

Brighton Area Buswatch

A branch of Bus Users (formerly Bus Users UK)
representing local bus users

Buswatch News – September 2019

New Brighton & Hove buses

Thirty smart new extended range hybrid buses will be entering service in October, mostly on routes 5, 5A & 5B. They are 'geofenced' to run in pure electric mode through the Low Emission zone in North Street and Western Road. Their distinctive colour is intended to differentiate them from the existing Brighton & Hove fleet, highlighting the environmental credentials of the vehicles.

The 5s run every five minutes through central Brighton during the day which means up to 24 electric buses an hour will be passing through the Low Emission Zone. This should significantly reduce both emissions and noise levels. Outside the Low emission Zone, they will run in Euro 6 diesel mode and the engines will also be used to recharge the batteries, avoiding the need for recharging facilities at the depot.

Before the new buses can be used in service all drivers need to be trained to use the new high definition cameras which replace front mirrors, giving drivers a much better view with fewer blind spots. The new buses represent an investment of almost £10 million. They are built in the UK by Alexander Dennis (ADL), a new bus builder for Brighton & Hove although ADL has built thousands of buses for Stagecoach and other bus companies. Sadly, B&H's former supplier Wrightbus has just gone into administration and its future is uncertain.



‘Tap On Tap Off’ is here

The new contactless payment system on Brighton & Hove Buses has arrived. Bus users may have picked up leaflets on buses explaining the system. I was invited to test it for a few weeks before it went live. It is very easy to use, when boarding you simply place your contactless card or smartphone on the reader in front of the driver as in London. There is no need to specify a ticket type but passengers paying for more than one passenger need to buy tickets as before. It works for adults only and it is not possible to tap twice for two people. When you leave the bus use the new black card reader by the exit door and tap off. The system will then calculate the equivalent cash fare which will be deducted from your account.

Perhaps the best feature is that it will cap the amount charged at the One Day Saver rate if several journeys are made. I had a few problems with exit readers not working but these should be sorted by now. If your card doesn't appear to work on the exit reader tell the driver and use the ticket machine again. There is no need to sign up for the new system and you can check your fare history at contactless@buses.co.uk

This is a bold attempt to introduce a faster payment method and it will hopefully speed up buses. Tapping off doesn't feel intuitive so will take getting used to; forgetting to tap off means being charged the maximum single fare for the route, which would be just £2.20 on an 18 but £5.70 on a long service such as the 29.

Valley Gardens - Progress (or not?)

The phase 1 & 2 works continue between Church Street and St Peter's Church. Traffic has been flowing remarkably well since the changeover on 5 September when general traffic was moved to the east side.

There is still some uncertainty over Phase three. Funding has yet to be released by the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). This could be achieved at its meeting on 17 October. The Council has promised further consultation with local stakeholders but this has yet to happen. There is considerable opposition to aspects of Phase 3 from businesses, local residents and some Councillors.

The biggest issue for Buswatch is the decision to pedestrianise the road in front of the Royal Pavilion. This involves the removal of the three very busy bus stops that use the listed art deco style bus shelters. We have consistently argued for a two way bus road here, keeping existing bus stops and shelters and introducing southbound buses and stops too. A high proportion of passengers change buses at the Old Steine and we believe it could create an attractive bus hub. Fewer buses would then need to use the south west corner of Old Steine providing an opportunity to provide larger green spaces and there would be no need for a bus lane on the east side, enabling wider pavements. It would also make it easier for bus passengers using St James's Street services or visiting shops there. Under current plans Old Steine bus stops would be spread around several locations, most of which have less space for waiting passengers than now.

New timetables – two first day experiences:

1) The 5B Churchill Square to Universities

New timetables came into effect on Sunday 22 September, there were only a few changes on that day, the main ones took effect on Monday 23rd when the 5B was extended from Hollingbury Asda to Sussex University and Falmer Station. The service beyond Hollingbury is half hourly, previously it was just a few journeys at peak times. The frequency of the main service between Hollingbury and Hangleton remains every 10-12 minutes during the daytime. I decided to try out the service to Sussex University, from Churchill Square. The 5B will shortly gain brand new buses but one of the oldest Scania buses in the fleet turned up for my journey. It was a couple of minutes late at 1503 and lost a few more minutes along the way, but was more or less on time when we reached Coldean Lane. The 5B is a busy service and the bus was well used as far as the top of Beaconsfield Villas where quite a few got off. Traffic conditions were good, but the time spent stationary at some bus stops was long and we often arrived at traffic lights as they turned to red so perhaps it wasn't typical.

At Hollingbury Asda five minutes recovery time is scheduled but as we arrived at the departure time the driver only waited a minute or two. A 24 was right in front and we followed this through Coldean. A couple of students left us at Varley Halls and there were still a few passengers on board which is encouraging for the first day.

2) Falmer Station to Old Steine

I left the 5B at Sussex University and walked through the subway to the Falmer Station stop to catch bus back into Brighton along Lewes Road. At this point I had no intention of writing about this journey, which I've made dozens of times. It was just before 4pm and when I arrived at the stop there was a 25X loading up but I let it go as it looked full and it left showing 'Sorry Bus Full'. According to posters in the subway, a Freshers Fair had been taking place at the Amex stadium which finished at 4pm and large numbers of students were heading towards the bus stop.

A 25 soon appeared along with the 5B I used earlier, returning to Hollingbury and Hangleton. The 25 left full but only a few boarded the 5B. I expected another bus shortly but the Real time information (RTI) screen then showed first bus (25) 13 minutes away, second bus (25X) 16 minutes which was rather worrying given the rapidly accumulating crowds. The 25 is scheduled every 6 minutes and the 25X every 10 minutes. I'd say there were 100-150 people waiting. In fact, it was nearly twenty minutes before the next bus arrived, during which time it had started to rain and the RTI screen began showing messages that buses would be turning at Old Steine or The Level due to traffic congestion. When the bendy buses arrived, they were already nearly full, and both were showing the destination 'Open Market'. I wondered whether new students had a clue where Open Market was!

I eventually left Falmer Station almost 40 minutes later than expected but our bus left a large crowd behind. Students seemed to take all this in their stride; they were either chatting or glued their smartphones. I felt really sorry for those waiting at the next bus stop, The Keep, as every bus would have gone past full. Some probably waited over an hour in the rain. Our progress down Lewes Road was reasonable, with just a slight delay through the roadworks at Brighton University.

Traffic heading out of Brighton was reduced to a slow crawl and this was no doubt the main cause of delays. Traffic conditions in Lewes Road can change from free flowing to solid queues very quickly, often from around 3pm when cars on school run clog up the roads. It was noticeable how much clearer Lewes Road was during the summer holidays. Buses were obviously running very late and those controlling bus services have a tough job maintaining a regular flow of buses. Unfortunately, it often feels as though priority is given to getting buses back on time rather than minimising waiting times for passengers, so when there is disruption you tend to see lots of 'Sorry not in service' buses running empty. On frequent services it doesn't matter to passengers if a bus is on time, they just want one to turn up without a long wait!

Hopefully these conditions will not become a daily event but clearly more contingency measures need to be considered to maintain regular bus services. These issues affect other parts of the city, notably the coast road services which have been disrupted and curtailed at the Sea Life Centre on an almost daily basis in recent weeks. Highway authorities must take responsibility too. As reported last month, Brighton & Hove City Council has delayed implementing recommendations from its Bus Network Review which could help bus services run more smoothly. Fewer cars on the school run would obviously help to reduce congestion but enticing parents out of their cars is difficult, especially when they combine a school run with a journey to or from work.

Brighton Area Buswatch meeting

The next meeting with bus company managers and Brighton & Hove City Council will be at 5pm on **Wednesday 16 October** in Brighton Town Hall. Meetings are open to all, but space is limited so please contact Buswatch at the address below if you wish to join us.

Buswatch News is produced and edited by Andrew Boag, Chair, Brighton Area Buswatch. We welcome your contributions and suggestions. The next issue is due mid-October 2019. E mail: brightonbuswatch@gmail.com. Phone: 01273 620215



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