

Draft of Statement to West of England Partnership 14th June 2010

As you may be aware, from the publicity in the local media, the residents of north east Bath are extremely unhappy about the changes made to the bus network in this part of the city without consultation with those affected. The Save Our 6-7 Buses campaign has, within a very short space of time, obtained 2500 signatories to a petition, set up a communication network & leafleted virtually every household in the area, organized three high profile demonstrations, carried out a passenger survey and held a public meeting at short notice attracting 100 bus passengers. We also have the support of our two local Councillors and our MP, Don Foster as well as two transport user groups and the Unite and RMT Trade Unions.

Camden Road, Claremont, Fairfield Park, Larkhall & London Rd, which includes the deprived area of Snow Hill, are not separate communities but have, over the years, due to a large extent to the interconnecting bus service, developed into a very cohesive community with a vibrant local centre at Larkhall. It is a very hilly area with some very steep gradients. A large section of the community lives on the upper slopes with Larkhall down in the lower area acting as the focus for the community (not central Bath). It is a vibrant centre with a very wide range of shops and businesses, 2 schools, a thriving Community Centre, the Parish Church which also runs many community activities, a Community Theatre and the only dental surgery in the area as well as the only veterinary practice. It also has the only Post Office in the area since the one at Claremont was closed, one of the main reasons for this being given as the availability of a good bus service - the one that has now been cut. There is also a Nursing Home at Larkhall and a number of elderly residents rely on the bus to be able to visit regularly. The Health Centre for the area is at Claremont, which is halfway up the northern slopes. For those more familiar with Bristol even to reach this point from Larkhall is the equivalent of climbing from College Green to the top of Park Street. To the top of the community is almost the same height again and a greater distance

A very wide range of people are affected by the changes in the bus service. Many are elderly who rely on the bus service to get to their Health Centre and do their shopping. However, there are also many families who live in Fairfield Park without cars and having done their shopping and/or collected the children from school, value the bus to help them get back up the hills, especially on cold rainy days. Then there are also the younger disabled who cannot walk far and have young children but don't drive. Finally there are large numbers of people in the area who are becoming more environmentally conscious & believe in supporting increased use of public transport

For over 25 years there has been a bus service connecting all parts of the community. This was changed to a circular service with the building of a major supermarket on the London Road. It ran at 20 minute intervals in both directions Monday - Friday, with an hourly service in the evenings and a half hourly service on Sundays subsidized by BANES Council. Although there were problems with reliability & punctuality, at least it was frequent enough to compensate for this. On 10th May we discovered that, as from 23rd May, this circular route was to be split into 2 routes with a 30 minute service for each route Mon - Sat and an hourly service on Sundays, starting and finishing in the city centre. This effectively reduced the service to one third of the previous level and severed the connection between the two halves of the community, splitting the community and denying vast numbers of people access to essential services and local amenities.

The best that we have been offered so far by First Group is an assurance that the circular service could be reinstated but with an irregular timetable 50% of the previous level and only starting in September at the very earliest. We believe this would be likely to lead to a further reduction in ridership and jeopardise the viability of the service long term.

The situation is causing hardship as well as considerable inconvenience and is already having a negative impact on local businesses. Taxi firms have seen a doubling in calls on their services. For instance, residents of the socially deprived area of Snow Hill are using subsidized taxis at £10 per round trip to reach the Health Centre and this may be needed by others in the community.

The background is that your Transport Executive was given details of these cuts by Justin Davies, MD of First Bus in Southwest England, at the last Joint Transport Executive on 28 January in Weston Super Mare. But there appears to have been very little challenging of First Bus's proposals by BANES Council who, in addition, even reduced the Sunday Service. This was evidently a failure of consultation mechanisms put in place by this Board.

We recognize that the problems caused by the delays to completion of the bus/rail transport interchange are having a major effect on First Bus's ability to run an efficient bus service. Fortunately this process has now been facilitated by the approval for removal of the ramp at the Rail Station, but it is evident these works will be ongoing for a considerable period. In the meantime other bus priority measures could be put in place to ease the congestion such as a Temporary Traffic Order banning private vehicles from Dorchester Street (allowing access to rail & bus station only) on an 18 month trial basis and also measures on the London Rd including prioritising traffic light changes in favour of buses. Easing the congestion in the city centre would have a significant effect on the efficiency of the bus service to the wider Bath area and the 6/7 bus route in particular

We bring this matter to this Board as a matter of urgency, asking you to bear in mind that the current situation was set up without proper consultation and is causing considerable hardship and inconvenience.

In view of the fact that First Group and BANES Council Safer Communities Scrutiny Panel have acknowledged a grave mistake has been made in that they underestimated the importance of the link and the effect it would have on the community, we are requesting :-

- that the circular route be reinstated with an Emergency Registration with no less than a 30 min interval in each direction. This will promote ridership and thus be sustainable, enabling amenities and essential services to remain accessible, keeping our community alive.
- that the Sunday circular service be restored to no less than an hourly service in both directions
- that all buses on the route be of good quality with low floors to serve the needs of the many disabled and elderly passengers and those with push chairs and shopping trolleys who use the route
- that this be done with an application for an Emergency Registration so the service can be restored earlier than 4 months (ie before September) - we know this was achieved in other areas within the West of England Partnership (notably Highridge and Bedminster) in a situation similar to ours

Furthermore :-

- that measures be put in place to ease congestion in the city centre to assist First Bus to run punctual, reliable and profitable bus services in the wider Bath network as well as along the 6/7 bus route.

We hope you have some understanding of the seriousness of our case and the strength of feeling of the community we represent. We would hope that swift resolution of this situation would considerably improve the standing of First Bus/BANES/West of England Partnership in the eyes of those you serve. We can assure you, members of the community will want to know that there are rapid developments in dealing with this situation. Otherwise they may well choose to make the journey, even if it involves hiring a bus or two, to attend the next meeting of the Joint Transport Executive on 2nd July so you can hear from them first hand and address their concerns directly.