

SCRUTINY MATTERS AND REVIEWS UNDERTAKEN BY THE COMMISSION

31/09 - **REVIEW OF BUS SERVICES IN THE HARROGATE DISTRICT:** The Chair welcomed Nigel Eggleton, Sales and Marketing Director of Transdev who gave an overview of the regulatory framework for bus services and the proposed changes to bus routes in the District as detailed in the document 'Harrogate Local Network Review and X54 Revised Timetable - From 30 August 2009'. He explained that as bus services were deregulated, they were run as private companies and, as such, had to operate profitably. Mr Eggleton reported that Transdev had invested £13m in the services in the District in the last five years and that nearly 100% of bus services in Harrogate were commercially run without some form of subsidy, which he thought was unique in a town of this size.

Mr Eggleton explained that the decision to make these changes had been arrived at due to a 7% decline in passenger numbers across all routes throughout the District when compared to 2008. It was noted that although through the day busy periods had been maintained, passenger numbers had declined significantly during the evenings. He stated that after detailed research, Transdev considered that the fall in usage seemed to have stabilised. Mr Eggleton explained that some routes, notably the 36 from Ripon - Harrogate - Leeds, were profitable but that local routes around the town were struggling to break even with cross subsidisation now occurring at the Harrogate Depot. It was important that profitability on the local routes was retained in order for further investment to take place throughout the District. Mr Eggleton also explained that Transdev were keen to get back to their previous operating position as soon as possible.

The Chair explained that each of the routes and their respective proposed changes would be discussed in turn with Mr Eggleton highlighting the changes, Members of the Commission were invited to ask questions, followed by questions from members of the public.

Route 100/101/102 (1a/1b/1c)

Mr Eggleton explained that the new numbering of the routes was for simplification purposes. Along Route 1 as it would be known post 30 August 2009, there would be an average of eight buses per hour between Harrogate and Knaresborough but with a reduced frequency early in the mornings and late in the evenings. After 21:00 Monday to Saturday the frequency would be reduced to every 30 minutes with no service to the Aspin, Carmires and Eastfield estates. Mr Eggleton stated that much discussion had taken place prior to the decision to withdraw services from the estates, but that it simply was not cost effective to run through services with an average of only four passengers after 21:00. Cutting the services to the estates would affect 15% of passengers that used the routes (i.e. those currently using the through services), whereas the alternative of just reducing the frequency, would have an effect on 85% of passengers (those using the services to travel between Harrogate and Knaresborough without travelling through to the estates).

Members of the Commission questioned whether it was too early to cut the services to the estates and whether services would need to be increased again during the winter months. Mr Eggleton explained that, based on previous years, although passenger numbers for through journeys did increase during winter months they would average at a total of around 5 or 6 per journey compared to 4 per journey during summer months. Mr Eggleton explained that the changes to Route 1 were due to cost and environmental concerns.

Councillor Stan Beer queried those factors affecting passenger numbers and asked whether the provision of more buses to the estates would increase numbers but Mr Eggleton explained that more frequent buses to the estates would be possible only with a reduction in frequency along the main Harrogate to Knaresborough corridor, which would lead to a reduction in passenger numbers on this section, currently the most used section of the route. Councillor Tim Swales referred to bus fares and asked whether the cost of operating services through to the estates would be met by the fares paid by those using the main corridor. However, Mr Eggleton explained that there were not enough passengers at any time after 21:00, paying enough in fares, along any section of the route, to meet the cost of continued through services.

The Chair then introduced Christine Dobson, Vice Chair of the Bus User Group who explained that her organisation were often involved in discussing decisions made by Transdev. Mrs Dobson explained that Transdev had kept the group up to date on all proposed changes to the routes around the District and had taken the suggestions made by the group into account during its decision making process. Following questions from Members of the public, Mrs Dobson clarified that she was an independent member of what was an independent group and that she received no payment for her work.

Mr Houlgate, one of the members of the public present at the meeting, referred to the recent increase in the cost of a bus fare for a journey between Harrogate and Knaresborough and asked whether the decline in passenger numbers could be attributed to this. Mr Eggleton referred to the research that had been undertaken, and stated that this indicated that increased levels of unemployment and low interest rates in terms of people's savings, were the main reasons for a general fall in passenger numbers throughout all the areas of the country in which Transdev operated, but conceded that it was inevitable that a small reduction in passenger numbers would result from an increase in fares. However, the fares increase had been necessary due to both the rise in fuel prices and insurance premiums. The drop in passenger numbers in the Harrogate District had also not been noticeable until April 2009. Mr Evans, another member of the public asked about concessionary fares and whether this had impacted upon the Transdev proposals. Mr Eggleton gave some background to the concessionary fares issue and confirmed that this had had little to do with the changes.

As a consequence of the discussions, Mr Eggleton **agreed** that the 23:50 and 00:10 services (the last two of each day) would continue through to the estates.

Members of the Commission expressed their disappointment that Transdev had decided to withdraw continued bus services through to the Aspin, Carmires and Eastfield estates but welcomed the decision by Mr Eggleton to retain the 23:50 and 00:10 buses, effectively the last two buses on each day, as through services travelling to the estates.

Route 201/202 (2a/2b)

Mr Eggleton outlined the proposed changes to Route 2 which served the Bilton area. He stated that the buses in the Bilton area performed very poorly for timekeeping and that a round trip for a 20 minute service took 30 minutes, requiring four buses. This was due to traffic congestion in the area. In order to keep to a realistic schedule and to release one bus from the route, the decision had been taken to reduce the service to a 30 minute frequency, although the 15 minute frequency for services along Kings Road would remain. Mr Eggleton explained that if traffic congestion in the area was drastically reduced, the round trip journey time could be reduced from 30 to 25 minutes and the bus service could be reviewed again. The last bus serving New Park would depart during the week at 20:25, and for Dene Park at 23:10 rather than 23:20. The first buses of the day on both parts of the route would depart later than at present.

Councillor Geoff Webber commented that the changes, a 33% reduction in frequency, were to be made in response to a 7% reduction in passenger numbers, which he believed did not justify this reduction. Mr Eggleton again explained that traffic congestion was the reason for the change in service but Councillor Webber noted that Council data showed an improvement in congestion in the area. He further pointed out that many households in the Bilton area did not have access to cars and this made it difficult to justify the final bus to New Park departing at 20:25. Mr Eggleton explained that Transdev had looked at making cost savings where they could reasonably be made and offered to share confidential loading figures with Councillor Webber outside the meeting.

In response to questions from members of the public, Mr Eggleton confirmed that Transdev were aware that some passengers currently used the early morning services in order to catch connections for onward journeys, and that with the implementation of the changes this now would not be possible. Mr Eggleton explained that from the passenger figures this number was low, hence the decision to delay the first journeys of the day. Savings would be achieved from this route by taking one bus out of service and therefore removing the associated maintenance costs and reducing average driver hours, there would be no redundancies. In terms of traffic management, Mr Eggleton also confirmed that there were sensors on traffic lights throughout the District that operated to the benefit of buses.

Councillor Nick Brown commented that the situation may benefit from the introduction of competition.

Members of the Commission **agreed** that comment should be placed on record that they were very disappointed about the changes due to take place with regard to Route 2 and asked that Transdev review the changes once traffic management improvement works around the affected area had been completed.

Route 103 (3)

Mr Eggleton explained that the only change to what was a well used Route 3, was a reduction in frequency from every 12 minutes to every 15 minutes. A member of the public felt that a frequency of 20 minutes along this route would be adequate.

Members of the Commission **agreed** to support Transdev in the changes to be made in respect of Route 3.

Route 106 (6)

With regard to changes to be made to Route 6, Mr Eggleton detailed the regulatory framework to which bus companies operated. He explained that the regulatory authority imposed stringent targets upon bus operators both in terms of reliability and punctuality. There was a reliability target of 99.5% and punctuality target of 95%. In order to meet the punctuality target, all buses had a six minute window in which they must arrive. They must arrive no later than 5 minutes behind the scheduled time, and must not depart earlier than one minute before the scheduled time. Buses serving Route 6 were not achieving the targets at any time of the day and it was not possible for buses to complete the journey along this route within the scheduled 40 minutes. This unreliability of buses on the existing route was well known to users of this service.

Transdev had therefore considered three options. The first had been to bring in a third vehicle to cover the route, however this would have a cost exceeding £100,000. The other options were to decrease the frequency of service from every 20 minutes to every 30 minutes along the whole route, or to maintain the frequency at every 20 minutes and remove a section of the route. The decision had been made to remove Green Lane, Rossett Green Lane and Yew Tree Lane from the route, this was based on the number of passengers that would be affected. 3.5% of passengers would be affected with the cuts to the service, whereas 96.5% would continue to benefit from the remainder of the route being unchanged.

Councillors Jim Clark and Bob Nash as Ward Members for Rossett spoke strongly against the changes to this route, which would predominantly affect residents living within their Ward. They highlighted problems that would be faced by elderly people living in the area who relied on the buses which stopped at the library and Post Office on Cold Bath Road. Councillor Clark felt that a less frequent service down the current route would be more acceptable than cutting out a section of it. Councillor Geoff Webber suggested that the current Route 110 be diverted to cover those sections that were to be cut from Route 6. Mr Eggleton acknowledged the problems that the changes would bring to the elderly but stated that the provisions of the Transport Act forced

companies, when faced with decisions such as this, to choose the option that would protect the majority of customers. He also explained that North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) contracted Transdev to provide the Route 110 service, and this could not be changed until an instruction had been received from them. Mr Eggleton explained that diverting Route 110 had been considered by NYCC, who had decided not to amend this route.

Members of the public highlighted their concern over cuts to the route, in particular the walk of up to 20 minutes that some would face in order to reach their nearest bus stop. Some called for other parts of the route, round Beckwith Knowle Moor, to be cut instead, as passengers there were felt to be younger and able to walk further. Others suggested that the routes be switched around throughout the day so that no one particular section was totally affected. Various members of the public expressed their frustration that the changes had been based around the necessity to meet targets but Mr Eggleton explained that the targets were set by the Bus Service regulator and bus operators were faced with penalties and potential loss of their licence if they did not meet with their requirements.

Members of the Commission expressed disappointment that in their view there had not been proper consultation on the proposed changes to Route 6 and felt that the given two months notice of the changes was unacceptable. It was **agreed** that the Commission would recommend that the Transport and Telecommunications Overview and Scrutiny Committee of North Yorkshire County Council review, as soon as possible, the proposed changes to Route 6 in particular the options available to maintain the current service (or a reduced service along the current route) including changes to the existing Route 110 to serve those streets that would be faced with a loss of service when the changes to Route 6 were implemented.

Route 104

Mr Eggleton reported that the new medical centre had now been included in Route 104 and Transdev had doubled the number of buses travelling along this route, to almost one per hour.

The Commission **agreed** to support Transdev with the changes to Route 104.

Route 110

Route 110 was discussed in relation to Route 6 above.

Route 111

There were to be no changes to Route 111.

Route X54

Mr Eggleton reported that initial figures had indicated a growth in passenger numbers along this route but this had not materialised. The service was well used at off-peak times but could not compete with train companies which offered numerous services at peak times, with some journey times between Harrogate and York of only 25 minutes. The timetable for Route X54 had therefore been revised.

The Commission **agreed** to support Transdev with the changes made to Route X54.

As a conclusion to the meeting the Commission noted that the changes made to the various routes had arisen due to a drop in passenger numbers. It was **agreed** that the Commission would monitor the issue and undertake a further review in six months' time if possible. Mr Eggleton would again be invited and an additional invitation would be made to the North Yorkshire County Council Executive Member for Transport. In the meantime, the Commission recommended that in light of the comments and views expressed at the meeting, Transdev take into account the following:

- reassure the public that services would be reviewed in the future if usage picked up
- review the marketing and promotion of its existing services both on buses and using other methods
- review its ticketing procedures
- review its existing timetable of services for certain routes particularly on a Friday and Saturday
- implement an improved consultation process for potential future changes in service beyond the required minimum period. In this regard the Chair offered Mr Eggleton the opportunity to attend future meetings of the Commission to discuss potential future changes to bus services if these were being considered.

(Councillor Jim Clark declared a personal interest in this item on the basis that he was Chair of the Little Red Bus organisation, but on the basis that the interest was not prejudicial, he remained in the meeting, took part in the debate and voted thereon).

(Councillor Willoughby declared a personal interest in this item on the basis that a family member worked for Transdev, but on the basis that the interest was not prejudicial, she remained in the meeting, took part in the debate and voted thereon).

(6.06 pm - 8.30 pm)