

Public Board Meeting

19 July 2023

The Watershed, Bristol



Minutes

Present

Board

Nigel Stevens (Chair)
Kate Denham
Theo de Pencier
Cllr William Powell

Apologies

NS Rob Wilson RW
KD Trisha McAuley TM
TdP Arthur Leathley AL
WP

Keith Richards OBE

KR

Management Team

Anthony Smith

AS Nigel Holden NH
Guy Dangerfield GD

Louise Collins
David Sidebottom
Jon Carter
Mike Hewitson
Kieran Watkins
Ian Wright

LCn
DS
JC
MH
KW
IW

Staff

Natasha Alvarado
Daniel Maguire

NA
DM

Part A Public Affairs

A1. Chair's welcome and opening remarks; apologies and introductions; declarations of conflicts of interest.

NS welcomed everyone to the Transport Focus Public Board Meeting. He explained that Transport Focus has a statutory requirement to hold public board meetings; these are usually held regionally and focus on transport issues relevant to the area.

There were no declarations of interest. Apologies were received from RW, AL and TM.

NS noted that rail ticket office closures are a particularly pertinent issue. He invited MH, who leads this issue for Transport Focus, to explain its role in the consultation process.

MH stated that the process for making major changes to ticketing office opening hours is set out in the Ticketing and Settlement Agreement, which is available online. A rail company

wishing to make changes to ticket office opening hours is required to put a notice in the affected stations. The notice must allow a 21-day period for comments from passengers and the public to be sent to Transport Focus. The current consultation period ends on 26 July 2023. (The consultation period has since been extended to 1st September 2023)

Transport Focus and London TravelWatch then analyse comments received, which informs the response back to train companies. Where Transport Focus objects to proposals, this is done on a station-by-station basis. The train company then has a number of options; it may decide to withdraw the proposals, negotiate with Transport Focus or to bring the issue to the Secretary of State for adjudication. Transport Focus assesses proposals against a set of criteria which are published on the Transport Focus website. Criteria include, for example, the ease of being able to buy the right ticket for a journey, timely available assistance for passengers who require it, availability of information for passengers etc. Passenger comments help to inform this assessment.

A2 Overview of current work at Transport Focus to represent the interests of transport users in the Bristol City and West of England region.

DS outlined that Transport Focus works with a range of stakeholders in the region. Staff ensure that transport companies and authorities are aware of its research, policy development influence and insight work; staff also provide feedback from stakeholders to Transport Focus on issues specific to this region. He went on to provide a snapshot of Transport Focus work across bus, road and rail.

Linda McCord chairs the West of England / North Somerset Enhanced Partnership Advisory Board, set up to deliver the Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP). This Board ensures that government funding for bus services is used to improve the things that matter to passengers locally such as punctuality, better service information, deals on fares. Transport Focus also produces a bus passenger satisfaction survey, Your Bus Journey, which has been part funded by the West of England Combined Authority. The survey provides benchmarking insights across 34 other areas of the country. Interim results from the survey will be published in early September, with full results likely to be available by the end of February. These results will provide an evidence base of the passenger improvements delivered through BSIP.

The Strategic Road Users survey findings indicate that this region performs very well. Improvements to be addressed include reducing the impact on road users of roadworks and congestion. This work will continue as part of our statutory duty for road users.

Research in rail focuses on priorities for passengers, which have been identified as reliability, getting a seat and value for money. This research provides the data to back up understanding of the issues that make a difference to passengers. Nina Howe from Transport Focus works with stakeholders to ensure that investment is focused on service improvements for the passenger, wherever possible.

Transport Focus works regionally and nationally to drive improvements to today's transport users, but we also work on influencing policy development in transport for tomorrow and the future.

Championing the needs of transport users today

A3 Rail – delivery, performance and priorities

NS stated that the meeting would focus on how Transport Focus represents the needs of transport users today and tomorrow, touching later upon transport users needs in the future. He introduced Mark Hopwood CBE (MHd), Managing Director of Great Western Railway to open the discussion on rail.

MHd explained that GWR is part of FirstGroup, providing a mix of services including long-distance, high-speed trains, regional trains, services into Wales, branch line services and London commuter services. All inter-city express trains are bi-mode, but GWR is keen to see more electrification. GWR has acquired fast charge battery technology through Vivarail, as part of the organisation's decarbonisation drive. Passengers choose to travel by rail for a number of reasons, including making the right choice for the environment. GWR has gradually increased the number of trains it runs per day, now up to 1,720, serving 277 stations. The number of stations is growing, and new station openings are planned.

The change in customer travel habits is a challenge. Commuter traffic is well below its pre-Covid level, especially on longer runs, with business travel very badly hit. The convenience of online meetings means that this revenue is unlikely to come back. Leisure travel is performing well and includes peak and off-peak travel. Overall, revenue is down to a much greater extent than footfall, which will impact upon future investment.

GWR has worked with the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) and has provided funding for some enhanced services, new station openings and bus/ rail integration. GWR has also introduced a pay-as-you-go smartcard scheme throughout the West of England, extending out to Ashchurch for Tewkesbury, Weston-super-Mare, and Chippenham. Services have also been improved in Devon and Cornwall and there have been station developments and enhancements in West Berkshire. However, funding is a real challenge and budget reductions will impact on service delivery, in terms of more crowded trains and some loss of services. Careful management and working in partnerships should enable GWR to deliver some improvements through this period of budgetary pressure.

GWR ticket office sales now account for just 15% of the total, down from 82% in 1996. This change is driving proposals to move more staff into multi-skilled roles. The ticket office closure proposals should have no impact on overall staffing, station opening hours or passenger assistance. MHd concluded his presentation by encouraging engagement in the consultation process.

NS invited Marcus Jones (MJ), Western Route Director from Network Rail to present. MJ began with a summary of recent Network Rail achievements, including the launch of the Elizabeth Line, the introduction of a new timetable with a 20% increase in services on the Western Route, which slightly exceeds the number of trains running pre-Covid. He also

highlighted the completion of a new seawall at Dawlish and construction of a new bridge at Nuneham. Delivery of the latter project went well and learning points from the process will be applied to future new development and enhancement works.

However, performance on the Western route is not where it should be. The downward performance trend is related to issues with signalling, track and overhead lines. Work over the last 12 months has included improvements to overhead wire resilience; track and points improvements have begun in the Thames Valley area, resulting in an 80% reduction in delays. The next phase of this work will include Bristol and the West Country. Network Rail has introduced more technology (remote condition monitoring intelligent infrastructure), where data can provide advance warning of problems and works can get underway overnight without disrupting services.

Future improvements include an upgrade to the CI systems at Paddington during Year 1 or 2 of CP7. Two pilots are underway to give local teams greater power to deliver, which is already delivering efficiency and performance improvements. Planning is underway for access cycles on large renewal schemes to avoid disruption at peak times. Network rail is going through a period of modernising maintenance, which involves taking a risk-based approach, prioritising maintenance based on level of usage and condition. MJ's final point was that performance improvements will drive willingness to fund and invest in rail, which is a key part of a sustainable transport network.

NS thanked the presenters for their overview of the rail network, providing both an operator and infrastructure perspective.

A4 The importance of local bus services; concessionary travel and barriers to bus use.

LCn, Senior Stakeholder Manager, Transport Focus, shared findings from recent Transport Focus research on bus services. There are significant challenges for operators, given the reality of changes in habits and attitudes since the pandemic.

Motivations and barriers to bus use research was published several weeks ago. The study includes responses from bus users, lapsed bus users and non-bus users, so it provides broad insight into behaviour. Bus usage has increased since last year when a similar study was undertaken. However, a sizable group of past bus users have not returned as bus passengers since the pandemic. Many people are using the bus less than before, either because they are making fewer journeys overall or because the bus doesn't provide a good enough service.

Responses from non-bus users showed that 7 in 10 simply prefer to use their car. Respondents also had negative perceptions about the bus e.g., taking too long and not going where people wanted it to go. For the one third of respondents who would like to use the bus more, buses would need to be more frequent and more reliable. Value for money is very important. The £2 capped fare is making a positive difference.

Transport Focus has shared these findings with bus operators and has had a very positive response.

The second piece of research recently completed is on concessionary bus travel, as these users have been slow to return to bus travel. Using its Transport Users Panel, Transport Focus spoke to 2,500 people. More than a third of older and disabled concessionary travellers said that they use buses less frequently because they are having fewer days out and fewer shopping trips due to the cost of living. The other key reason for travelling less was the quality of bus services, including cuts to services and cancellations. Passengers are also frustrated that they cannot use free passes before 0930 hrs. One in four respondents has been using the government's £2 capped fare for travel before 0930 hrs.

Transport Focus has brought these findings to government. LCn noted that a new government Take the Bus advertising campaign had just been launched. This latest work will be shared with operators and partners.

NS thanked LCn and commented on the common theme of core reliability across all services, including bus, road and rail. Transport Focus uses its role to bring these issues to the attention of operators and highlights the importance of getting core reliability right in delivering improved transport services.

A5 Bus services – delivery, performance and priorities

NS invited Rob Pymm (RP), Commercial Director, First West of England to present. First West is the principal bus operator in the region with a fleet of 500 buses; it operates between 35,000 and 40,000 bus trips per week for approximately 1 million passengers.

RP stated that the narrative around bus use has tended to be somewhat negative. The industry, as with rail, is going through challenging times due to changing travel habits and some services are no longer viable. Factoring in the impact of inflation; difficult choices have to be made, with some costs up by as much as 40%.

One positive for bus services is the £2 bus fare; it benefits the industry to have government support and funding for bus services. The £2 fare will be in place until October, when it will be replaced by the £2.50 capped fare. Value for money is a key driver of bus usage. The industry needs to battle the negative perception around buses, highlighting it as a cheaper way to move around, and encourage at least some occasions when current non-users are persuaded to leave their car at home. There are a number of factors, from cost of living and climate change to congestion, that should encourage an increase in bus travel if operators get the service right.

Bus passenger numbers are up over the last year, with a 14% increase in year-on-year commercial users and an 11% increase in concessionary users. Inter urban routes particularly benefit from the capped fare. Funding is in place for the ambitious Bus Service Improvement Plan, so revenue and capital investment is available via the local authorities. This has enabled First West to enhance the frequency of services on some routes. The funding helps to bridge the initial demand gap from launching a new route to building regular usage.

First West has been able to calculate unique passenger numbers, pulling data from mobile ticketing, contactless payments etc. Findings indicate that the service is attracting new users. The challenge now is to keep these users by continuing to be reliable. Bristol is a congested city. Priority action needs to focus on freeing roads up for buses to get people moving faster. First West has shown some improvements in the last year on reliability (+6%). Driver shortages have been a challenge, but First West is bringing in an average of 5 new drivers per week. Finally, partnership working, and the shared goal of sustainable travel are priorities for the future. RP wrapped up his presentation by commenting that service reliability and commercial efficiency can both be greatly improved if congestion is reduced.

A6 Integrated bus operations and the Bus Enhanced Partnership

NS invited Peter Mann (PM), Head of Integrated Transport, WECA to present WECA's plans for a more connected and integrated transport network in the West and South West.

PM explained that his main focus in WECA is on bus integration, especially since government has made more funding available to local authorities for bus service improvements. The BSIP is a joint initiative with North Somerset Council and was awarded £105.5 million in funding, of which £48 million is capital funding for North Somerset. A separate capital bid for government funding for the city region was awarded £540 million over 5 years, including over £400 million for bus investment. This should deliver a significant improvement to the network reliability.

BSIP commitments include enhancing existing commercial services. An investment has been made into demand responsive transport, with a minibus (Westlink) dedicated to the rural part of the community, linking passengers up with existing rail and bus services. Other fare incentives have been introduced over and above the £2 capped fare. There have been real information system improvements. With the enhanced partnership now in place, there is a strong collaborative effort to bring about bus improvement in the region. Linda McCord, from Transport Focus, provides support as Chair of the Advisory Panel.

The Passenger Charter was a requirement of BSIP. It sets out what standards passengers can expect now and, in the future, when using buses in the region. It was developed with input from Transport Focus. The charter is an evolving document and is adapted to take on board feedback from passengers on service expectations. PM concluded by outlining the main commitments within the charter, namely a focus on reliability and punctuality, standards on cleanliness to ensure the service is welcoming, value for money fares and bus driver behaviour standards. The enhanced partnership will collectively ensure that these commitments are delivered.

A7 Strategic roads in the West of England – delivery, performance and priorities

NS invited Jason Hones (JH), Regional Director to present on behalf of National Highways.

JH began by outlining the strategic road network in the South West, characterised by a concentration of rural A roads and a unique urban road network through the city of Bristol. The region experiences high traffic seasonality (50-60% more traffic in August than in January). There are a number of very large infrastructure sites, including Bristol Port (6,000 HGV movements per day), Hinckley Point C (10,000 people travel to work there each day)

and, just recently announced, confirmation of the development of the new Gravity battery manufacturing plant. There are also a number of planned large residential development sites.

Road user feedback indicates that 80% of road journeys in the South West are satisfactory and performance is relatively good compared to the national picture. Speed of incident response is important in maintaining a free-flowing road network. Other criteria impacting on satisfaction are road surface quality and the ability of road users to accurately plan and time their journey.

Under the Road Investment strategy (RIS) 2, National Highways is carrying out a customer impact assessment for major roadworks. Where delays can have a disproportionate impact (access to ports and airports for onward journeys), measures such as increased patrolling and increased statutory recovery may reduce the duration of delays. Enhancement works are now increasingly bundled, so that more work is done within a time slot to reduce overall impact on the public. Other measures include better road signage and communications.

JH's final comments were that inflation has hit maintenance and renewal spending. National Highways is now at the point where safety measures are prioritised over all other activity. Renewals of some complex structures are planned.

A8 Questions and panel discussion

Q: NS opened the question session by asking what great might look like in terms of an integrated transport network.

A: PM (WECA) responded that passengers should feel confident and empowered in their ability to make value for money journeys that meet their needs. This might mean making it easy to connect for another part of the journey, ordering an e-scooter on an app etc. The collaborative "Vision" is captured within the main transport policy documents. Investment is key to a great transport network. Customers come when services improve.

Q: The panel was asked about future strategic thinking around door-to-door accessibility, particularly in rural areas, bearing in mind that decarbonisation might be an opportunity to rethink accessibility.

A: PM (WECA) felt that the enhanced partnerships are taking on this role, particularly around the bus network, to develop a demand responsive model. He referred to the Westlink concept, which moves away from a fixed timetable, fixed route approach to a more flexible offering. The danger is that this model will cost more than can be afforded, and new funding sources need to be explored; there is a recognition of the social commitment needed and that such services are unlikely to be commercially driven.

MHd (GWR) reported that all new rail stations are fully accessible; the challenge is that some stations remain that are difficult and expensive to make accessible. The vision is to have step free access, where booking ahead for assistance is not necessary.

Q: The panel was asked whether advance planning for passenger communication during periods of disruption in bus and rail could be improved, for example with customer impact assessments.

A: MJ (Network Rail) gave the example of forthcoming work at Old Oak Common and the current planning underway to work together with contractors to cause least disruption to passengers. There is a commitment to thinking differently to minimise the access required and to planning for times when the network is not busy. A Passenger Handling Strategy is being developed but needs more work.

Q: The panel was asked about resilience plans for extreme weather events.

A: MJ (Network Rail) responded that the industry is getting better at developing contingency plans and using data e.g., introducing weather data speed restrictions. Heat resilience work is ongoing. There are two or three taskforces in place, developing plans to tackle these issues.

Q: A question was submitted online for MH on whether a user group representing a number of stations can collectively submit a comment for the ticket office closure consultation process.

A: MH (Transport Focus) confirmed that a group can submit comments. Comments can be submitted in relation to a specific station or about a specific train company's proposal. If comments do not refer to either, they are treated as a national comment.

Q: The panel was asked whether the Temple Mead station project would be delivered on time and to budget.

A: Due to time overrun, it was just possible for MJ (Network Rail) to comment that he was confident that the project would be delivered as planned.

Ensuring transport users are at the centre of policy making and decisions for tomorrow.

A8 Bristol Transport Board and the One City Plan – the vision to 2050

NS invited Melanie Watson (MW), Co-Chair, Bristol Transport Board, Transport Focus, to present on the One City Plan.

MW stated that transport is a key theme within Bristol City Council's One City approach. The City's Transport Board includes partners from the various transport modes and key employers such as NHS, community reps and businesses. The document sets out steps to achieving better cycling and public transport infrastructure, reducing congestion and creating real alternatives for people who live and work in the city.

As well as outlining a longer-term vision for mass transit in the city, the approach sets out some short-term deliverables. Examples provided ranged from freight consolidation to the development of city-wide car clubs, increases in bus lanes, minimising the impact of utility works on the road network and reduction of boarding time in buses etc. A bigger challenge is

encouraging behavioural change and incentives to try out different transport options. Without funding, this is proving difficult.

Transport will continue to face funding challenges and shifts in demand. It is a complex and fragmented network, which can benefit from taking collective responsibility and working together to share messaging, best practice and new ideas. The One City plan provides some stability and vision and is a forum for interested organisations to take a leadership role in delivering change. MW concluded by saying that the approach is about starting to change attitudes and to begin to put in place some thinking about the longer term but balancing this with short term delivery wins.

Metro West and strategic transport plans for the West of England

NS invited Malcolm Parsons (MP), Head of Capital Delivery WECA and Industry Programme Director, Network Rail to talk about the work of the combined authority.

MP's presentation focused on delivery of rail services. Investment in rail through to 2027/28 will be between £250 million and £300 million. There are plans for seven new train stations and for accessibility upgrades to existing stations, including the difficult Lawrence Hill Station site. Of 27 existing stations, 23 are currently accessible. Four enhanced services have been introduced.

A high proportion of investment in rail (69%) is coming from the region. MetroWest Phase 1 is proving challenging to bring within budget, as inflationary pressures continue to impact. The project will cut typical journey times into the city and will deliver 1.2 million additional train journeys. Phase 2 is underway; Ashley Down station has been built, North Filton and Henbury new stations will follow. These new stations will provide the sustainable transport networks needed for the development of new homes. Temple Meads is due to complete by 2026.

Challenges include capital funding pressures. Looking ahead there will be further development and enhancements of stations. Some projects are ongoing to deliver accessibility enhancements. MP's final comment was that the strategy team has a 10-year and a 25-year strategy for rail, which includes the integration of transport modes and moving away from the transport silos of today.

A10 Questions and panel discussion

Q: MW (Bristol Transport Board and Transport Focus) was asked about the development of Bristol's role as a hub for the wider rural community, currently with limited choice except to commute by car.

A: MW replied that hub development is a big issue and thought is being given to hub development by WECA. Unusually, Bristol has many routes across the city, whilst the main rail station is out of the centre, so the geographical nature of the city does not necessarily lend itself to a central hub.

Q: A question was submitted online about LTA's coaching role in delivering a more joined up approach across regions.

A: MP (WECA) referred to the WECA links with North Somerset Council for the BSIP, which is a move towards more cohesive outcomes. Passengers do not recognise the administrative borders and WECA is working with other jurisdictions. It would be useful to move towards integrated ticketing, which would encourage greater flexibility but there is a lot of work to do in this area. There is ongoing engagement with ticketing providers but finding an effective solution is a challenge. The vision is to include all transport modes, including e-scooters, taxis etc, on a ticketing app, which would facilitate a cross-regional approach. It would be useful if technology could provide passengers with an understanding of the CO2 impact of the range of transport choices available.

Q: The panel was asked about their assessment of the key risks to transport delivery over the next couple of years and how operators handle the difficult period between initial investment and increases in service uptake filtering through.

A: MP (WECA) highlighted the financial risk and impact of inflation on budgets for schemes, with a resulting pressure on achieving maximum value for money. Some budgets were agreed before inflation began to take hold. Politics can play a part in influencing scheme delivery, but a strong plan is in place.

Q: This led to a further question for the panel on how to deliver long term investment plans within the challenges of short-term electoral cycles.

A: MW (Bristol Transport Board and Transport Focus) pointed to the value of a collaborative, stakeholder-led partnership such as the Bristol One City approach, which provides a level of stability that makes it less vulnerable to short-term electoral cycles. Stakeholders, rather than politicians, are driving the One City approach.

Q: The point was made to the panel that it is very difficult in practice to deliver workable solutions for freight consolidation, given existing commercial arrangements in place with supermarkets, retailers etc. Has the panel been working with the industry to try to resolve these issues?

A: MW (Bristol Transport Board and Transport Focus) agreed about the importance of long-term thinking and developing solutions in tandem with stakeholders, which is the approach adopted by Bristol City Council. The solution hasn't been reached yet but the discussions are at least underway with the right stakeholders.

Q: Have there been any discussions about lane rental, for example, to utility companies?

A: The panel was not aware of any such discussions but felt that this would be a matter for the unitary authorities in the region. MW (Bristol Transport Board and Transport Focus) acknowledged that the utility issue is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

Q: The panel was asked whether the much talked about proposal for re-opening the rail line to Portishead was likely to be delivered.

A: MP (WECA) stated that he was very supportive of the proposal and would be keen to work with colleagues in Network Rail to see it delivered.

Q: Whilst confirmation of the Gravity plant is very positive, is it likely that there will be a connection by rail, rather than having to upgrade the M5 to cope with increased volumes of traffic on roads to transport batteries?

A: MP (WECA) stated that Gravity is outside the combined authority's region. He was able to confirm that there is a disused railway connection at the site; he felt it would make sense for government to consider a sustainable transport link, given the carbon impact implications.

Q: The panel was asked whether there had been disability impact assessments around ticket office closures since this issue is causing anxiety within the disabled community. Also, could the panel provide clarity on bus service outlook because many disabled people find it impossible to access services?

A: MH (Transport Focus) confirmed that train companies should have done disability impact assessments and they should soon be available on websites. Transport Focus will be looking closely at this issue and is aware that this is likely to be a significant issue in the consultation. NS commented that whilst various funding pots are in place for bus services, this has not yet filtered through to improve integration across the network. Transport Focus will take the issue on board and continue to raise it in discussions with operators.

Inspiring future thinking

NS outlined the role of Transport Focus in taking a leadership role in developing thinking about transport needs in the future and invited Ian Wright, Head of Innovation and Partnerships at Transport Focus to provide some insights.

IW referred to work on The Future of Transport report, which is soon to be published. The report looks at how broader societal trends over the next 30 years will impact upon transport needs. Experts from a range of different fields including demographics and technology provided their insights to the research. Given that change in transport tends to be slow, considering evolving societal needs at the early policy development, planning and design phases will deliver a more inclusive network. Transport Focus will run an event later in the year to present its thoughts on how changing passenger needs might shape the Future of Transport.

Part B Corporate Affairs

B1 Public Board Meeting Minutes: March 2023

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 29 March 2023 were **agreed** as a true and accurate record.

B2 Committee meeting minutes

B2.1 Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (April and June 2023)

The minutes of the meetings held on 18 April 2023 and 13 June 2023 were **agreed**.

B2.2 Statistics Governance Group (redacted) (March and June 2023)

The minutes of the meetings held on 15 March 2023 and 16 June 2023 were **agreed**.

B2.3 Passenger Contact Group (redacted) (April 2023)

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 April 2023 were **agreed**.

B3 Reports from subsidiaries:

B3.1 Transport Focus Scotland (June 2023)

The report was **noted**.

B4 For noting by the Board:

Items previously discussed and approved out of meeting or in private session were **approved**:

B4.1 BRD2223-020 (SRUS 2023-24

B4.2 BRD2324-001 (Manchester Office)

B4.3 BRD2324-002 (Transport Focus Wales Ltd: parent company guarantee)

B4.4 BRD2324-003 (Transport Focus/ London TravelWatch Collaboration Agreement) 2023-24

B4.5 BRD2324-004 (riding, walking and wheeling research 2023-25)

B4.6 BRD2324-005 (annual report and accounts 2022-23)

B5 Items for approval

None

B6 Any other (public) business

There being no further business, public or otherwise, NS thanked all those who had attended the event and expressed his gratitude to all the speakers and the planning team for a very useful event.

The meeting closed at 1236 hrs.

Signed as an accurate record of the meeting:

Nigel Stevens, Chair

Date