



Turning things around

The UK city of Bristol has a uniquely creative impetus, along with a strong knowledge economy, dominated by two prominent universities. It has a population of 430,000 and is renowned throughout Europe for its vibrant environmental sector – particularly in the areas of renewable energy and sustainability. However, the city has been struggling with congestion problems for decades and many people believe that the continual bickering between Labour and Liberal Democrat authorities at City Hall has rendered the council almost incapable of making any firm decisions on the issue. And that’s why the city voted in favour of a mayor with executive powers to get things done. In an exclusive interview for *Eurotransport*, directly elected Bristol Mayor George Ferguson highlights the challenges of trying to solve Bristol’s congestion problems, making the city’s bus services more attractive and encouraging Bristol residents to seek alternatives to the private motor car.

There is a lot of work to do. Bristol is now regarded as having one of the worst congestion problems in the UK – a problem that costs the city somewhere between £350 million to £500 million per year. This was reflected in a survey of European cities’ which found that Bristol is the second most congested city in the UK outside London. But Bristol’s Mayor, George Ferguson, disputes these findings stating that published government data on person-journey-times has shown that Bristol is actually a consistent high performer in comparison with other core cities. “However there is clearly dissatisfaction and much room for improvement,” he says.

Yet when the AA compiled a city speed league table it found that Bristol was the worst city in the country with an average vehicle speed of 16.8mph. The congestion also affects air quality in the city with some streets in Bristol having air pollution levels of more than twice the EU limit.

George says: “Congestion threatens business, tourism, health and the quality of our communities and our lives. It has been a huge factor in Bristol’s transport woes, negating potential improvements in the flow of public transport, and has dominated local headlines with calls to action from every quarter.” When he became Mayor, George already knew that

action had to be taken and not all of it was going to be popular.

So what has George done to solve the problem so far?

“Bristol is a medium-sized historic city with a high number of car commuters from a relatively prosperous city region,” George explains. “This alongside the issues that other cities face such as a limited road network and road works from utilities will contribute to congestion. Steps we’ve taken to minimise disruption include promoting mode change through the Local Sustainable Transport Fund and joint travel plans with neighbouring authorities, increasing capacity at our three park and ride sites and

pioneering a new code of conduct with utilities in the city to improve co-ordination of planned road works.”

Impressive details, but what is next on the agenda and what are the priorities?

“My priorities are rolling-out the introduction of 20mph zones,” George reveals. “And I am pressing ahead with residents’ parking, improving the transport infrastructure around Temple Meads and the Enterprise Zone and making the city a more pleasant place to walk or cycle.”

The residents’ parking scheme is indeed a radical idea and it has only been tried in a small number of cities across the UK and not always successfully. So far, in Bristol, it has been very controversial with some areas of the city, such as Ashley, almost coming out in open revolt. George has been forced to scale it back to some extent but he certainly doesn’t intend to abandon it altogether.

How about a congestion charge? London has tried this – will it work in Bristol too? George investigated this and conducted a feasibility study. However when it became public knowledge, although the city’s cyclists were in favour, the Federation of Small Businesses opposed it on the grounds that it would damage Bristol’s economy.

“While I have said that it would be irresponsible to exclude the possibility of introducing a congestion charge, I have no current plans to do so,” says George. “We have new CCTV cameras around central Bristol that have many uses for different agencies in partnership with the police and Safer Bristol.”

Improving public transport in Bristol is essential to luring people out of their cars, but that isn’t going to happen quickly, or easily. Over the years there have been many complaints about punctuality and fares, directed particularly towards Bristol’s dominant bus service provider, First Bus. George believes that the best way to get fares down is to get more people on the buses.

“As a motorist, cyclist, passenger and pedestrian myself I’d like to encourage others to use more modes of transport,” George says optimistically. “In Bristol we’ve encouraged this through a new bus fare structure. Naturally, less congested roads help with punctuality but it is also aided by effective service management to reduce ‘bunching’. Smartcards are, at long last, due to be introduced later this year which will reduce boarding delays and improve services.”

Many people in the city blame First for lateness and high fares, but are they really at fault and what can be done about it?

George explains: “The City Council works closely with First to improve infrastructure and discuss issues raised by councillors and residents, but since buses were deregulated in the 1980s, with the exception of London, the council’s powers are limited as it does not manage the local market or plan services. The council does not have any statutory means to directly tackle any poor performance with the operator.”

So what more can be done to make the city’s bus service more efficient?

“The Greater Bristol Bus Network has helped improve services on 10 major route corridors in and around the city,” George states. “This includes bus priority measures such as new bus lanes and intelligent traffic signals to minimise delays and improve journey times, new buses with easy access low-floors, lower emissions and improved comfort and cleanliness. To put bus users in control of their travel options, simple and easy to understand real-time information will be provided where and when passengers need it. There will be improved links to and from park and ride sites, more services and new routes where there is most demand, and new shelters with raised kerbs, improved lighting, seating and CCTV to improve access, comfort and cleanliness. Improved maintenance and service agreements will ensure buses and shelters remain clean and damage-free and there are similar improvements being made as part of the Investing in Bristol package, the Local Sustainable Transport Fund, and the Better Bus Area Fund.”

The Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) scheme, now rebranded as the ‘MetroBus’, and the South Bristol Link are also part of the Mayor’s planned package of measures, but like residents’ parking and congestion charging, they are also hotly contested.

“The MetroBus scheme is in three parts which are in different planning and delivery stages,” explains George. “Our investment in the Greater Bristol Bus Network alongside the Metrobus and MetroWest rail network forms the basis of a much cleaner, smarter, more connected transport system than currently exists. I would love to be able to deliver a tram system, but the three MetroBus routes will offer some of the benefits of trams without the prohibitive cost:

smart ticketing; dedicated routes; high standard vehicles plus rail and bus network connections to provide a more joined-up system. The first route is the South Bristol Link which is a combined road and rapid transit bus route that travels between the A370 in Long Ashton and Hengrove Park. It includes new cycle and pedestrian paths along the whole of the 4.5km route. The second route is North Fringe to Hengrove which will connect key employment hubs with key residential areas in the north and south of the city. Finally there is the Ashton Vale to Temple Meads route and that will provide frequent services from Long Ashton Park and Ride to Bristol Temple Meads and around Bristol city centre.”

So what does George hope the city’s transport system will look like in 10 years’ time?

“In 10 years I think important indicators of an improved transport system for Bristol would be reduced air pollution, more electric vehicles (both public and private), more car sharing, more walking and cycling routes to link the city to the Enterprise Zone and Temple Meads, increased bus use and communities no longer blighted by commuter car parking.”

The Mayor has also said he wants Bristol to have an arena as many other cities do, but one thing is for sure, before any such development takes place the problems with transport in Bristol have to be sorted out first. An attractive bus network will undoubtedly have to be part of that solution.

Reference

1. Survey by Dutch automotive systems manufacturer Tom Tom – sixth Traffic Index (2013)

Eurotransport thanks Robin Whitlock for providing this article. Robin can be contacted via email at robinwhitlock1966@gmail.com.



George Ferguson is foremost an architect and local businessman. He was instrumental in developing the Tobacco Factory arts centre in Bedminster which helped to revitalise south Bristol, and that means he is a man with some experience of how to turn things around. As the only directly-elected Mayor outside London (nine of the 10 cities in the UK voted to reject the idea of a city Mayor), he has had to draw on that experience to solve the city’s problems. It hasn’t always been an easy ride and Bristol itself is indeed finding life under a city Mayor a challenging experience.