

REGENERATION, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

29 JANUARY 2015

TIMING OF BUS ROUTES AND BUS PUNCTUALITY

Report from: Robin Cooper, Director of Regeneration, Community & Culture

Author: David Bond, Parking & Transport Operations Manager

Summary

A report in response to the concerns raised by Members about bus reliability during peak times.

1. Background

- 1.1 The deregulation of local bus services in 1986, resulted in the break-up and privatisation of the National Bus Company and all operators declaring their commercial network, with local authorities being given the power to support loss making services, considered to be socially necessary, through a tendering process.
- 1.2 This also meant that Shire Counties and unitary authorities now only have direct responsibility for those services that they financially support, typically a small percentage of the network, in Medway's case, about 5%.
- 1.2 As the vast majority of the network is commercial, any complaints about those commercial services need to be made directly to the operator for investigation. There are, of course, a number of reasons why a service is unreliable, eg, vehicle breakdowns and staff shortages, within the operator's control, but many are not, for example, roadworks and traffic congestion.
- 1.4 Because congestion increases journey length, bus operators have to provide additional vehicles at peak times which also results in increased costs, costs which will often not necessarily be met by extra revenue through ticket sales.
- 1.5 Research has shown that both potential and current bus passengers' concerns relate to the punctuality and reliability of services. Reasons for poor punctuality may lie with either the operator, Local Authority or with other organisations such as utility companies, undertaking highway works, or a combination of these organisations. Consequently it is important to have a collaborative mechanism whereby performance can be monitored, problem areas can be identified, issues communicated and resolutions reached.

- 1.6 Periodically the Traffic Commissioner monitors the performance of local bus services across the country, the last time Medway Council was aware that the Traffic Commissioner measured bus punctuality in Medway was in 2009. All operators have a punctuality target of 95% set by the Traffic Commissioner, with a tolerance of not more than 1 minute early and not more than 5 minutes late at any timing point.
- 1.7 In March 2014, Medway Council and all the local bus operators signed a Punctuality Improvement Plan (PIP) in the presence of the South Eastern & Metropolitan Traffic Commissioner. The PIP sets out the responsibilities upon all signatories to make every effort to ensure that local bus services operate as reliably as possible and is attached as an appendix for reference.
- 1.8 However, despite having a PIP in place, bus operators have identified that a major cause of unreliability is as a result of traffic congestion on the network.
- 1.9 Officers from the Traffic Management and Parking & Transport Operations teams hold quarterly meetings with the local bus operators to discuss operational matters including identified congestion on the highway network. In addition, monthly roadworks meetings are held with local bus operators to raise awareness of potential operational issues on the network. These partnership arrangements allow for operators to plan changes to services, if necessary, including temporary diversion of services and timetable changes.
- 1.10 A bus real time passenger information system operates in Medway in partnership with Kent County Council and all buses in Medway are fitted with GPS tracker devices. The system enables real time bus service information to be displayed at 60 bus stops and 10 other central, public locations. All bus stop screens also provide audible announcements. Punctuality information from the system is also displayed in Medway's Traffic Operations Room. However, it is currently not possible to capture a time-series of bus punctuality data to enable analysis of bus punctuality in Medway across times of the day or for longer periods to enable trends to be assessed. However, there is the facility to give buses priority at all signalised junctions if they are delayed and this is to become operational within the next 12 months.

2. Future actions

- 2.1 Bus journey time punctuality information is currently captured in real time using on-bus GPS equipment, although the software cannot currently store the information for future analysis. To understand the scale and location of bus punctuality problems and to measure trends, officers are investigating software development to capture the bus journey time information to enable robust analysis to be undertaken. This would enable bus priority measures to be developed at locations where demonstrable operational problems exist. It is intended to implement bus priority at traffic signals within the next 12 months.
- 2.2 As a result of the Local Transport Plan and PIP a mix of measures to assist reliability have been developed including a short section of bus priority lane on Frindsbury Hill, near Sans Pareil roundabout (of particular benefit to Service 191 to Hoo and Grain, one of the services highlighted by Members as suffering from unreliability) plus limited lengths of parking restrictions, eg

around Marlowe Park and Earl Estate. It is planned for these projects to be progressed subject to future member support.

3. Risk Mangement

3.1 This report is for information only

4. Financial Implications

4.1 This report is for information only.

5. Legal Implications

5.1 This report is for information only.

6. Recommendations

6.1 The Committee is requested to note the report.

Lead officer contact

David Bond, Parking & Transport Operations Manager
Gun Wharf
334314, david.bond@medway.gov.uk

Background papers

None