

Brighton Area Buswatch

Representing local bus users



A branch of Bus Users UK

Buswatch News – April 2018

Welcome to Churchill Square



With summer at last approaching, this is the welcome many visitors and potential bus passengers see at Churchill Square. These are the busiest bus stops in the City and the information kiosk should be very busy, but all too often it is closed. The result is that people with enquiries ask bus drivers or walk away. Enquiries made to bus drivers delay buses, which is very frustrating for those already on board who want to get moving. It creates congestion too when buses behind cannot pass and leads to increased emissions within the low emission zone.

Imagine Brighton railway station with no staff, yet probably more people use buses to and from Churchill Square on a typical day than travel on trains from Brighton station. Buswatch has been raising the kiosk issue with Brighton & Hove Buses for over five years, but nothing has changed. In fact it has got worse lately because the kiosk door has been covered with timetable posters and a mirror, preventing people from seeing whether there is someone inside. It could not be less inviting and is such a contrast with the kiosk outside Brighton Station which is usually open during the daytime and where the staff are excellent.

The Churchill Square kiosk needs to be open daily throughout the day, so potential bus users can rely on it being open to get the information they need. It should also sell scratchcard tickets like the station kiosk. This would help to encourage more people to travel by bus and enable new passengers to buy tickets before they travel.

Those Brighton & Hove Bus Company profits

On 10 April The Argus ran a front page headline 'DISGRACEFUL' commenting on the £15 million profit made by Brighton & Hove Buses. This represents a 16% profit margin which I explained to their reporter was high for the transport industry. I was quoted as being "shocked and disappointed" which was accurate, based on that information. There is no doubt that our largest bus company is in a very healthy financial position. Passengers are rightly annoyed, because fares were increased in January, just nine months after the previous increase. At the same time frequencies were reduced on some routes, especially at weekends. The 21/21A service between Whitehawk and Brighton Marina was halved to just hourly, where two years ago it ran every 15 minutes. Night buses were cut back and completely withdrawn from some areas with no prior consultation. Not surprisingly this led to lots of complaints and petitions.

Towards the end of last year Buswatch was informed there had been a downturn in bus use. This was partly attributed to the temporary closure of North Street and the roadworks at Lewes Road/Elm Grove junction. We were told the company needed to take action and changes would be implemented in January, three months ahead of the normal timetable change in April. Bus users might have expected a reduction in fares to encourage people back on buses - which are certainly more reliable now - but apart from a small 'kids free' promotion in December there have been no special offers. Instead it feels as though passengers are being discouraged with higher fares. The recently published financial results refer to the year to July 2017. If profitability has fallen since, the drop cannot be large as there are still plenty of people using buses.

Here is a different view: there is no doubt The Argus was looking for a sensational headline, with some justification. The following day they reported an interview with Brighton & Hove's Managing Director Martin Harris in which he defended the company position. The company had re-invested profits in over thirty new buses in 2017. The number of buses allocated to the busiest services also had been increased to take account of worsening traffic congestion, which made those services more expensive to run. It has recently announced ambitious plans to move towards all electric fleet by around 2030. Brighton & Hove is a well-run company and MD Martin Harris is a career busman with a clear vision of the future. He has attended our meetings several times and has never given the impression his company is obsessed with making money. The company has financial targets like any other business and 2017 was clearly a good year.

Reaction on social media mostly related to fares so that is clearly the biggest issue. A few people did defend the profits. Brighton is good bus territory, densely populated with low car ownership, high numbers of students, lots of visitors, plenty of bus lanes, difficult and expensive parking and hilly terrain. So it is no great surprise that more people use buses in this city (per head of population) than anywhere else outside London. Despite two decades of growth, against a national trend of downward bus use, there are signs our local buses may be losing their appeal.

Bus companies face big challenges to avoid losing more passengers. If the closure of North Street for just six weeks impacts on profitability what is going to happen when the two-year long Valley Gardens project gets under way? There are other issues too, the bike share scheme is a huge success, Uber cabs are gaining ground, people are walking and cycling more to keep fit, and more people are working from home. There's nothing wrong with any of these, but they mean buses are no longer the first option for many people, so bus operators need to up their game.

Brighton & Hove Buses needs to do more to show it values its customers. The erratic opening of the Churchill Square kiosk is a clear failure. Passengers like to seek advice from real people, especially when services are disrupted. Bland messages at bus stops telling people to 'Go to Sea Life Centre for routes 12, 12X etc' are useful but they don't help visitors who don't know their way around. There should be more staff at busy City Centre stops to give information on the best alternatives. Spare buses should be available to provide free shuttle services from Churchill Square to connect with buses when they are starting from Old Steine or Sea Life Centre.

Buses need to be cleaner too, inside and out. Passengers don't want to see torn copies of Metro strewn all over the floor. A few years ago we suggested cleaners on buses at strategic points like Churchill Square. The Council offered to provide extra bins for the cleaners, but nothing happened. Route branded buses should run on the correct routes; there is no point painting a route number and map on the side if it is wrong and confuses people. Worst offenders are the purple and gold 'Regency Route' buses which should be on the 28 & 29 to Lewes, Ringmer and Tunbridge Wells. Every day several are used on short city services, so long distance passengers are given old buses which have uncomfortable and worn out seats and rattle constantly. The recent trial of two smart new high spec 'ADL Enviro' buses won some fantastic reviews on social media. It was a great idea to put them on the 21, 23 & 46 where new buses are rarely seen, so they made a bigger impact. Let's have some of these soon and put some on these routes to replace the oldest buses.

The company needs to lobby harder for new bus lanes and other priority measures such as improving the flow of buses at the Clock Tower junction. It needs to seek funding to experiment with new routes across the city so people can get around without going through the City Centre. Contactless card payments (already available on Stagecoach buses) should be introduced to speed up boarding.

Brighton Area Buswatch will continue to press for improvements. We are not a protest group, but we are passionate about getting more people to travel by bus. Good bus services help to solve our traffic problems and reduce emissions.

Night bus survey

Brighton & Hove Buses is carrying out a Night Bus Survey to identify potential improvements to late night services. This follows the outcry about cuts imposed in January. Have your say [here](#): Your views are important even if you only travel occasionally at night. Of course this survey should have taken place last year, before any cuts were planned, but at least the company has promised to consider implementing some improvements from June where a clear evidence of demand is identified.

Compass Travel wins 37 & 37B contact

Congratulations to Compass Travel which has won a three-year contract to continue to operate the 37 & 37B routes between Meadowview and Bristol Estate. The timetable will be similar but there will be a much improved evening service on Mondays to Saturdays, every 40 minutes throughout the route. This replaces the current 75-minute frequency which has been the subject of many complaints, especially from residents in Meadowview and Bristol Estate. Four brand new ultra-low emission buses are being purchased with free Wi-Fi, USB sockets and next stop announcements. Brighton & Hove Key Cards, scratchcards and M tickets will continue to be accepted.

News from The Big Lemon

Last month we reported that The Big Lemon had launched a bond offer to raise £405,000 to buy three brand new electric buses. This target was reached within three weeks and the buses have now been ordered for delivery by the autumn. They will run on routes 16/66, 47, 52, 56 & 57 adding to the two electric buses already in use. The company is continuing to raise funds and is increasing its target by £135,000 to finance the purchase of a further electric bus. To invest in bonds please contact: anna@thebiglemon.com.

The company has also announced its summer 2018 Sunday walks programme. This kicks off on Sunday 29 April with a 5.2 mile walk from Horsted Keynes to Kingscote. Walks take place twice a month from June and all end at a pub.

West Sussex Consultation

West Sussex County Council has launched a Bus Strategy Consultation to develop policies for bus services and community transport between 2018 and 2026. For further details contact www.westsussex.gov.uk/buses. or call 01243 642105.

Brighton Area Buswatch meeting

The next meeting with bus company managers and Brighton & Hove City Council will be at 5pm on **Wednesday 18 July 2018** 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-May 2018. E mail: brightonbuswatch@gmail.com. Phone: 01273 620215



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Bus Users
Working for passengers

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