

5th February 2020**Open Letter to the Melksham Bus Users' Meeting on Friday 7th February**

On behalf of First West of England Ltd I am writing to say how sad we are that after almost 100 years of continuous operation of local bus services between Melksham and Bath via Atworth and Box, we are having to give up. Nobody likes quitting in such circumstances but sometimes reality overtakes everything else – and that's the point that we have reached.

Some two years ago we invested heavily in better buses, with our new brand "*discover*", and an improved frequency. While we won ourselves quite a few new passengers and we say thank you to all of you, the growth in patronage has proved insufficient to cover the costs of operation.

People often believe that running buses is a licence to print money. It is not so. Providing interurban bus services in today's circumstances is very challenging financially and it is my belief that it is very difficult to sustain two operators on one corridor, as has been the case for quite a few years past in this route.

We have no more rights – and no more obligations - than any other operator. Although we may be a large company, our bills must be paid just like everybody else's. The transport authority is Wiltshire Council, not the bus companies. In the end, we must look to them.

It's worth reminding ourselves that local bus operations in Britain outside London operate under the terms of the 1985 Transport Act, as amended. This Act de-regulated local bus operation. Under these rules, *any* operator may operate *any* route at *any* time at *any* fare on giving 70 days' notice to the Traffic Commissioner. Withdrawal requires similar notice. The responsibility for guarding the network lies with the local authority (the Transport Authority), so in this case Wiltshire Council (although the route does also run into the BaNES area as well, of course).

These authorities have the power (but not the obligation) to consider the local bus network and procure replacement services, where they consider this to be in the public interest and representing good value for money. In this context, officers of Wiltshire Council will no doubt be considering right now how to deal with the short section of route through Whitley between Atworth and Melksham where the D3 and X72 cover different roads.

The evening and Sunday service is currently provided under contract to Wiltshire Council, who can be expected to re-tender these operations, to enable them to continue to operate as before.

We were invited to attend the meeting in person. We appreciate that courtesy. After careful consideration we have decided not to join you. There is no possibility that we will reverse the decision already made. This meeting, therefore, is not about us but what is to be done in the future, that will not involve us.

Good luck with your discussions and thanks to all the many generations of Melksham people who have been our customers, and those successively back in time of Badgerline, Bristol Omnibus Company, Bath Tramways Motor Company and the original Lavington & Devizes Motor Service way back in the 1920s.

Yours sincerely



James Freeman
Managing Director
First West of England