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Executive Summary: A New Transport Plan for the Bristol Region

A Plan

What does Bristol need to provide a transport system fit for the 21st century? The detailed answer is long, but here's the short version. We need:

- an expanded **rapid transit system**, combining rail with new on-street tram routes, integrated with an improved **bus network**;
- better **road management**, eliminating 'rat runs', repurposing main roads, and creating liveable neighbourhoods; and
- strict management of **parking**.

These are the key ingredients of four Plans prepared by *Transport for Greater Bristol*. They cover **rapid transit, buses, traffic management and parking** in four documents. But these four need to be considered together, just as the transport system needs to be considered holistically. Only an integrated approach can help us move toward key goals – reducing car use, decarbonising transport and equal access to mobility for all.

Here we summarise the essential elements of these Plans, which you [can download](#) to consider in full. They are not in final form but show what could be achieved and offer a basis for further development. We want them to start a conversation about a system which has served Bristol and the surrounding region poorly for too long. That conversation becomes more urgent with COVID19 highlighting the possibilities of digital connectivity and home working, as we recognise the health cost of poor air quality, and to serve the climate policies in Bristol City Council's One City Climate Strategy and in the West of England Combined Authority (WECA)'s own climate emergency response. That conversation, and action following from it, needs to start now.

Where would it get us?

We envision a city in which everyone who walks and cycles feels safe on the streets, neighbourhoods are green and quiet and people know their neighbours. Children can play safely, we breathe clean air, and we hear birdsong more than traffic. A city where everyone can get to where they need to, affordably and quickly, whether they live in the centre or the outskirts. Where people who can't afford to (or chose not to) own a car can get to places of employment and access the town centre. Where active travel and public transport are the obvious choice, and community mobility services are accessible to everyone. Achieving all of this would take us a long way towards achieving our air quality and climate emergency targets. So how do we get there?

Bringing back the trams

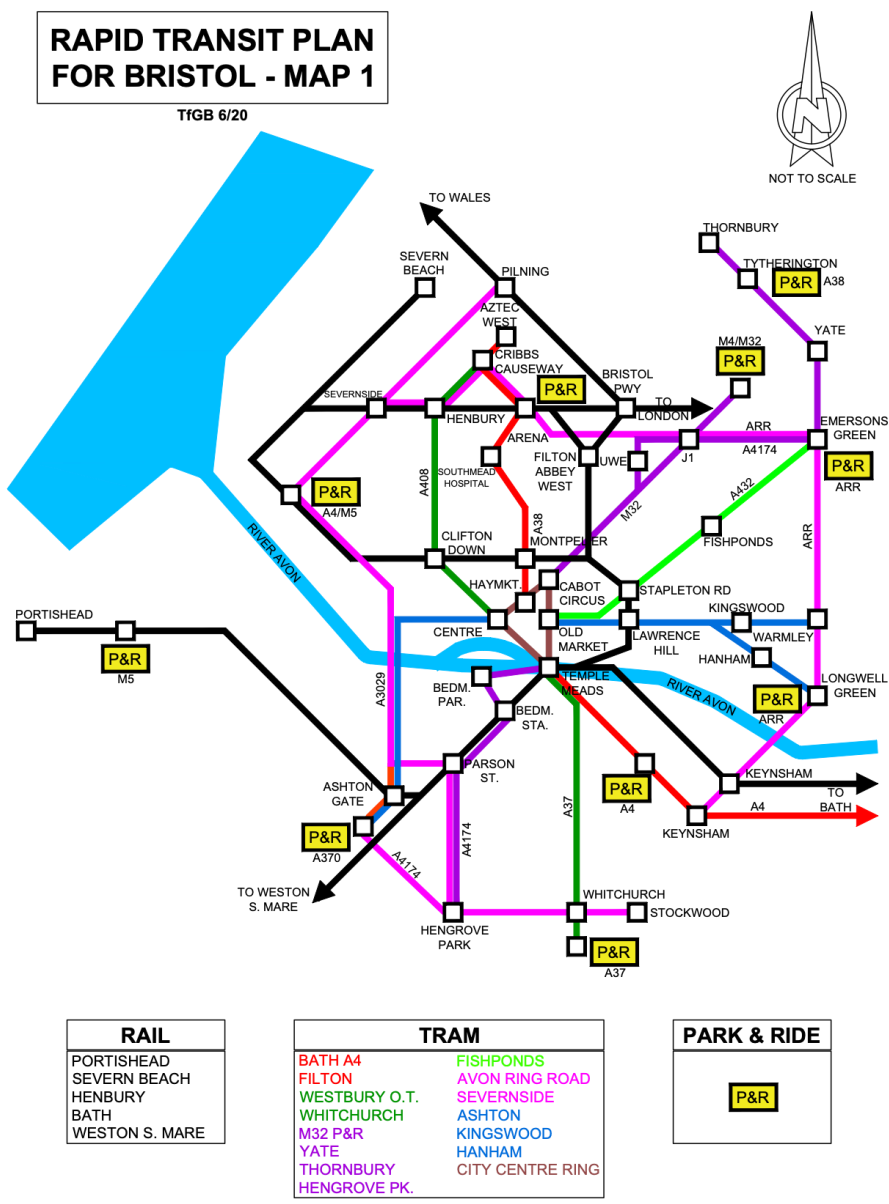
Bristol was built around trams. Bedminster Parade, Whiteladies Rd, Gloucester Rd, Fishponds Rd, Lawrence Hill, Bath Rd and Wells Rd all had trams. Other cities – Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Nottingham, Croydon, Edinburgh and soon Cardiff – are following successful European cities and seeing modern, comfortable, efficient trams return. Bristol has no such plan. So we've drawn one up.

We already have suburban railways that can be adapted. We want to enhance train services to **Avonmouth**, to **Henbury** (new station) and **Filton Abbey Wood**, to **Yate** (with new stations at **Ashley Down**, etc.), to **Weston super Mare** (via **Bedminster** and **Parson St**) and to **Bath** (with a new station at **St Anne's**). Reopen the **Portishead** line (as already agreed, but with a station at **Ashton Gate**). Reopen the lines from **Thornbury** via Yate (where connection can be made for Temple Meads), and thence via the Westerleigh freight line to **Emerson's Green**, and alongside the Avon Ring Road and M32 into the city centre. And the old **Clevedon** line to the mainline at Yatton. But that still misses out much of the built-up mass of Bristol – which is where bringing back the trams comes in.

We begin with the already agreed reopening of the Portishead rail line, and the proposed reopening of the Henbury to Filton Abbey Wood rail link. We look forward to the early opening of services to the **Brabazon Arena**, first via rail to both Temple Meads and Bristol Parkway, but later also by a tram service down Gloucester Rd to the city centre. In the city centre, trams can return to the **Centre** via **Haymarket**, but also connect to **Temple Meads** station on-street in a city centre circuit via Temple Way and Victoria St. Other early on-street tram lines

would be to **Hengrove Park** via Redcliffe Way, **Bedminster Parade** and Hartcliffe Way; and to **Bath** via the Bath Rd and **Keynsham**.

The **M32** and the **Avon Ring Road**, currently pouring traffic and pollution into Bristol city centre and the North Fringe, in the future should include tram routes taking at least one traffic lane, and link to a **Park & Ride** site near the M4 as well as serve hitherto car-dependent sites including **Longwell Green** retail centre and the **Bristol & Bath Science Park**. A service should also link South Bristol to the employment opportunities of **Sevenside**, via Ashton Gate and Portway.



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Buses that interconnect

Where there are no tram or rail lines, there can be buses. TfGB's *Bus Plan* was submitted in 2018 to the City Council and to First Bus, who have at least in part accepted our recommendations. They include:

- comprehensive **bus-lanes** along all the main routes;
- '**bus hubs**' in the suburbs, at rail stations and in the city centre where bus services can interconnect;
- '**orbital**' **bus routes** linking these hubs between corridors (at the moment accessible only via the city centre); and
- '**feeder buses**' linking suburban hubs to their local residential areas, but not having to go the congested the city centre.

Other essential improvements include **interchangeable ticketing** to speed up buses and enhance their reliability, and better bus **information systems**.

Progress is slow because of a lack of co-ordinated planning in the West of England. WECA as Transport Authority needs actively to take responsibility – as occurs in other cities – for planning bus services, clearing traffic jams from their routes and achieving an integrated ticketing system making multi-service journeys practicable.

Tackling Bristol's 'rat-runs'

Mass transit and better integrated buses are necessary but we will not achieve a significant modal shift – persuading fewer people to choose to use their cars for most journeys – unless **traffic is better managed**. At the moment, every part of the city has '**rat-runs**': unsuitable roads that get jammed with through-traffic they were never designed for. There are many examples. Just one: the last good traffic data we have shows Ashley Down Road in Bishopston carries more traffic than the nearby designated 'A' road, the A38 Gloucester Rd.

These traffic flows are entirely uncontrolled and often unmeasured. Tackling them will rely on a 'road hierarchy', identifying – after public debate – those routes on which traffic is more acceptable. The TfGB plan initiates this with a **draft road hierarchy map**. We propose cutting each major rat-run by means of judicious road closures that maintain local industrial and residential access and bus services, while prohibiting extraneous through-traffic. This is a delicate process requiring much discussion with residents.

Parking

Another issue is parking. People only drive if they have somewhere to park. At the moment this too is a free-for-all. The city centre is full of underground office car parking. Building sites get used as temporary commuter car parks. Several areas that still lack **Residents Only Parking Zones** get filled with commuter cars.

Our plan proposes:

- Expanding the **Park & Ride** system (where necessary by the Compulsory Purchase of sites), most notably to the M32 and A37;
- a **Workplace Parking Levy** (like Nottingham's, which uses it partially to fund their trams), while protecting small businesses and providing the City Council with an independent income stream. This would incentivise office managers to reuse their car parking space for something more sustainable.

Walking and cycling

The most sustainable forms of transport are of course walking and cycling. The TfGB plan fully supports the City Council's expansion of segregated commuter and leisure cycleways. The closure of rat-runs offers an additional set of calmed cycle routes, at low cost.

Pedestrians would enjoy calmer streets within their neighbourhoods, and safer routes to school and to local shops. The shopping centres themselves need attention. Several small inner city local centres could easily be pedestrianised: **St Mark's Rd, Mina Rd, Picton St, Cotham Hill and West St** by Old Market, as indeed the Council has already partially planned under Covid measures. The larger traditional centres – **Gloucester Rd, Fishponds, Stapleton Rd** in Easton, **Kingswood, Redfield, Wells Rd, Bedminster Parade, Whiteladies Rd** – need bus-gates (later becoming in some cases tram-gates). Each site presents its own challenges which need to be fully addressed locally. Full calming of Bristol will occur gradually, as we gradually control traffic and parking, encourage cycling, and invest in rail, buses and then trams.

Our greatest concentration of pedestrians is the city centre. Here we propose the removal of all private through-traffic from within the Inner Ring Road, introducing an access loop system for servicing vehicles, and a defined bus (and future tram) circuit to reduce the impact of too many circulating buses.

Occasionally dramatic intervention is justified to enhance Bristol's tourism offer. We thus propose the pedestrianisation of **Clifton Suspension Bridge**. Thus would

not only reduce traffic through Clifton, but increase the life of this venerable bridge by a measurable number of decades. And less spectacularly, **Merchants Rd Bridge** and **Prince St Bridge**, congestion points on the round–Harbourside path, to be made bus, cycle and pedestrians only as appropriate.

Inherent conflicts between walkers and cyclists where both are numerous have been largely successfully addressed in Castle Park, but not yet within the Centre. Here, redesign is required for pedestrian convenience and safety.

A better way

These plans, if co–ordinated and implemented carefully, in stages, could achieve a connected set of improvements.

They would **protect neighbourhoods and suburban centres**. Bristol’s city streets were once places of social interchange. They can be again, with the right planning, making neighbourhoods more liveable. **Liveable neighbourhoods** are permeable to pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users, and accessible by car and commercial vehicle; but closed to through–traffic by private motor vehicles. This depends on a network of walking and cycling routes, and an integrated public transport network, including new mass transit.

Bristol’s road network needs to be better managed. The city centre and local suburban centres can be transformed, by removing them the through–traffic network. This can be achieved with bus–gates, sometimes full pedestrianisation. Servicing access can be controlled by time, weight, and/or approach route. In some streets, cyclists may be required to dismount. In each case, ways need to be found so local traffic can circulate while connection with the wider world maintained.

Our goal is a **continuous, signposted, safe and attractive movement network** throughout the city, for each separate mode of travel. We must **integrate these networks** so that multi–modal trips become viable – the only mode for which this exists now is the private car.

Each neighbourhood would be linked to all other neighbourhoods via such networks. But car drivers could no longer assume a straight route from any place ‘A’ to any other place ‘B’, since too often that takes them directly through another person’s home neighbourhood. Instead, their trip begins at the nearest part of

the main road network, and continues until they come to the edge of their destination neighbourhood.

This simultaneously can deliver an increase in **efficiency of the principal through-traffic arteries**. More important roads should be allowed to operate as such, without uncontrolled rat-runs compromising their junction capacity. Eliminating rat-runs will mean less main-road delays through intersecting traffic; probably less traffic signals in total. The road system will operate more not less efficiently. Similarly, a lower speed limit on main roads can actually increase effective highway capacity.

We must **reduce the unfairness of the current system**. At the moment bus users do not get a decent service. Through-traffic most seriously affects disadvantaged wards like Ashley, Easton and Lawrence Hill, as do traffic-related air pollution and road 'accidents'. Natural justice demands change. At present, non-car-owners do not get a fair deal. Nor do carers pushing buggies along busy streets. Nor the disabled. Nor those of us who feel we have to carry on driving through necessity, even though we don't wish to. These plans address all these issues.

The ultimate aim is to **clear the public space that is our roads** for play, trading, talking, walking and cycling. But at the same time to build up a public transport system with two features: fast from the fringe and beyond, but inside the city a criss-cross network of potential interchanges (rather like the intersection bus-stops in rectilinearly planned Toronto or Manhattan) able to compete with the car's ability to take you from anywhere to anywhere.

Questions and answers.

Who's going to pay?

Mostly, the Government. That's who paid for the trams in other cities. Rapid transit can be part of getting Bristol's economy going again after COVID, via realistic, publicly-useful investment projects. Part of the finance can come also from funds that WECA is currently bidding for to build yet more roads (which will simply generate yet more traffic).

Is this plan any good?

It's a 'work in progress'. It has been drawn up by some of the people who wrote Bristol's first *Local Transport Plan* in 2000, commended at the time by the Government's Department for Transport. That plan never got enacted because since then Bristol transport planning has been absorbed by the West of England

Combined Authority (WECA), which unlike other British metropolitan authorities does not have a large body of expert planning staff. Currently, the role of Transport Authority is uncertainly split between WECA and a powerless City Council. Yet in practice our plan is not unlike WECA's own emerging plans to meld a MetroWest expansion of local rail services with investment in trams, and the City's aspirations to see more bus-lanes and cycleways. We just need to quicken the pace.

Does it cover my area?

We do not cover all of the West of England and North Somerset in the same depth, focusing mostly on Bristol and Bath. The treatment of some key routes is wider than Bristol – extending to rail line re-openings for Clevedon and Thornbury. Other aspects, like parking, focus more on the cities, though Park & Ride clearly has wider implications. Likewise the traffic management proposals have a Bristol focus except at the boundaries. We hope, though, that these improvements inspire such developments throughout the region.

We have had tram plans before. They never came to anything.

Previous plans faltered on a disagreement between Bristol and South Gloucestershire about Cribbs Causeway as a destination. That no longer seems to be an issue. The Government has disallowed further expansion of Cribbs.

Hasn't Bristol's Mayor got a plan for an Underground, and for rapid transit to Bristol Airport?

We do not support this. An Underground would be extremely expensive, have few stations and be of poor accessibility. Trams are superior on all counts. Nor do we advocate spending money on links to the Airport, whose expansion North Somerset Council has turned down. Bristol Airport already has a direct express coach service into the city.

Can we really reduce traffic?

We have no choice. As WECA's own transport plan says, "To achieve carbon neutral transport by 2030 requires a substantial modal shift away from cars to public transport, cycling and walking." The city has to reduce traffic by around 40% to hit the Council's carbon targets. The good news is this is achievable. Much car use is due to lack of choice. Some rely on a car to get to work in a reasonable time, without huge expense. Many of our bigger shopping malls and leisure sites are only realistically accessible by car. But with a decent modern tram network, with rail and bus interconnections, that will no longer be so. For kids,

cycling to school on a safe route is healthy, and convenient for parents who might otherwise be obliged to drive them. Car clubs and e-bikes also offer alternatives to owning (and parking) your own car.

So we'll have to wait years, until trams appear?

No. Not if Bristol makes its bid for Government money soon. In the meantime we need to be doing a lot of things in parallel: giving buses priority on the roads, building safe cycleways, coming to an agreement about car parking, and closing off the worse of the rat-runs. Hopefully, local Councillors in each ward will initiate a debate about what improvements residents want to see. We need to work on this together.

But who wants to use public transport during a pandemic?

We must plan for a medium-term when, with help from a vaccine, we can live with COVID. In the meantime, wear a mask and obey the distancing indications. We can't afford, or accommodate, an increase in regular car use, even temporarily. In liveable neighbourhoods, with a properly integrated transport system, we won't need to.