

Transport for Greater Bristol Bristol's dearth of transport planning

Newcomers to Bristol remark what a good place it is to visit and indeed to live. But they notice too it has no decent public transport system, and the traffic is congested. Compared to other big cities, its transport planning seems in a time warp.

In issue 4 of Better Bristol (spring 2014) we published a map of how the city centre could operate if its transport were organised in a modern manner. At the time, the Mayor was said to be thinking along similar lines. So what happened? Why no progress? The reasons are several.

Bristol's "planning" is effectively random. It operates on the "let's apply for a one-off grant if one's going" principle. No lessons appear to have been learnt from the unpopular Bus Rapid Transit (now MetroBus) fiasco, which will see city residents subsidising out-of-town commuters.

Crucially, Bristol, unlike other metropolitan areas, has no team of skilled transport planning professionals. We are as yet still not a Passenger Transport Executive / ITA / Combined Authority. The self-interested suburban authorities of South Gloucestershire and North Somerset over-ride the city's aspirations. There is a touching belief in private transport consultants. Our city in other words suffers from a severe democratic deficit.

Local MetroRail investment is virtually on hold due to the prior claim of the embarrassing MetroBus. A Workplace Parking Levy - which in Nottingham funds their trams – has yet to be adopted.

While there has been an unsung improvement in normal bus services, with more people using them, there are troubles ahead here too. The Traffic Manager has increased road capacity by updating the traffic signals, but installed few extra bus-lanes or bus-only streets. This encourages general traffic: which before long will slow the buses down again. Backstreet "rat runs" are tolerated.

The timidity of our traffic engineers is such that although a 20 mph speed limit is being expanded, it is now beginning to omit the very roads – the main traffic distributors – where accidents actually occur. An annual road accident map must be published for public discussion, as it was in in the first Bristol Local Transport Plan.

The planning of buses and the future MetroRail are not integrated, most obviously in the lack of bus interchanges at Temple Meads and at Filton Abbey Wood stations. MetroRail is seen as peripheral – with only a 30 or 60 minute frequency target – rather than as essential. Hard negotiation with the Port of Bristol and with South Gloucestershire to achieve the reopening of the Avonmouth-Henbury-Filton Abbey Wood Loop has yet to occur.

There is a fear of of constructively engaging with users. Transport planning has to be negotiation, not public relations. Net result: the city does not "do" – or "get" – transport planning. Councillors, the Mayor and some fresh officers should take themselves off to Nottingham, Sheffield, Manchester, Bordeaux or anywhere in Holland, to "look and learn".

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