

**Zuhura Plummer**

**12 September 2023**

**Speech in favour of Cllr Hicks, motion 12**

I am speaking in favour of Councillor Hicks motion today. Carrying out a feasibility study into the other ways of organising, governing or even owning our bus companies is clearly a useful task. We will gain solid knowledge of what is possible, what it would take, and what it might cost. Some might sneer about how it can never be done, how expensive and how impossible it is. Let the critics sneer, while we get on with a feasibility study – that will leave us with a costed shopping list and a set of thought-through options.

Buses are the workhorses of Oxfordshire. They are the way thousands of people get around our country – be that office workers on the 9-5, shift workers on early starts, Oxford's elderly getting to the doctors, or cheery revellers making friends at the back of the bus at 3am after a night out. And the poorest people in this city – where one in three households don't have access to a car - utterly rely on buses.

All bus journeys are important. But they are made harder – by traffic making them unreliable and slow, by a lack of joined up services, many confusing ticketing options or by routes which always force a change in the centre of town to cross our city. Even different brands give people who don't use them a sense of buses needing skills to navigate.

These problems *can* be solved – the traffic filters are about to make a *huge* difference to the speed and reliability of virtually all services which come into Oxford. The new route serving the eastern arc from the hospital to Littlemore is fantastic. And I heartily welcome the bus companies' investment in 159 new electric buses. All these huge wins have come about as a direct result of the traffic filters plan. And my goodness, do I support the County talking about this more! Communicating and explaining this to our communities!

But the wider issues of investment, integration, routes and liveries remains. And all of these could be significantly improved with public franchising or a public transport body. Reading Buses, which is municipally owned, can invest an additional £3 million a year in the bus network because it has no private shareholders.

Any of the options in the motion will be costly, I'm aware of that. But there may be time, in intermediate future, when the County has a decent source of regular income, ringfenced for transport. Whatever this spent on, it needs to be popular and easily understood by the people of Oxfordshire. And boy, is public control of public transport understandable and popular. Polls consistently show 70% or more approval for public ownership or control of buses, with Conservative voters polling only marginally lower, in the low 60s.

And the opportunities are opening at a national level. I pray daily for a change of government at Westminster, as I think many in this country do, and soon our prayers may be answered. Labour's Shadow Secretary of State has indicated that making it easier for bus companies to come under public control or ownership is a priority, so let's be ready to seize that opportunity when it comes.

If we never look at what is possible, it will remain impossible. But if we commit to this feasibility study we at least be ready to take advantage of new income streams, or new opportunities when they arrive.