

PET(4)-09-12 : Tuesday 29 May 2012

P-04-380 : Bring back our bus! Petition against the removal of scheduled bus services from east Lampeter, Cwmann & Pencarreg

Response from Peter Hoskins

I write to submit remarks on a letter dated 21st April 2012 from Carl Sargeant AM to William Powell AM, Chair of Petitions Committee.

Residents of the three adversely affected settlements must accept that under current law in Wales, as cited by the Minister, a local authority is prevented from subsidising a bus service that would compete with an already registered commercial service. My purpose therefore is not to challenge the application of the law but to draw attention to the resultant unacceptable situation following the withdrawal by Arriva from service X40.

I feel it incumbent to advise the Minister that his conclusion that the extension of the 'very popular' Bwcabus experiment to the affected settlements has enjoyed much if any popularity is seriously mistaken. This became evident at an extraordinary surgery hosted by Mark Williams MP in Lampeter on Friday 27th April 2012 where Cribyn residents recalled in detail many instances of Bwcabus service failure.

It was revealed that favourable reports collected on the performance of Bwcabus are exclusively from users who have actually managed to book a service that has turned up and delivered them to the requested destination in accordance with the undertaking to provide service given at the time a telephone booking was made. The opinions of users who did not manage to secure service are not included in any survey of use. Needless to say this gives an indisputably unbalanced view of customer satisfaction.

I understand from casual conversation from Arriva drivers that the service bus is required to wait for up to 15 minutes for the arrival of a Bwcabus vehicle at an identified stop where a passenger may alight from the Bwcabus vehicle to board the service bus. This has resulted in instances of severe delay to the service bus.

On another occasion when I raised the subject of Bwcabus the Arriva driver recounted to me the experience of an old lady in Ffostrasol, I think it was, who used to catch the 551, the service that ran from New Quay to Pencader or covered parts of this route until displaced by Bwcabus. The lady had a hospital appointment at Glangwili and duly telephoned Bwcabus in good time to be informed that on the day of her appointment the vehicle would pick her up. At 9.30 on the day of intended travel she received a call from Bwcabus stating that her journey had been cancelled as no one else had booked in the meantime which meant that the journey could not be justified. She then had to book a taxi in haste which cost her 18 GBP.

I cannot use the Bwcabus service myself since I habitually use the 19.00

40 service from Aberystwyth to return home from work. I am now obliged to alight in Lampeter as Cwmann and Pencarreg are no longer served by Arriva. I therefore have no choice but to walk home beyond Cwmann. I count myself among the fortunate or certainly among the less adversely affected. The Bwcabus vehicles are required to be back at their base by 19.00 hours. This therefore precludes any Bwcabus connection from Lampeter to Cwmann and Pencarreg for passengers alighting in Lampeter from the 18.00 or 19.00 southbound 40 services from Aberystwyth.

I make no effort to conceal my deep disgust at what I consider to be a truly scandalous investment of substantial monies in what amounts to no more than a half-baked scheme which by its extension to Cribyn, Cwmann and Penacerrg has been revealed to be an unworkable and disproportionately if not prohibitively expensive misadventure, strikingly so in times of severe financial restraint. I have no idea how the monies from the initial investment of 850K GBP were applied.

<http://www.sirgaerfyrddin.gov.uk/English/transport/Buses/TravelTimes/Pages/Bwcabus1yearon.aspx>

It alarms me to discover that yet further monies in the sum of 1.3M GBP were devoted to this scheme last year. What is there to show for all this investment? All I see is four leased vehicles and positions created in local government to operate the so-called service.

<http://transport.research.glam.ac.uk/news/en/2011/jun/08/funding-boost-bwcabus/>

All I read on this second page is sickening self-congratulation concealing the truth of the experiment as an unqualified disaster. The scheme may have found favour in the Llandysul area but that is a rather different situation from Cribyn, Cwmann and Pencarreg. Until the establishment of Arriva service 41 in February 2012 Llandysul enjoyed only scant regular through services. The withdrawal of service 461 can only have aggravated the situation. Any mini-bus service offering connection from Llandysul to the route of the more frequent service 460 was bound to be welcomed no matter how it were branded, be it Dial-A-Ride, Community Transport or even Bwcabus. The name of the service has no bearing on its claimed success.

As if discovery of the investment of what I can only describe as an obscene amount of money into this reckless scheme is not serious cause enough for public concern in times of restraint I discovered two weeks ago that Carmarthenshire County Council does in fact operate a parallel Dial-A-Ride scheme. Clearly the Bwcabus scheme is nothing but another Dial-A-Ride scheme under a silly new name to distinguish it from the existing scheme. The procedure for booking a journey may be slightly different but I discern no significant difference let alone any element of novelty in Bwcabus that has brought it plaudits from within Wales and beyond.

I am exercised to know how these monies have been dissipated. I am concerned about the funding of the Bwcabus project at Glamorgan University. I have not investigated its source of funding or whether it is paid in tranches throughout the duration of the project but if the Welsh Government has any influence upon its provision I urge the Minister to order a review without delay. It crosses my mind that a sum of 1.3M GBP could have been more profitably applied to the acquisition of a small fleet of Optare buses among any number of other much more worthwhile causes to assist communities which suddenly find themselves deprived of a regular and popular bus service which they have enjoyed for decades. It should not be overlooked that communities such as Cribyn, Cwmann and Pencarreg have flourished and continue to attract residents because of the very provision of desired services including, until of late, bus services.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Bwcabus scheme should be scrapped before any further monies are misguidedly squandered on it. In Cribyn, Cwmann and Pencarreg it has been experienced and shown to be an unworkable scheme which stands absolutely no chance of fulfilling the needs of unjustifiably deprived residents of those places arising from the unacceptable new route chosen by Arriva for their unpopular service 40.