

Buses4Us – Written evidence (TTS0046)

Background

Buses4Us is a community action group formed in response to the withdrawal of two key bus services on the Gloucestershire/Herefordshire border in February 2022.

The three market towns of Ross-on-Wye, Newent and Ledbury are neighbours, less than 10 miles apart. They have been connected by scheduled public transport services for more than 70 years.

These links are so long established that they are effectively part of the local infrastructure and inform people's decision making when considering where they should live, work and study.

In recent years the towns have been linked by buses run by Stagecoach on a commercial basis.

Over the years service frequency has been reduced and passenger numbers have dwindled. By 2019 services were running at a loss and the operator was not confident that passenger numbers would recover post-pandemic.

In 2021 the operator gave notice to Gloucestershire County council of its intention to discontinue the services.

The county council cabinet member responsible for public transport became aware of the impending cuts in late January, along with the rest of the community, via social media.

Following public outcry and media coverage attempts were made by Herefordshire and Gloucestershire County Councils to come to a subsidy agreement with the operator. These however failed.

Services were withdrawn on 27 February with effectively 4 weeks' notice to the community, no transport needs or equalities impact assessment.

Issues to Consider

Reasonable notice. Bus services between our towns were withdrawn with just one month's notice. After being in place in one form or another for more than 70 years. It seems possible that the community might have had no notice at all had it not been for social media.

Is there the potential to require operators to commit to a reasonable notice period - 6 months to a year - when being granted a licence to run a route? Further, if the reason for discontinuing the route is lack of passengers/commercial non-viability could there be a requirement for community engagement, a "use it or lose it" message and strategies for building custom before a final decision is made?

Transport Needs Analysis, Equalities Impact Assessment. Neither of these were carried out prior to the withdrawal of the services in our case as the services were commercially operated and therefore the council had no obligation to do so. This seems wrong.

County Lines. Despite the best efforts of officers attempts to subsidise our services were vetoed by elected councillors on both sides of our county borders. There was a stated reluctance on both sides to subsidise services for residents of the neighbouring county. This behaviour on the part of elected representatives of differing political views is having a negative impact on the lives of people who live close to local authority boundaries up and down the country. A duty needs to be put in place for local authorities to properly plan and implement cross border services.

Hub and Spoke. As in many places, public transport in Gloucestershire is planned on a hub and spoke pattern, with most routes leading into the central towns of Gloucester and Cheltenham. Whilst hub and spoke might be an appropriate model for transport services in the suburbs around a city it's not the answer for market towns. Put a market town at the end of a transport spoke and it effectively becomes a suburb of the central urban hub.

Connect market towns to their neighbours, around the rim of the wheel, and together they can become vibrant communities in their own right, between them meeting many of the daily needs of their residents and businesses without the need to travel to the central hub.

Levelling Up. Probably an obvious point, but at the same time that huge investments are being planned for public transport in urban areas, rural and small-town services are being allowed to wither and die. A look at the transport planning documents for Gloucestershire shows great plans for the central, urban Gloucester/Cheltenham belt. A multi-million-pound transport hub close to GCHQ, new rail stations, a tram/metro link. Whilst the market town of Newent is earmarked for a new cycle path.

User Input. The situation may be different in urban areas, but it's become clear to our group over the past few weeks that many of the people in our local authorities who make decisions about public transport rarely if ever use it. This seems likely to lead to poor and uninformed decision making. Is there the

potential to require councils to set up and consult with transport user groups?

March 2022