



Elsie Blundell MP

Heywood and Middleton North



Local Bus Services

in Heywood and Middleton North


Submission to TfGM



This is a crucial moment for bus services here in my constituency of Heywood and Middleton North, and across the country. Through the leadership of the Mayor, Combined Authority and Transport for Greater Manchester at a city-region level - and the recent national announcement made by the Transport Secretary of £1 billion of funding to support, improve and protect bus services - there is now the potential to achieve tangible and lasting results which will improve the lives of my constituents. The Government's commitment to extend devolution and empower local people will serve to compound this.

This is why, as the MP for Heywood and Middleton North - a constituency of immense potential - I feel compelled to relay my views and those of my constituents on the crucial issue of local bus services. People here understand that a key driver of opportunity, economic growth and social mobility is reliable, safe and sustainable public transport. Their voices provide keen insights when it comes to the progress that has been made and work still left to do.

I have therefore collated the views of a number of local people across Heywood and Middleton North who rely on local buses for a variety of reasons. There are several key themes which emerge from their testimony. Their remarks underscore the fact that, when it comes to local bus services, the needs of communities across my constituency are not currently being met. We must take this opportunity to press ahead and deliver better bus services for everyone living in our area.



The 167 Bus Route

The importance of a fast, direct connection to Manchester city centre

One of the central findings of my constituency-wide survey was the need for the former 167 bus route (or a similar, direct connection into Manchester) to be re-instated.

The route, which was sadly scrapped over ten years ago, connected the people of Norden, Heywood and Rhodes to Manchester. Residents across the former route emphasise in their survey responses that the loss of the 167 has greatly hampered their ability to reach Manchester quickly, with one commenting that the current journey time from Heywood to Manchester is 'scandalous'.

Responses also suggest that there would be a considerable uptake from residents to fully utilise the 167 were it to be re-instated. Historically, they relied upon its 'express' nature and made clear that it would save them considerable time when travelling between local hubs and Manchester itself.

Their testimony is almost unanimous: the current provision of local bus services does not provide the means for commuters to travel swiftly to the city centre. People living in Heywood and Middleton North understand that robust transport infrastructure allows for more frequent interaction between people and creates larger pools of workers for businesses - each a pillar for regional and local economic growth.

The 167 Bus Route

In relation to the impact of this on local schools, Edgar Wood School opened on the route of the former 167 service (a phased opening over the last 3-4 years). A school bus has been running, funded by TfGM, but this will soon cease operation. The school committed to pay toward the cost of the bus, but cannot sustain the service alone. If the 167 were to be reintroduced, at regular times, the need for a school bus no longer exists and this would help to ease financial strain on the school. In addition, further on from the school (in the direction of Heywood) on both sides of the same road, there are two large housing developments. Again, these estates require a bus service that connects them with Heywood and, crucially, with Manchester in the opposite direction.

The re-instatement of the 167 would level the playing field and allow the people of Heywood, Norden and other locations to enjoy the same benefits of other towns across the city region – opening economic opportunity, catalysing city centre footfall and enabling residents to have greater control of their journeys across Greater Manchester. Based on the testimony collated in my survey, correspondence I receive from constituents on this issue, and my own experience of travelling between my constituency and Manchester city centre on the bus, I implore TfGM to reinstate the 167 bus route and finally bridge gaps in service provision which have been left open for over a decade. My constituents are calling for a ‘faster, regular and direct express service to Manchester’ and I urge TfGM to heed these legitimate concerns.



Connections

Another concern shared by respondents was the connectivity between Heywood and Middleton and other towns across Greater Manchester. Given that both Heywood and Middleton are without heavy rail stations - and are cut off from the Metrolink - some residents argue that, for example, the Bury / Rochdale 468 service should be extended to Rochdale train station, and that all bus tickets issued within Rochdale should include travel between the train station and bus station on the Metrolink.

Adopting an integrated, multi-modal approach to transport usage (in the way that the Mayor and TfGM intend) would enable commuters and others who rely on public transport in my constituency to reach local hubs without incurring further costs. Passengers also made a strong case for better connections between Norden, Bamford and Rochdale railway station.

Heywood and Middleton North's position in Greater Manchester means that there are significant opportunities nearby, not just Manchester city centre. The respondents advocate for improved connections to Bury and Bolton, with some making the point that major economic and health destinations can require several connections despite being close enough to be short car journeys. Manchester Airport, the Royal Oldham Hospital, the Trafford Centre and others are close enough as sub-regional amenities to be part of the fabric of local people's lives, but all too often access by public transport is almost impossible. One resident went as far to say that he learned to drive aged 40 to avoid delays on the 163 route – a testament to the challenges that exist when it comes to using public transport across Heywood and Middleton North.

People's ability to make these relatively short, essential journeys by public transport should not be determined by their postcode – this is not the case in London, or even in south Manchester!



Safety, safeguarding and suitability

Passenger and driver safety is critical. Abuse, harassment and violence are not ‘part of the job’. Too many drivers sadly feel they must now accept this. Passengers, too, should have access to safe transport at all hours of the day.

Several respondents, nonetheless, concluded that on local bus services safety was not guaranteed with one passenger relaying that ‘as a female, I don’t feel safe using that bus (163 route)’. Violence against women and girls transcends sectors and modes of transport. As the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women in Transport, I am determined that female passengers across my constituency, Greater Manchester and beyond are not avoiding travel from fear of harassment or violence. I am keen to work with TfGM and other organisations to raise the profile of this challenge facing passengers and staff across certain bus routes and devise solutions, drawing on the insights of those affected. We must continue to prioritise this issue following the city-region’s success in becoming the first area in England in four decades to bring its bus services under local control.

Respondents also voiced their concerns regarding the cleanliness, sustainability and general state of local buses. Local modes of transport, like local landmarks, are a source of community pride and should be well maintained to ensure the comfort of commuters. Respondents made clear that current buses are outdated, unkempt and not suitable for local people. Again, my constituents felt that buses along the 163 route are unfit for purpose in this regard. Local people are also concerned that we are being left behind in the introduction of electric buses here in Heywood in comparison to other parts of Greater Manchester.



Reliability, Schools and Local Communities

My constituents also repeatedly raised issues with the reliability and punctuality of bus services across Heywood and Middleton North. It is clear from these responses that there is a stark lack of confidence from many people in local bus services and their capacity to facilitate timely journeys.

This erosion of confidence has considerable ramifications when it comes to patronage. Only a third of respondents to our survey use the bus every day, while over 20% say they use the bus less than once a month. There is evidence, however, that the situation could be rectified: almost 80% of those who responded stated that they would use the bus more if services were improved.

This unreliability is felt across the generations, with children and young people experiencing the consequences of not being able to depend on services turning up on time. One respondent made clear that their children regularly have to wait up to an hour after school to get the 471 bus home to Heywood. In some instances when the buses arrive they are too full to board and children must continue to wait. Another of my constituents stated that their grandson often has to wait 40-50 minutes after school due to buses simply not running to timetable. Respondents of working age also stressed unreliability across different services at peak times. This can inflate the duration of my constituents' commutes and often causes them to be late unnecessarily.

From employment opportunities and job performance; to the vibrancy and viability of the regional night time economy and from educational attainment to the need to support new housing, constituents responding to my survey drew a clear link between the strength of communities across Heywood and Middleton North and a reliable and well-functioning bus network.

The image shows a street scene with a yellow sign on the right side. The sign has a black outline of a bee with wings and a striped abdomen. The word "Conclusion" is overlaid in white text on the left side of the image.

Conclusion

Swift action is needed to address the significant transport challenges which impede the lives of my constituents. Most of my constituents do not have easy access to the rail or Metrolink network, and it is therefore critical that they have confidence in the reliability of local bus services, that routes are well planned, meet their travel needs to key destinations and are safe and reliable. Far too many people across Heywood and Middleton North feel that the benefits enjoyed by commuters and travellers in other parts of Greater Manchester do not extend to them – despite the role that both towns play in the city-region’s continued growth and development.

As the MP for Heywood and Middleton North, I would be delighted to meet with officials across TfGM and the Combined Authority more broadly to address the above issues set out so eloquently by my constituents to ensure that the potential of our towns is fully unlocked and that residents are finally assured that their local bus network is built around their needs.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this submission.

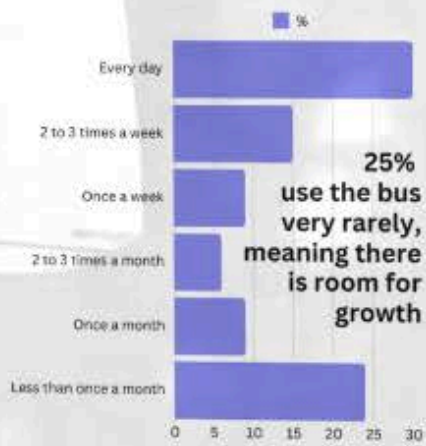
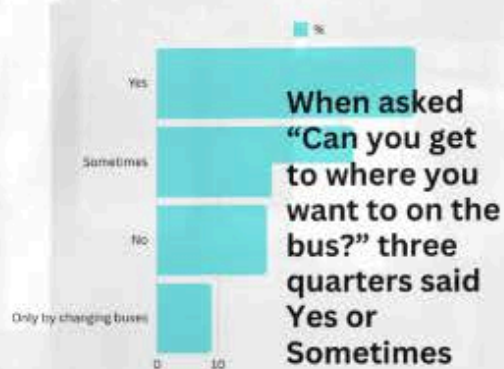
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elsie".

Elsie

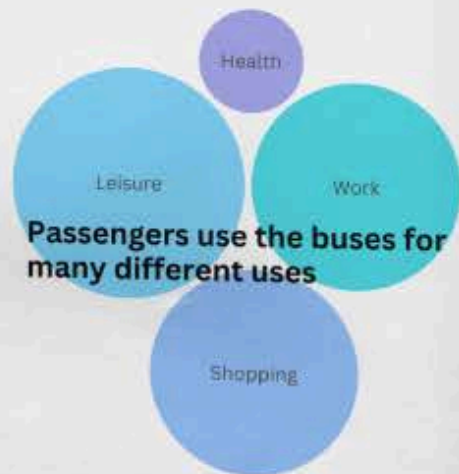
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Survey Responses

Yes, more Yes, for 1st time No



"What one thing would improve services...?"



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