

# North Somerset Council

## **Report to the**

## **Transport, Climate and Communities Policy and Scrutiny Panel**

### **Date of Meeting:**

20 July 2023

### **Subject of Report:**

WESTlink Services and 3-month review

### **Town or Parish: n/a**

### **Officer/Member Presenting:**

Louis Mertens, Principal Transportat Planning Officer

Carl Nicholson, Services Manager for Passenger Transport

### **Key Decision:**

None to take

### **Reason:**

This report is an update report that references a project that is ongoing.

### **Recommendations**

None, this is an update report.

## **1. Summary of Report**

The WESTlink service is a positive and popular improvement to the public transport offer in North Somerset and the West of England. It provides demand responsive public transport to parts of the area that don't have or have never had public transport services.

WESTlink is a trial demand responsive transport service. It is funded by the Bus Service Improvement Plan until 2025. All demand responsive transport services are unique to their geography and demographic, and as such it is always anticipated that changes must be made over time to maximise service efficiency and performance.

North Somerset Council and the West of England Combined Authority have agreed that the service should be subject to a regular review period of three months, to decide appropriate changes in response to the data and public feedback.

There is currently a three-month review of the service taking place which is intended to report by the beginning of September.

This report introduces to the committee the first three-month review for the WESTlink service, as well as public feedback sought by the chair of the committee.

## **2. Policy**

The delivery of demand responsive transport services is a key feature of the Bus Service Improvement Plan, and more broadly supports the objectives of the North Somerset Council Corporate Plan by improving transport and connectivity in areas of the district not served by public transport, particularly in rural areas which is addressed as a key challenge by the corporate plan.

## **3. Details**

Full detail of the report can be found in the appendices.

## **4. Consultation**

The project is delivered by the West of England Combined Authority in partnership with North Somerset Council as part of the Bus Services Improvement Plan. The BSIP includes its own arrangements for engagement and consultation, including through the enhanced partnership.

On WESTlink, feedback is regularly received by officers from councillors to inform the development of the service, and community engagement has been delivered by officers which has also captured feedback from members of the public. All feedback will be considered as part of the first 3-month evaluation.

## **5. Financial Implications**

WESTlink is fully funded out of the Bus Service Improvement Plan funding, awarded jointly to the West of England Combined Authority and North Somerset Council by the Department for Transport.

The contract for WESTlink is between the West of England Combined Authority, the technology provider and the operator respectively.

## **6. Legal Powers and Implications**

None to note, contract is not held by North Somerset Council

## **7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications**

WESTlink promises to fill a gap in existing public transport provision that will make public transport a much more attractive solution to members of the public in North Somerset and the West of England.

## **8. Risk Management**

Risks for WESTlink are managed at a BSIP project and programme level by the West of England Combined Authority.

## **9. Equality Implications**

An equality impact assessment has been undertaken for the Bus Service Improvement Plan, and for the DDRT project (the original WESTlink pilot) by the West of England Combined Authority.

Impact assessments will be completed for the 3-month review of WESTlink before changes are delivered.

## **10. Corporate Implications**

None to note, beyond contributing to modal shift in the district which has clear positive implications for sustainable development and climate change.

## **11. Options Considered**

Options for development of the service are outlined in Appendix 1.

### **Author:**

Carl Nicholson, Services Manager for Passenger Transport

Louis Mertens, Principal Transport Planning Officer (Behaviour Change)

### **Appendices:**

Appendix 1. WESTlink Demand Responsive Transport Services (South Zone) Report, 20 July 2023

### **Background Papers:**

[West of England Bus Services Improvement Plan](#)

# Appendix 1. WESTlink, Demand Responsive Transport Services (South Zone) report, 20 July 2023

By: Louis Mertens, Principal Transport Planning Officer (Behaviour Change)  
Carl Nicholson, Head of Passenger Transport Services

**Directorate: Place Directorate**

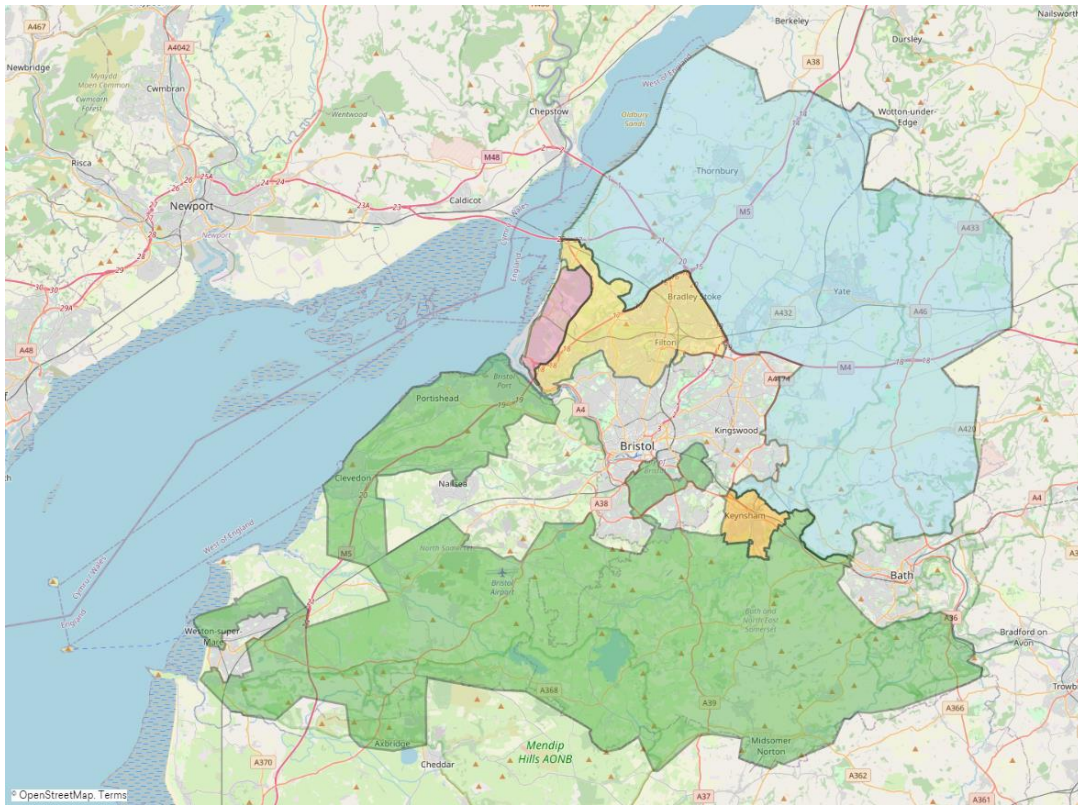


## 1. Summary

- 1.1 The WESTlink service is a positive and popular improvement to the public transport offer in North Somerset and the West of England. It provides demand responsive public transport to parts of the area that don't have or have never had public transport services.
- 1.2 WESTlink is a trial demand responsive transport service. It is funded by the Bus Service Improvement Plan until 2025. All demand responsive transport services are unique to their geography and demographic, and as such it is always anticipated that changes must be made over time to maximise service efficiency and performance.
- 1.3 North Somerset Council and the West of England Combined Authority have agreed that the service should be subject to a regular review period of three months, to decide appropriate changes in response to the data and public feedback.
- 1.4 There is currently a three-month review of the service taking place which is intended to report by the beginning of September.
- 1.5 This report introduces to scrutiny the first three-month review for the WESTlink service, as well as public feedback sought by the chair of the committee.**

## 2. Introduction

- 2.1 WESTlink is a demand responsive transport service being delivered in the West of England and North Somerset by the West of England Combined Authority, with input from North Somerset Council. It is funded by UK Government bus service improvement funding won in the bus service improvement plan bid submitted jointly by North Somerset Council and the West of England Combined Authority.
- 2.2 A demand responsive transport service is a ride-share service which typically uses small-medium size buses and operates across a zone in response to demand, rather than on a fixed route with a timetable. Demand responsive transport technologies allow users to submit requests for bookings, for those to be confirmed or refused based on availability, and for those journey needs to be met by the service.
- 2.3 The objective of WESTlink is to fill the gaps in fixed line bus services, and to feed customers into the scheduled bus network through shorter local journeys and connection to hubs and interchanges.
- 2.4 In the South Zone, which covers most of North Somerset Council area and Bath and North East Somerset Council, the service is contracted to WeMOVE Solutions, who sub-contract to Via Transportation to provide the technology to run the service and to E-Zec to operate the buses. WeMOVE Solutions provide the call-centre, in house.
- 2.5 The contract for WESTlink is between the West of England Combined Authority, Via Transportation and WeMOVE Solutions. However, North Somerset Councils officers work with the West of England Combined Authority, Via and WeMOVE Solutions in order to advise and feedback on the service.



### 3. Public Feedback

3.1. Since the service launched, public feedback has been collected through a number of channels:

3.1.1. Community engagement on the WESTlink service has been prioritised to help people understand how to use the service and to gather feedback to inform the first three-month evaluation. To this end officers have completed 17 community engagement events across North Somerset.

3.1.2. The WESTlink app also requests a user rating for each journey. This continues to report an average ride rating of 4.8 out of 5 from people completing journeys on the service. This is consistent for the South Zone and the whole service, meaning that most people completing journeys and completing the survey on the service are rating it highly. Across the whole service, there are about 730 responses to date.

3.1.3. Feedback submitted to the West of England Combined Authority is logged and as well as any feedback that is inadvertently received through North Somerset email channels, including to officers.

3.2. In addition to this, The West of England Combined Authority have developed a user survey that will be distributed to all WESTlink users to complete in the near future. This will help to gain a clearer picture of its reception amongst people who hold an account for the service. The responses to this survey will be used to inform the future evaluations of the service.

## 4. Key Themes of Public Feedback

Throughout our engagement with the public on WESTlink, a range of key themes have emerged.

### 4.1. Positive

- 4.1.1. "I like that there are new places to go to".
- 4.1.2. "I like the fact it only costs £2 to go wherever I want".
- 4.1.3. "I like that I can get a bus within the hour, if there's one available".
- 4.1.4. "I like having the real time information on the app".
- 4.1.5. "It's really helpful having the call centre to confirm a journey, this gives me confidence".
- 4.1.6. "It came exactly when it said it would".
- 4.1.7. "the driver was great, and really friendly".
- 4.1.8. "the call centre were great, and really friendly".

### 4.2. Negative

- 4.2.1. "It arrived later than I thought it would / it said it would".
- 4.2.2. "I can't get a journey when I want one".
- 4.2.3. "I see them go past, but they're often empty".
- 4.2.4. "I don't feel like I can rely on the service when I need to".
- 4.2.5. "I'm worried that I won't be able to get back, after my outbound trip".
- 4.2.6. "I'm worried I'll be late to work, or time critical appointments".
- 4.2.7. "I'm worried the service won't be able to support itself and will be withdrawn".
- 4.2.8. "I wasn't clear on where it would pick me up".
- 4.2.9. "It gave me a pickup location but I wasn't sure where that was."

### 4.3. In a very few cases, customers have also reported:

- 4.3.1. The operator calling them to explain they can no longer meet a journey they had agreed to and delaying the journey by up to an hour.
- 4.3.2. Journeys taking longer routes than expected to take them to their destination.
- 4.3.3. Long call centre waiting times.
- 4.3.4. Lack of assistance from drivers.

4.4. North Somerset Council, and the West England Combined Authority have raised each of these issues with the operator, and as much as possible have investigated them using data fed back from the service. North Somerset Council access to WESTlink data is currently limited whilst both organisations pursue a data-sharing agreement. However, anonymised service performance data is intermittently being shared with North Somerset Council, in good faith.

4.5. The data confirms certain concerns raised by customers, such as availability of the service (met demand) which is improving over time. However, it also shows that some of the issues mentioned by customers in paragraph 4.3 are not common occurrences. Other issues concerning journeys taking longer than expected and a lack of assistance offered by

drivers are difficult to validate with data alone but are investigated on a case-by-case basis.

## **5. 3-month review criteria**

- 5.1. There is currently a three-month review of the service taking place between officers at North Somerset Council, the West of England Combined Authority, and the operator. The first review is intended to report by the beginning of September.
- 5.2. A review of the service is to take place every three months of operation. Each three-month review will help the West of England Combined Authority and North Somerset Council to agree short, medium and long-term changes. The public feedback captured above will help to inform these changes, alongside a review of the data being fed back from the service, officer expertise and input from the operator and technology partners.
- 5.3. The scope of the three-month review includes:
  - 5.3.1. **System parameters**
    - This includes a review of booking windows, arrival times, and acceptable route detouring which means how far the system will allow a bus to deviate from a route it is on, in order to accommodate journeys from another passenger.
  - 5.3.2. **Fares models**
    - Considering whether distance-based pricing could be used to help improve service performance and encourage shorter trips in line with the service objectives.
  - 5.3.3. **Ticket integration**
    - Consideration of the potential timescales for through ticketing or MAAS based ticketing, and the impact on the service.
  - 5.3.4. **Communications and marketing**
    - Review of how potential communications and marketing activities might impact on service performance.
  - 5.3.5. **Customer feedback**
    - Development of a WESTlink passenger survey.
    - Consideration of any gaps in feedback gathering, and how they might be filled.
  - 5.3.6. **Travel logic**
    - Reviewing zones, to understand the likely impact of splitting the south zone into a series of smaller zones.
    - Introducing key drop-off points that have been investigated.
  - 5.3.7. **Fleet mix**
    - In the long term, consider whether additional smaller vehicles would help to improve the efficiency of the service.
  - 5.3.8. **App changes**



- Consideration of any changes to messaging in app, or user journey in order to improve customer experience.

#### **5.3.9. Operating hours**

- Consideration of whether additional funding can be acquired to increase the operating hours of the service, and whether there is enough resource to support this.

#### **5.3.10. Drivers**

- Consideration of what additional support drivers might want to assist them in their delivery of the service.

### **5.4. Short-term**

5.4.1. A number of short-term changes, that fall within scope of the review have already been introduced. These will be reviewed again at the next review cycle to ensure that they are still the most appropriate options for the service. These include:

- a) Extend booking window search by -30 mins and +30 mins

This allows more options to be made available to people searching for journey opportunities in the app, which means that while the exact journey they want to make might not be available, they're now able to see more journey opportunities that might be taking place just before the time they were seeking to depart by.

- b) Improving traffic data

The source of traffic data has recently been changed to provide a more accurate and up to date reflection of traffic across the WESTlink zones. This means that drivers are more likely to be offered routes to follow that avoid difficult congestion spots, allowing lateness to improve and free-up resource.

- c) Increasing detour to prioritise utilisation

At launch, the service prioritised "quality of service" to offer more direct trips to customers. The system parameters on this have been adjusted which means while some customers will experience longer journeys than they had previously, WESTlink is able to accommodate more journey requests.

### **5.6. Medium-term**

5.6.1. Without prematurely anticipating the outcome of the evaluation, the following are the key options being considered to improve service performance and deliver on the objectives of WESTlink. These changes will take longer to introduce and are therefore being considered for the medium term:

- a) Investigate a distance-based pricing model

A distance-based pricing model would move WESTlink away from a fares structure that charges £2 for every journey. Distance-based pricing is used in both conventional bus services and is common across other DRT services. Distance-based pricing means that the service might charge £2 for journeys up until a range, and then charge over £2 for journeys longer than X kilometres. Officers are conscious that while price is a powerful lever for influencing behaviour, it needs to be ensured that it won't penalise people who live in exceptionally rural areas and will need to travel further to reach amenities. Full impact assessments will be made before decisions are made.

b) Investigate journey caps

A journey cap would limit the distance a user can travel to in a single journey, based on their origin. This means that each user will have a different range of potential journey destinations depending on where they start from, which might map more closely with the range of networks of places that people are used to travelling to.

Introducing journey caps would reduce the amount of distance a bus is travelling, meaning they can be more responsive to different journey demands and can return to a settlement quicker than they might be able to if they were to be taken out of the area on longer journeys.

c) Splitting and reducing zones sizes

An alternative to introducing a hard journey cap, would be to split the South Zone into smaller zones, each with their own smaller and committed bus fleet. This would have the advantage of ensuring that buses don't stray far from any pattern of journeys in each area, but new zones would need to be carefully drawn to ensure that populations were not severed from amenities closer to them that they typically travel to.

d) Reviewing South Zone, and split Bristol Zone from South Zone, introduce Long Ashton Park and Ride

This is an "easy-win" for demand management with WESTlink. Long Ashton Park and Ride is frequently fed back to the project team as a destination that people want to travel to. Introducing the park and ride and splitting parts of the Bristol zones from the South Zone, would improve service availability for both areas, in part because it would prevent WESTlink buses from being caught in congestion in Bristol. The Long Ashton Park and Ride, as a key service interchange location, also fits the base model and criteria of the DRT.