

Brighton Area Buswatch

Representing local bus users



Part of Bus Users UK

Buswatch News – October 2015

Meadowview bus users campaign for improvements

Around 50 people filled the Meadowview Community Centre for a meeting on 19 October, organised by the Meadowview and Tenantry Community Action Group. They were concerned about the uncertain future of bus routes 37 & 37B. Recent reductions to the evening service have left the Meadowview and Coombe Road area with just one bus every 75 minutes. Compass Travel Managing Director Chris Chatfield did his best to reassure the audience. He said usage of the 37 was below original expectations but had increased since the Key Card and M tickets scheme was extended in August. There should be no need for changes before September 2016.

There were several complaints about crowded buses and long gaps at peak times. In response Chris Chatfield agreed to consider a trial of an extra hourly shuttle between Meadowview and Lewes Road Sainsbury's during the daytime. He also invited the audience to contact him personally with their concerns and promised to respond promptly. A number of people blamed Brighton & Hove City Council which subsidises the 37 & 37B. Public Transport Officer Richard Johnson and Councillor Daniel Yates explained that the Council had provided additional funding at short notice and the Council's budget was under severe pressure to meet Government inflicted cuts. The Lewes Road and Coombe Road areas have a large student population. We suggested the council seeks alternative sources of funding, such as the two universities. In Oxford and Southampton, universities support extra bus networks which are available to everyone.

Local bus users have set up a website www.meadowviewbus.co.uk and a Facebook page www.facebook.com/meadowviewbus where people can find out more and express their views.

Accessibility improvements

At the Buswatch meeting on 14 October we were given a very informative presentation on accessibility improvements by Victoria Garcia from Brighton & Hove and Metrobus. The Helping Hand scheme which involves yellow credit sized cards being available to bus users with particular needs has been a big success with over 2,000 now in circulation. The cards are shown to bus drivers who have received training. They are also being used elsewhere such as shops and cinemas to convey information about a disability discreetly. All bus companies in our area have joined in the scheme. More information is available at www.buses.co.uk.



The reverse of the card can display the passenger's name and emergency contact number if desired. This may benefit passengers with epilepsy, Alzheimer's or dementia.

Bus use falls for the first time in over twenty years

Fewer people travelled by bus in the Brighton & Hove City Council area for the year to March 2015 according to official figures released by the Department for Transport. A total of 44.4 million journeys were made, down from 45.8 million journeys in 2013/14, a reduction of 3%. In previous years there has been an increase of about 3% each year so the reduction is actually nearer 6% which is a very significant drop. Nationally the drop in bus use outside London was 1.3%. In the Capital bus use increased by 0.1%.

These figures cover all bus companies in the Brighton & Hove area and there appear to be several factors affecting the decline. During the period there were a series of roadworks which created major delays to bus services. These included the Vogue gyratory, Brighton Station, Edward Street and North Street. The main bus company also suffered from staff shortages which exacerbated the delays because some buses were cancelled while others were being held up. On top of that the real time information system was being updated so electronic displays were often unreliable or missing completely. The overall effect was to undermine confidence in our bus service and people voted with their feet.

Lessons need to be learnt from this experience. The top priority for the Council must be to give more attention to keeping buses moving during traffic schemes. There are some promising signs here as the City Council has been in discussion with bus companies on ways of mitigating the impact of future roadworks. The major Valley Gardens project due to begin in the coming months will be the first test of this strategy. We are told Brighton & Hove Buses has reduced its staff shortage and buses are no longer being cancelled regularly for that reason. The real time information system has improved in recent weeks is at last becoming reliable again. Some bus services which suffered from poor reliability have been re-timetabled. It is particularly encouraging to see that bus companies are not reacting to the fall in numbers by reducing service levels; instead they are investing in anticipation of future growth. So the overall outlook is much brighter and with fewer roadworks planned for this year there are already some signs more people are using buses again, especially on those routes that have been improved.

Compared with other areas around the country, Brighton & Hove still leads the way. We still have the highest bus use per head of population outside London with only Nottingham and Reading coming anywhere near close. In fact local bus use is more than twice the levels recorded in many urban areas in the south. Buses in Portsmouth carried just 10.6 million passengers, while the figure for Southampton was 20.1 million. Bournemouth and Poole combined did better with 29 million journeys, but even this is way below the 44.4 million journeys made within the Brighton & Hove City Council area. The biggest increases in bus use last year were in Bristol and Reading.

Our suggestions for getting people back on buses!

In June we published our own twenty point plan in Buswatch News. It seems timely to repeat it:

For Brighton & Hove City Council

1. Re-phase traffic lights, especially at the Clock Tower junction to speed the flow of buses and reduce waiting times and emissions from stationary vehicles.
2. Plan roadworks more carefully so bus passengers can be advised in advance of disruptions and special publicity and timetables planned.
3. Consider new bus priority measures along busy corridors eg Marine Parade
4. Make sure buses are considered during the planning stages of major projects, eg Churchill Square/Brighton Centre
5. Work with bus companies through the Quality Bus Partnership to develop new routes so people can move around the city without changing buses in the City Centre
6. Stop funding cuts for supported services and seek alternative sources of funding for bus service improvements

For Brighton & Hove and other bus companies:

7. Put more effort into controlling reliability and reducing bunching. Terminate fewer buses at Old Steine when they are running late – instead have spare buses on standby to fill gaps.
8. Employ more bus company staff at critical points to keep buses moving through Churchill Square, building on an experiment carried out in 2013 which we suggested.
9. Make sure the Churchill Square information kiosk is properly staffed and doesn't close in the middle of the afternoon rush hour. Employ staff with clearly marked yellow jackets to pro-actively help passengers as they do at Brighton Station.
10. Make special announcements inside buses (which now have audible message facilities) when services are disrupted or diverted.
11. Encourage more passengers to use Key Cards and smart phone M tickets so fewer pay the driver which can create delays.
12. Introduce a Pay as You Go facility and an all operator ticket and make it possible to top up bus Key cards from machines at rail stations and other strategic locations.
13. Introduce transfer tickets – We have been pressing for one hour M tickets so passengers on single tickets can change buses without being penalised - as in most of Europe.
14. Provide better messages on real time bus stop displays when there is disruption.
15. Introduce special timetables during long term roadworks to allow for delays and diversions.
16. Stop confusing passengers by putting route branded buses on the wrong route. This happens every day. It should occur only when no other bus is available.
17. Provide more information on bus stops and shelters to indicate the direction of buses stopping at each stop, eg 'towards Brighton Station' or 'Towards Churchill Square' in North Street. Make it clearer how to get to major destinations from each stop.
18. Have a 24 hour information line available. Buses run 24 hours so information should be available at all times, not just office hours.
19. Promote new cheap fares to entice people back on buses to 'Get on and Go somewhere'.
20. Introduce two door buses on the busiest cross city services to speed them up.

We welcome your comments and suggestions.

Valley Gardens scheme

Councillor Gill Mitchell, chair of Brighton & Hove City Council's Environment Transport and Sustainability Committee attended our meeting on 14 October and gave us an update. Further computer modelling will be carried out shortly to review the previously agreed scheme. Councillor Mitchell assured us it will take account of weekend and summer congestion levels as well as Monday to Friday rush hours. She also confirmed that consideration will be given to special arrangements for buses during the construction period. A final report would be presented to the relevant Committee next March and work could start shortly after that.

Real Time Information signs improve at last!

Following comments in Buswatch News last month I was invited to meet Steve Lane, the GPS Officer at Brighton & Hove Buses. Steve is responsible for sorting out issues and maintaining RTI signs. He works closely with Brighton & Hove City Council (which is jointly funding the project to update the system) and with Trapeze, the specialist contractor. I was very impressed by Steve's skill and dedication to get the system working properly and his understanding of the problems.

Since last month there has been a noticeable improvement in reliability and blank screens are much rarer. Those outside Brighton Station are finally working again and the large displays inside the station should be live very soon. That leaves the two stops in London Road opposite the Co-operative supermarket where an electrical contractor is responsible for restoring a connection. Information for Stagecoach and other bus companies remains less reliable than for Brighton & Hove services and we will continue to press for improvements until all signs are working properly.

Woodingdean improvements

Finally, some really good news. New timetables introduced last month to improve reliability seem to be running well. A few months ago route 22 between Brighton Station and Woodingdean was one of the least reliable services in our area. I attended community meetings in Woodingdean where users were very vocal in their dissatisfaction. Now the 22 is not only more reliable but more frequent during the daytime. This is an excellent outcome. Other services we feel could do with some attention are the Coaster 12 service between Brighton & Eastbourne and routes 21 & 21A which regularly run late in the afternoons. If your service is regularly running late please let us know and we will take it up with the bus companies.

Brighton Area Buswatch meetings

The next meeting with bus company managers and Brighton & Hove City Council will be on **Wednesday 20 January 2016** at 5.15pm in Brighton Town Hall. Meetings are open to all members and supporters but please let us know in advance if you wish to attend as space is limited.

Buswatch News is produced and edited by Andrew Boag, Chair, Brighton Area Buswatch. We welcome your comments and suggestions. Printed A5 copies of this newsletter are available from Hove town hall reception and a pdf or large print versions are available on request. The next issue is due in mid November 2015.

E mail: brightonbuswatch@gmail.com. Phone: 01273 323075



brightonbuswatch.org



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