

# **Bus passengers told “use it or lose it”**

**The message to the West Lothian public who have been thrown a bus service lifeline by Lothian Country is “use it or lose it”, a veteran Labour councillor said today.**

Cllr Tom Conn’s comments come less than a week after Lothian Country announced it was tendering for two new services and extending a third to take on routes which McGill’s are giving up.

Councillors around the chamber in Livingston welcomed the decision to launch the new services which largely cover areas served by McGill’s.

Public Transport Manager Nicola Gill won agreement from the council’s Executive to pursue tender processes for routes which will not feature in the new services announced by Lothian Country.

The bulk of services routes which were scheduled to lose services will now see them retained thanks to Lothian Country’s intervention. Gaps will remain though mainly in the western end of the country around Blackridge and Armadale.

The council plans to put these out to tender this week and report back to the Executive before the December deadline.

In her report to the Executive Mrs Gill said: “Lothian Country have stated it is their intention to launch these new services commercially with customer numbers monitored very closely to

ensure that there is sufficient demand to justify their continued operation.

“Commercial viability can only be achieved should there be sufficient patronage and use of the new services.”

Councillor Tom Conn, Executive Councillor for Environment and Sustainability last week joined Council Leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick in a meeting with Màiri McAllan MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition alongside council officers and officials from Transport Scotland to discuss the bus crisis. He asked Mrs Gill if Lothian Country’s close monitoring of service the patronage and commercial viability of the new services they were introducing would be a “use it or lose it” scenario.

She agreed. Mrs Gill detailed the meeting with the minister and Transport Scotland: “The key points discussed at the meeting included the impact on passengers and communities following the removal of McGill’s bus services as well as the subsequent impact on health, employment and businesses within the area.

“Additionally, the meeting discussed the wider challenges within the public transport industry and the long-term effects of not having a sustainable local bus network. It was agreed that joint working is required to help improve the situation and, where possible, identify solutions which will support the local bus network in West Lothian.

“It was also agreed that further discussions would be needed and a meeting date would be arranged for the coming weeks.”

A report to the Executive highlighted: “The only contracts affected by the recent commercial changes are LBS 10 Blackridge – Armadale (including Armadale West of cross), and LBS 23 Greenrigg to Whitburn, which were handed back by McGill’s and now due to end on 2 December 2023.

“It is recommended that a tender exercise is undertaken to understand the operational capacity and operational costs of providing a subsidised service in these areas.”

Councillor Andrew McGuire who represents Armadale and Blackridge ward thanked Mrs McGill and her team for the work they had put in to support the bus network.

He added: “The Scottish Government has ignored the most basic and fundamental form of public transport. The bus network subsidy has not increased since 2012 and the commercial bus network and communities are crying out for support, yet the Scottish Government subsidises middle class rail users.”

Cllr Kirsteen Sullivan pointed to the semi-rural geography of West Lothian which meant that many could not “hop on a train”.

She added: “We’ve heard a lot about free bus passes. You can have all bus passes you want but if there’s no buses they really serve no purpose whatsoever. I think there has been a failure to understand how critical buses are to local communities. We have a semi rural geography. Not everyone can hop on a train so buses are vital to take people to their place of employment, to take people to hospital, to take people to college, to take people to shop and for social purposes. If there are no buses then people are cut off from daily life.

“There has to be a major rethink and investment put into the bus network similar to that put into rail services.”

SNP depute group leader Councillor Robert de Bold said: “This is my regular reminder to the meeting that austerity emanates from Westminster and that accounts for the majority of the shortfall in funding for most services.”

Cllr Conn welcomed the Lothian Country intervention but described it as a “work in progress” to maintain and restore bus services across the county.

by Stuart Somerville Local Democracy Reporter



Lothian Country bus