
- Thanked members of public for attending and speaking.
- Emphasised the importance of writing to MPs, as funding decisions are made by central government.
- The next meeting will be held after the funding is approved in October 2022, likely around November.
- PTC were thanked for organising and facilitating the meeting.

Meeting closed at 21:30