

Meeting: Council

Date: 29 November 2023

From: Councillor C Eberle

To: Councillor Gillbe, Executive Member for Planning and Transport.

Question:

Can the Executive Member give an update on the Council's plans and progress in increasing the use of public transport, both in pursuance of the Climate Change Action Plan, and also to help those residents who do not have access to car transport; particularly in relation to bus transport to and from Crowthorne and Sandhurst railway stations?

Answer:

Bus patronage within Bracknell Forest is continuing to grow back following the COVID pandemic. Data from Thames Valley Buses, who operate 80% of routes within borough, shows that overall patronage is up 17% since the start of 2023 and up by 26% compared to this time last year. Whilst patronage on individual services will vary, these figures show that travel by bus is broadly 3% down on pre-pandemic levels.

Commercial services are performing better than council supported routes, and fare paying passengers have returned in much greater numbers than bus pass holders. In part this is due to the positive impact of the national £2 single fare cap, but also the national change in travel habits of our older population.

Promotion of bus travel by operators is key, but the council can also play a part. Next month we are promoting bus use on our supported services through a free bus offer for journeys heading to the town centre on the first four Saturdays in December. We hope to encourage non-bus users to leave the car at home during this busy period and instead enjoy the experience of modern bus travel. Hopefully for many this will be an introduction to the range of benefits that bus travel has to offer.

We will also continue to work closely with bus operators to identify how bus travel can be made easier and more convenient. Technology has its part to play, not only on the bus but also through the use of real-time information for bus arrival and departure times and to simplify how passengers pay for their fare. I am pleased to say that local bus operators are equally keen to drive these improvements forward.

However, it is important to encourage our residents to use their local bus services. The contribution that bus travel can make to the environment is clear, but for those without any other form of transport it can also be a life-line. Alongside our work with community transport providers, and voluntary groups such as the Arc, (who run a voluntary car scheme), the Council continues to fund a network of bus services that keep the borough connected. But the cost of these services continues to grow.

Against the back-drop of local authority funding pressures, providing new bus services that cannot otherwise be provided commercially by operators is now unaffordable. Therefore partnership working with local town and parish councils will be key in order to share the challenges of keeping our communities connected. This is a conversation which I hope can take place with regard to connecting people and facilities within Crowthorne and Sandhurst, for example, and I know that officers are continuing to explore the practical opportunities available.

In closing, I would like to encourage our residents to support their local bus services in the best way possible – and that is to travel by bus whenever they can. Not just to enjoy a journey that helps the environment, but also to help maintain the viability of those services for those who rely on them.