

# **Councillors in West Lothian slate Scottish Government review on public transport**

**Councillors in West Lothian have  
slated a Scottish Government review  
on public transport as “fluff with  
no substance”**

Labour veteran Tom Conn blasted the recently published Fair Fares Review, saying it offered nothing on ways to improve bus services.

And Conservative Alison Adamson said it treated rural counties like West Lothian as “country bumpkins” and contained nothing to help communities.

Transport Scotland said all communities had been consulted, not only urban centres, to prepare the review.

The county has faced major disruption to its bus services over the last two years with many outlying communities losing what little transport links they had to population hubs such as Bathgate and Livingston.

Last year McGill’s gave up all services in the county potentially leaving the district without a large-scale operator. Lothian Country have since expanded their operations into West Lothian to fill the gap.

The Fair Fares Review promised short term solutions, but crucially it did not suggest ways of investing in bus services in the way the government has by cutting peak rail fares.

A summary of the review was delivered by Keith Muirhead, Interim Passenger Transport Manager.

On buses the review goes little beyond acknowledging the issues.

It says: "With bus operator income dependent on patronage levels and passengers fares in a reduced market with the unreliability and vulnerability of services, there needs to be a more comprehensive system change.

"The bus network in many parts of the country faces serious challenges with operators prioritising their investment in more commercially viable routes and services in order to ensure a sustainable operating model and with Councils increasingly unable to restore socially necessary services which reduces the benefit of free bus travel.

"The new bus powers to run services, develop bus improvement partnerships and develop franchises can and will provide alternative models but the challenge of public finance subsidy is likely to remain regardless of the system."

The review said: "We will develop a proposal for a bus flat fares pilot for an area-based scheme to provide flat fares on bus travel, or reduced fares on zonal integrated travel for consideration in future budgets."

Councillor Conn, chairing a meeting of the Environment and Sustainability Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel, said the review did nothing to improve the standing of buses in public transport while it continued to support subsidised rail services.

He suggested that the impression councils had been given during the review was that it would address the disparities. "In any discussions we have had with government ministers we were always told to wait for the Fair Fares Review."

He said that disparity needs to be addressed. "Most people in West Lothian need access to a bus service to get somewhere else, including to a railway station.

"I have to say I am extremely disappointed with the Fair Fares Review because it doesn't give us an indication if there would be any support to try and develop a better integrated bus and rail service within West Lothian. It's a document with fluff but no substance.

Councillor Conn pointed out that the council spends £2.1m a year on subsidised bus services. This is not statutory for councils, but it does so to sustain and protect communities.

"We really need others to step up and support communities which need public transport," he added.

Councillor Diane Calder said the committee was forgetting free travel for young people and over sixties the government had introduced. She pointed out that when some parts of her ward in Uphall and Broxburn lost bus services she was told that private companies paid for buses, not the council.

Councillor Conn said: "There's no point in having Under 22 concessionary travel if there's no buses. We all know what the solution is but we are not working the same route to get there."

Councillor Adamson said: "The whole point is that in West Lothian we are treated as the country bumpkins. We don't have the same kind of transport facilities available in cities. I prefer to use trains but, as the chair pointed out, people need to get to the stations.

"Because we don't have sufficient funding to provide the sort of bus services people want to have, it's impossible for people to jump on a bus to jump on a train."

A spokesperson said for Transport Scotland said: "The Fair

Fares Review sets out a range of recommendations and actions to be taken to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares that supports the future long-term viability of a public transport system that is more accessible, available, and affordable for people throughout Scotland.

“The Review was informed by the views of stakeholders with lived experience from urban, rural and island communities and includes recommendations for improved integration between bus, rail and ferry. It includes the development of options for the introduction of a national or regional public transport ticket that is valid across all modes of public transport.”

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter