

## **Portishead Residents Bus Service Meeting – Notes December 13<sup>th</sup> 2022**

### **Attendees from First Bus and NSC:**

Cllr Steve Hogg – NSC Executive Member for Transport and Highways

Carl Nicholson – NSC Service Manager for public transport

Carole Stevens (Online) – Operations Manager for First Bus (Weston & Marlborough Street, Bristol)

Meeting chaired by Cllr Bob Bull, Portishead Town Council

Carole Stevens : Apologised for being online due to family illness. Explained that she has only been in the post for two weeks.

Carl Nicholson: NSC have been awarded £48million from the BSIP (Bus Service Improvement Plan) for physical improvements and infrastructure and £60million on services and revenue improvements. The £60m is shared with WECA. Spending on physical improvements will start in January/February 2023 by which time the partnership agreement between NSC and the bus operators will be in place.

Steve Hogg : Spending on infrastructure can start straight away. How the revenue money is to be spent has mostly yet to be decided.

Carl Nicholson: WECA are looking for suppliers for Demand Responsive Transport (DRT). This will be trialled in areas which have very poor existing services. DRT is half way between a bus service and a taxi by which a bus is summoned by an app or phone call. The cost will be capped at the bus service rate and concessions can be used. The bus will arrive within an hour and will take you to where you want within a zone, or to a point where you can pick up another bus. Where the bus is will be shown on the app. The number of zones and vehicles has yet to be decided but initially there will be two vehicles on the Portishead to Clevedon service. NSC are in the midst of a procurement process. They are getting bids from reputable national companies. There is a £6million budget to spend over 2 years. The aim is to start in April 2023. There are 13 zones across the whole region and 3 in North Somerset. These 3 zones will cover most areas, but not Nailsea.

Bob Bull: Asked when the consultation period ends re. the capital spending. There is public concern about the effect on car users about removing space allocation i.e. bus lanes

Steve Hogg: About the end of January. There is a need to reduce carbon emissions, but often there is no choice about using a car. The aim is to get people out of cars and on to buses. In order to give a reliable high frequency bus service along the major routes in North Somerset, e.g. the A370, A38 and A369, priority needs to be given to buses. We need to make it easier to get the bus than take your car. So buses mustn't get stuck in traffic.

Carl Nicholson: Most traffic signals in North Somerset do not currently give priority to buses, but are being upgraded so they will. Giving buses priority over car users is a condition of the funding. Even if people have EVs, buses will still have priority.

Steve Hogg: Buses must be available for road re-allocation to make sense.

Carl Nicholson: At present there is suppressed demand, no confidence and no reliability, and some buses are overloaded, but things will start to improve.

Carole Stevens: Driver shortage is a national problem. They are doing their best to recruit. Patronage on some routes have overall decreased but some have increased post Covid.

Cameron Stewart, NDCT: DRT is a good idea, as an experiment for two years. Can the apps be used for First Bus as well? This would be an obvious progression. It should be implemented now rather than later as this would build confidence.

Carl Nicholson: The aspiration is that it will become an integrated system, so the DRT will be coordinated with First Bus. It is planned to continue after 2 years, but it needs to be well used. It is an expensive service, but the cost is less than providing buses for less well used routes using a traditional bus service. The three zones should provide cover for all areas now.

Carole Stevens: There are no plans for First Bus to integrate with DRT at the moment.

Cllr Caritas Charles: The lack of confidence in First Bus has been there for years, pre-Covid and before the issues with bus drivers. Communication has been appalling. Does the power of the BSIP money lie with First as they determine the routes to be invested in. Will First engage with the public as well as NSC?

Carole Stevens: Agree that they need to improve communication and reliability. If a route is commercially viable, they will not get BSIP support.

Steve Hogg: NSC has no control over the bus route or timetables. NSC are not happy about the recent performance of First Bus & have asked for it to be investigated by the DVSA (Driver & Vehicle Standards Agency). The new enhanced partnership gives NSC a degree of influence & some control over how the bus services are run.

Carl Nicholson: The first stage is a voluntary enhanced partnership. If that doesn't work you can have a franchise, i.e. the Council stipulates the routes and frequency, but they aren't allowed to operate bus companies. So need a partnership.

Bob Bull: Where is the public interface with the enhanced partnership?

Carl Nicholson: There will be annual consultation, or you can contact the council directly.

Heather Toms: Do bus services no longer have to be run on a commercial basis? Who has control of the money? Buses are essential, especially for people who've stopped driving since the pandemic, the problem is reliability.

Carl Nicholson: The enhanced partnership ends fully deregulated services. The contract for BSIP requires NSC to meet certain targets, e.g. frequency of services. Part of the problem is that the government froze the rate that can be paid for concessionaries, so bus companies are losing money carrying concessions. This will be changed, but it will cost NSC via the Council tax.

Heather Toms: What are First Bus going to do about the reliability of the X4 and X5? How do they recruit drivers?

Carole Stevens: They are reviewing the timetables. There will be new timetables in April. However, improving one service results in cuts to another. Re drivers, there is no priority for one service over another.

Dave Gill: Why has the X5 service been cut on a Saturday? It takes six hours on a Saturday to get from Portishead to Weston via Bristol and back or 5 hours to Glastonbury and back.

Carl Nicholson: The X5 has never been commercially viable. It is on the list for negotiation to add Sat and Sun services, but it is up to First Bus. Primary focus of X5 is to get kids to school.

Dave Werrett: From the pressure group 'All aboard the 56 bus' with membership of over 200 people. Portishead & Clevedon are only linked by X5. There are no buses on the road (B3124) between Portishead & Clevedon. Believes First Bus have cream picked the routes, so miss connecting people from the suburbs which would bring more custom. Need to bring people to major routes. First Bus needs to change their business model, e.g. running bigger buses. NSC rely on First Bus, so First Bus have control. This has to be reversed. If they aren't providing a service, they shouldn't be paid. Quoted a number of statistics from their survey.

Heather Toms: NSC have already taken up the question of cherry-picking with the DVSA.

Steve Hogg: Bus driver shortage is the biggest problem. Has been trying to get bus service for Wrington for four years. There should be benefits by the spring.

Bob Cartwright: Bus drivers are leaving because of the pressures, split shifts, cancelled holidays etc. The company needs to adjust, change with the times and provide a reliable service. Is the DRT flexible, so if there is more demand can it change to meet it?

Carl Nicholson: The DRT bus has to arrive within an hour. If the usage is there, it could be adjusted and in the long term, it could become a permanent service.

Bob Cartwright: Can the DRT service be used to provide a hub service around Portishead?

Carl Nicholson: That is the aim. First Bus are willing to work with the DRT service. The Bristol E-scooter is very successful as a form of transport.

Bob Cartwright: Will the Portbury 100 have a bus lane?

Carl Nicholson: No comment.

Janet Davey: When are we going to have a service to Southmead hospital & Cribbs? At present this is an all day journey via Bristol and you could miss your appointment with cancelled buses.

Carl Nicholson: This is still on the agenda, but doesn't know how it can be delivered. Could cancel the underused 57 and re-divert it up to Cribbs. May look again in the spring.

Cameron Stewart : Four years ago, NSC had a strategy for a three year contract for Community Transport. Unlike DRT, NDCT offers a door to door service. How will it fit in? We need a long term goal.

Steve Hogg : Sees a role for Community Transport and it needs to interplay with DRT.

Carl Nicholson : Community Transport has a wide range of passengers & not everyone can use a bus. Doesn't know how many will use the bus services. The current contract with NDCT expires in January and he has been given the go ahead to extend it by another year, but not further.

Cameron Stewart: for businesses to continue, they need a strategy. Community Transport is needed as it is door to door for people who can't walk to bus stops etc. Saying year to year, or it may not happen doesn't help. BSIP includes Community Transport which is as important as bus services and DRT.

Carl Nicholson: Community Transport is no longer included in BSIP. He cannot support Community Transport with no money.

Cameron Stewart: You can't expect a service to be there if you don't support it. NSC has not put a penny into new buses for Community Transport for 12 years. If there is no BSIP funding, then it should come out of another pot. If you want Community Transport to be part of your integrated transport system there needs to be a strategy, not a lurch.

Ray Shields: Badgerline did start a service some time ago from Portishead to Southmead hospital, but it didn't succeed. Avon County Council was keen on Community Transport resulting in setting up Portishead Porters 30 years ago, which provides transport to all hospital appointments 7 days a week. They have made 42,000 trips over the 30 years.

Caritas Charles: Re decarbonisation, we need to get people who commute onto buses. Lots of people in his ward commute and they all drive. If there was a fast, efficient service, people would use it. NSC have not been proactive until public pressure made them due to individuals and the town council who've been holding bus meetings for years.

Steve Hogg : He believes he's made a difference, has spoken to Heather as his first task when appointed to the Exec. He voted against the motion brought to Council, it was the wrong time to bring the service under council control which would have lost the BSIP funding. Agrees that we have to change the behaviour of commuters.

Carl Nicholson: You cannot have a franchise unless approved by the Secretary of State & approval won't be given until we've tried the enhanced partnership. It would be too big a risk. The motion highlighted the problems residents have.

Janet Davey : Will the clean Air Zone in Bristol bring increased profits for First Bus.

Carl Nicholson: The X4 has potential for increased growth. Parking in Bristol costs about £30 per day. It goes through Pill because there is a lot of patronage, but they need to speed up the journey through Pill.

Caritas Charles: There is enough support for a direct Portishead to Bristol service if was frequent and regular. Going through Pill just adds time.

Carl Nicholson: Can't see anything wrong in adding 5 minutes to the journey by going through Pill. The only alternative is going along the M5 and up the Portway.

Sandra Bluebird: Belongs to the 'all aboard the 56' group. Needs people in a position of authority to listen to their ideas. Said thank you for being listened to.

Heather Toms: Why does the X5 route to Waitrose go via Sainsbury's where it waits for 10 minutes?

Patricia Sterndale: Why don't some buses go via Pill & some straight to Bristol?

Carl Nicholson: It's a commercial decision.

Dave Gill: If NSC removes First Bus, who would take its place.

Steve Hogg: The motion asked for a vote of no confidence in First Bus & to take the service back in house. If it had gone ahead, they would have lost the BSIP money (£48m for NS and a share of £60m). It would have been ridiculous. It may happen in the future, but it would be a risk. If NSC took over, they would have the cost of buying buses etc. and no money.

Carl Nicholson: NSC are not allowed in law to own and operate buses. The alternative is a franchise, but it's a risk.

Dave Gill: First Bus bought out all the competition. They are only interested in money and the shareholders, not the public.

Dave Werrett: Re DRT, how are the elderly and vulnerable going to be able to manage the technology. You need a regular route.

Carl Nicholson: The system is well proven. Those with recognised disabilities will have a door to door service as an exception.

Robert Bull: The next meeting will be in early March.