

Brighton Area Buswatch



We are a branch of Bus Users, the national charity representing bus passengers

Buswatch News – June 2021

Council to consider franchising local buses

Brighton & Hove City Council is to carry out a feasibility study on bus service franchising which will be presented to the Environment, Transport and Sustainability Committee in the Autumn. Under this system the 'Local Transport Authority' (Brighton & Hove City Council) would have control over all aspects of bus services in its area, controlling service levels, where buses go and fares. All bus services would be tendered with contracts awarded to private companies for individual services or groups of routes. This system is in use in London where bus services were not de-regulated in 1986 so there is no direct competition between bus companies on the road. However, there would be no return to the old days of council operated bus services, so don't expect to see Brighton Corporation's blue buses again.

The big advantage is that the Council would be able to plan the network on the basis of what it sees as local need. That could mean less emphasis on the very frequent main road routes, allowing resources to be allocated for better services to outlying estates and some completely new routes. Fares would be co-ordinated throughout the area with tickets available on any bus at the same price, irrespective of the operator. It could also incentivise the Council to implement bus priority measures to speed buses through congestion hotspots because any cost savings would go back to them and not to the bus companies. Fares could be revised at the same time as parking charges to discourage bus users from switching to cars.

Franchising is not without its risks though. A common myth is that it automatically leads to lower fares. Around 50% of the cost of running a bus is drivers wages. Add to that fuel, new vehicles and maintenance costs and there isn't a lot left. There is also a risk that private operators applying to run services would submit high bids to protect their profit margins, so savings would be smaller than expected. People often refer to the London experience. For many years London's buses were subsidised by the Government but those subsidies finished in 2016; after that they were accumulating losses which reached £700 million in 2019/20. By the time the pandemic began London's buses were only kept going by a cross subsidy from profitable Underground operations, which of course is not an option here.

At the moment franchising is only available to Combined Mayoral Authorities but the Government has said it will support other transport authorities where they can demonstrate that it will improve services and they have the resources. The only area

actively pursuing franchising is Greater Manchester, although West Yorkshire and Liverpool are considering the option. An earlier bid in the North East failed because the Combined Authority could not demonstrate its ability to meet the requirements.

The Council may conclude franchising is not worth the risks because existing arrangements work well. The recently published National Bus Strategy 'Bus Back Better' uses Brighton & Hove as an example of an area which already has a good working partnership working, so it might seem odd if this was abandoned. Bus use per head in Brighton & Hove is already higher than anywhere else outside London. According to Department for Transport statistics bus use here increased by 6.5% between 2014 and 2019; in London it fell by 12% during the same period, despite a fares freeze imposed by the Mayor. In 2019/20 48.6 million journeys were made on buses in Brighton & Hove. This compares with just 9.9 million journeys in Portsmouth and 20.3 million in Southampton. We are a success story!

There is also a risk of political interference if control passes to a local authority. Bus services could be enhanced or reduced in wards which are marginal. Some busy cross city bus services could be cut back to terminate at the edge of the central area at Old Steine, forcing passengers to change buses. The cost savings from doing this might look good in a report but experience from bus operators shows this leads to a loss of passengers and revenue.

The alternative to franchising is an Enhanced Partnership arrangement which is basically what we already have. Bus fares appear to be the main area of concern within the Council and as mentioned above, there is no certainty they could be reduced under a franchise arrangement unless subsidies were forthcoming which seems unlikely.

There is perhaps some scope to negotiate price reductions with existing bus operators. The Go Ahead group which owns our main operator, Brighton & Hove Buses also operates in and around Bournemouth as 'Morebus'. A one day ticket covering Bournemouth, Poole & Christchurch is similar to our City Saver area but costs just £4.10 on a mobile phone, £4.30 on bus. The equivalent prices in Brighton & Hove are £4.70 and £5.20 - almost £1 more. A Morebus weekly ticket costs £15 on a mobile phone compared with £21.60 here. However Morebus competes with another operator, Yellow Buses, on some routes and tickets cannot be used on each-others services. We do not have that issue in Brighton, The Big Lemon, Compass Bus and Metrobus charge the same fares as Brighton & Hove. The only direct competition is with two Stagecoach services so full fares integration should be achievable fairly easily within an enhanced partnership.

Councillors considering franchising could do well to visit other towns and cities in England before making a decision. There are plenty of towns, including some not far from here where buses finish by 7pm and are very sparse on Sundays. In Worthing some single fares are significantly higher; a day ticket bought on bus costs £6.20 covering a relatively small area. We have a lot to be grateful for and a lot of cities are envious of our bus service. Fares are on the high side but as London has shown, lower fares do not necessarily lead to more passengers. The frequency, reliability and marketing of the service all play a vital role. Our real time information system works well and timetable information is easy to access.

New Local Transport Plan ignores Park & Ride

Brighton & Hove City Council has published its latest draft Local Transport Plan, LTP5 which sets out its vision and priorities to 2030. The draft plan was approved by the Environment, Transport and Sustainability Committee on 22 June. As expected, there is a strong emphasis on promoting active travel options with improved walking and cycling routes, an extension of the bike share scheme and more low traffic neighbourhoods.

Increasing public transport is supported with priority measures including extensions to bus lanes or changes at junctions. These improvements are welcome. More affordable bus travel is also included, as referenced above in the previous item. One proposed intervention is for a bus based Greater Brighton Mass Transit connecting Brighton to Shoreham and Worthing. This idea comes as a complete surprise as it has never been mentioned to us in meetings with bus operators and it would require the support of West Sussex County Council to make it happen.

Strategic mobility hubs are suggested 'which could provide a transport interchange on the outskirts of the city where Park & Ride enables them to switch from cars and coaches to bike share, buses and taxis'. That is the only mention of Park & Ride in the whole plan, so it clearly isn't a priority and won't happen anytime soon, despite a recommendation from the Council's own Climate Assembly last year.

Brighton Area Buswatch has been promoting Park & Ride for many years. We suggested a Park & Ride trial using Mill Road this summer. This site has been used successfully for many years as a football Park & Ride. Its location close to the A23 & A27 junction but away from residential areas makes it perfect to attract visitors. Without P&R, people from outside the city will continue to drive into the centre of Brighton creating unnecessary congestion and pollution. That will delay our local bus services, making them slower and unreliable so fares will go up. They should look elsewhere, there are plenty of examples of successful P&R schemes in the south of England, Oxford, Guildford, Reading, Canterbury, Cambridge, Winchester, Portsmouth and Southampton is building one now.

News from The Big Lemon

Four new all electric single deck buses are being delivered to The Big Lemon for use on local services. The photo shows a demonstration vehicle, the new buses will be mostly yellow, of course! The Big Lemon has also acquired three longer single deck buses which be mostly used on college contracts.



The Big Lemon will be launching its new buses at the first London to Brighton electric vehicle rally on Sunday 18 July which will finish in Madeira Drive.

Summer opportunities

With movement restrictions easing there are lots of opportunities for bus trips out of the city to explore the countryside or coastline.

- The Coaster services 12/12A/12X from Brighton Station to Eastbourne run frequently. The 13X to Birling Gap, Beachy Head and Eastbourne is now running half hourly on Sundays.
- The Stagecoach Coastliner 700 goes westwards from Brighton, Old Steine and Hove to Shoreham, Worthing and Littlehampton, every 10 minutes (every 20 minutes on Sundays).
- Heading North, the Regency routes 28/29 go to Lewes frequently, then to Uckfield and Tunbridge Wells (every 30/60 minutes) while Metrobus 270/271/272 go to Haywards Heath and East Grinstead (270) or Crawley with the 271 serving Wakehurst Place. The 273 also goes to Crawley via Hurstpierpoint and Crawley Down (www.Metrobus.co.uk for times). Stagecoach route 17 goes to Henfield and Horsham, hourly.
- Don't forget the excellent Breeze up to the Downs services from Brighton on Saturdays and Sundays:
77 to Devil's Dyke – **now running daily every 45 minutes**
78 to Stanmer Park – every 70 minutes
79 to Ditchling Beacon – every 70 minutes

This is just a summary, there's an excellent leaflet [here](#) which shows all the opportunities with a superb map with times available on the [Brighton & Hove Buses](#) website. A One Day Discovery ticket (£9 for one person or £17.50 for a family ticket) is valid on most buses throughout Sussex and beyond without restricting you to one bus operator.

Brighton Area Buswatch meetings

In normal circumstances, meetings with bus company managers and Brighton & Hove City Council are held four times a year. Meetings will resume when we are able to use Brighton Town Hall again. In the meantime, please send in your comments and we will take them up with the operators or the Council.

Buswatch News is produced and edited by Andrew Boag, Chair, Brighton Area Buswatch. Contributions and suggestions are welcome.

E mail: brightonbuswatch@gmail.com. Phone: 01273 620215



brightonbuswatch.org



Brighton Area Buswatch is a branch of Bus Users www.bususers.org