

The Independent Voice of Local Business.....

SOUTHAMPTON & FAREHAM CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

RESPONSE TO
HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL CONSULTATION ON
EASTLEIGH AREA PASSENGER TRANSPORT REVIEW - NOVEMBER 2006

1 What needs should Eastleigh bus service meet?

The national picture is that bus travel is for those too young, too old or too poor to drive, instead of it being promoted as a contributor to economic activity. Many bus services are failing to meet the need to offer an attractive alternative travel mode for appropriate journeys. This failure is evidenced by:-

- dramatic growth in demand for car parking at interchanges like Parkway station,
- growth of private bus hire like those used for schools and colleges,
- absence of bus service travel incorporated into Travel Plans by local schools.

However, there are at least a dozen bus services showing passenger growth of 10% plus, before the change to the concessionary fare scheme. Locally, Solent Blue Line has introduced new marketing products called Blue Star and Red Rocket which aim to redress the bus service image and the current decline in patronage. Their investment on the Waterside area last April is an example of the right mix of frequency, simplicity and vehicle quality needed to change the perception of the bus. Any recent small growth locally can largely be accounted for by the introduction of free travel for older people.

2 What travel needs are not being met / links not being provided?

2.1 Services for commuters

- Signpost the connections from the train to the bus-stop all along the route. A map somewhere at the station is not enough and not provided at each station,
- Real time and bus departure information in baggage reclaim at the airport,
- Car/taxi sharing should be promoted more for use by commuters.

The success of the night services has shown that there is a demand for out of hours services, not just for young revellers, but also for those commuters returning home by rail after 18.00 hours. The new Red Rocket services from Eastleigh to Boyatt Wood and Chandlers Ford finish at 18.00.

Car clubs should be seriously considered by Eastleigh as they can be offered at no cost to the local authority and can make a high impact on car use in urban centres and can be operated by individual organisations.

2.2 Families shopping

- buses with separate exit doors make getting on and off less of a struggle.
- Smart proximity cards for pre-purchase and no need for tickets.
- More flexible space for buggies and shopping.

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2.3 Schoolchildren

There should be less emphasis on school special buses. Develop local services so that the reliance on special buses available only twice a day – especially at colleges - is overcome. It is this inflexibility and high cost that encourages early acquisition of cars by students.

2.4 Teenagers

This element of the population is very mobile and can bring demand and consequently viability, at times other than the travel to work periods, but needs encouragement through availability and good people handling skills on the part of operators. As already said, any success in offering reasonably priced quality services on appropriate routes will have the benefit of deferring the decision to purchase and use a private car.

2.5 Elderly

It is this group that is showing a positive response to the free travel for the over 60 age group, but for many there is little choice. There is an opportunity to encourage bus patronage amongst the youngest by encouraging the elderly to start bringing their children and grandchildren along with them on their increasing number of trips. The emphasis needs to be improved for easy access and excellent customer care on the part of drivers. Ways should be now sought to have these people start to bring their children and grandchildren along with them on some of their increasing number of trips.

2.6 Disabled

The challenge is to have accessible buses guaranteed on every bus on the route with plenty of flexible space. Once again motivated caring drivers are needed to offer a first class level of service for their customers.

3 Matching Services to Needs -Which needs do these types of service best meet?

The nature of demand whether met or unmet should be considered, especially traditional routes and services with low patronage. Research needs to be done to discover what were the journeys the lost passengers used to make and if there are potential new passengers and what their potential journeys would be. This could be done by market research or leaflets at pay points in petrol stations and on the back of parking tickets. The research would simply ask which one journey the traveller would be prepared to take by bus and what would be the frequency of this journey.

4 Some rural bus services are no longer as well used for short distance travel as they once were. How could services such as Community Transport better suit users?

This question needs to be asked of the individual communities themselves. Community Transport where journeys are booked in advance means a flexibility of route and timing not possible with a bus service and modern computer technology enables the functioning of such versatility in a service.

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5 What improvements could be made to Community Transport services in Eastleigh?

It is assumed that Community Transport does not need to be exclusively for the elderly or disabled. Very frequent, smaller and environmentally friendly vehicles are needed to meet demand at certain times of day to link certain locations, but which should also serve medical and other public service destinations en route.

6 Any further comments or suggestions.

6.1 Where quality of a public transport service declines until it is no longer viable for the operator, the local authority has to step in to fund the service. Provision of this funding should be conditional on the operator demonstrating the cause of the decline has been addressed. Otherwise the funding simply finances the continuing decline.

6.2 The briefing refers to the plan to introduce roving inspectors to note patronage on local authority funded services. Bus patronage level information is readily available and in detail from the ticket machines and should be routinely supplied by the contractor to the customer (the Local Authority).

6.3 Rather than just monitoring bus service patronage, local authority supported services should be regularly monitored for reliability and service quality by monitoring contractors which are used by the best bus services. Independent and regular monitoring with published results is consistently used in the travel industry. Buses should not be any different to air or rail travel in this respect and successful published results would help improve the credibility of bus travel.

6.4 Money spent on infrastructure and publicity should be audited for results to discover if it could not be better spent on improving reliability and customer care. The high tech self service information facility at Eastleigh bus station is an example of this.

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