

## READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

POLICY COMMITTEE

30 OCTOBER 2017

### QUESTION NO. 1

James Berrie to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

#### Proposed changes to bus services in Caversham

At the time of submitting this question, a week into an initial 10 day consultation, there are still no documents produced by Reading Buses which detail the sheer number of bus stops due to be axed and huge sections of the Caversham community who will now be unable to reach a Reading bus. An online petition which campaigners have created reached 800 signatures in less than 48 hours\*\*. Does the Lead Member for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport agree with the Reading Buses Pink bus route proposals, which will also include the loss of 10 bus stops on route 22 and the loss of 5 stops on the 24?

REPLY by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Mr Berrie for his question.

Much has happened since he submitted his question.

I have already made known, both to the Chair and CEO of Reading Buses, my concern at the initially very short and inadequate consultation period, and I welcome the fact that this has now been extended until 10<sup>th</sup> November.

Comprehensive feedback, detailing concerns about the initial proposed changes to Caversham services, has been shared with Reading Buses. I am pleased to note that they have subsequently revised the initial service change proposals, following a review of feedback submitted by users and other stakeholders.

Details of the latest revised proposals were published last week, and set out the intention to retain services to the main stops at the Cloisters and the soon to open Albert Road care facility. I have no doubt that Mr Berrie and others will study these proposals and respond accordingly.

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### QUESTION NO. 2

James Berrie to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

#### Consultation on Proposed Changes to Bus Services

Does the Lead Member for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport share our concerns that Reading Buses, which is 100% owned by Reading Borough Council, has not followed good practice in their consultation on the proposed changes in Caversham by providing just 10 days initially for their consultation on the Pink bus route? Reading Buses have since allowed a period of three weeks in total for this consultation, one of which is a school holiday, when the national minimum guidance for public consultations is four weeks and ideally 12. If the Lead Member shares our concerns over the length of the consultation period, will he agree to write to Reading Buses to request an extension to the consultation period to the middle of November to enable there to be a minimum of four weeks?

REPLY by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Mr Berrie for his question.

As I said in my previous reply I have already made known, both to the Chair and CEO of Reading Buses, my concern at the initially very short and inadequate consultation period, and I welcome the extended period until 10<sup>th</sup> November.

In strict legal terms Reading Transport Ltd is not obliged to consult on any service changes, but as it is owned by the Council we have always expected it to consult properly on any proposals for major service changes. This has been the case since I was Chair of Reading Buses.

It's worth noting that no other private bus company operating in Caversham (and I believe there are now four) has consulted with, or intends to consult with, either RBC or customers or any other body on changes it may make to its bus services.

Reading Transport Ltd has extended the consultation period until 10th November but the need to make changes due to financial performance, and the need for eight weeks' notice of such changes to be given to the Traffic Commissioner before any changes can be made, means that the time given for voluntary consultation cannot be extended indefinitely.

Reading Buses have informed us that, regrettably, early publications on their website quoted only a 10 day response window to the consultation. This was an error and the consultation period was subsequently extended to 31<sup>st</sup> October. The consultation period has now been further extended to 10<sup>th</sup> November, following new changes to their original proposals, which will give all interested parties a total of just over four weeks to respond to the proposals.

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### QUESTION NO. 3

James Berrie to ask the Lead Councillor for Adult Social Care:

#### Proposed Bus Service Changes - Access to Community Facilities

Does the Lead Member for Adult Social Care share the concerns which have been expressed by many volunteers and also developers and operators involved in supported housing throughout Caversham about the proposed changes to the Pink routes?

I am sure that the Lead Member is aware that the new development in Albert Road, the residences in Highmoor Road, Regency Heights and The Cloisters all rely (or will rely) on the existing bus service both to get into Caversham and Reading and also to reach the community facilities available in Highmoor Road Church and soon the new communal facilities at the Albert Road Extra Care development.

The proposed removal of the 22 service will cause a great deal of isolation and difficulty for those residents who will be unable to access support. If the Lead Member does share these concerns, will she agree to submit a response as soon as possible to the current consultation being run by Reading Buses to formally express her concerns as the Lead Member for Adult Social Care?

REPLY by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Mr Berrie for his question. As this is primarily a question about the proposed bus service changes in Caversham I shall be answering this with the agreement of the Lead Member for Adult Social Care.

As colleagues know a number of public meetings have taken place around Caversham and these have been well attended by concerned members of the public. The consultation has already raised many concerns particular for the older residents residing in the areas most affected.

In addition the proposed service changes were also discussed at the Loneliness and Social Isolation meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> October 2017, where an action was agreed to ensure that A2 Dominion, who are developing the previous Arthur Clark/Albert Road site, should be informed of the proposed changes to the bus route. This action has been completed.

A Reading Buses spokesperson is also scheduled to attend the Older People's Working Group on 3<sup>rd</sup> November to report on changes. The Older People's Working Group is made up of representatives of many vulnerable services users and groups delivering services to older people.

As I said in my reply to your first question, I am pleased to note that Reading Buses have subsequently revised the initial service change proposals, following a review of feedback submitted by users and other stakeholders.

Details of the revised proposals were published last week and set out the intention to retain services to the main stops at the Cloisters and the soon to open Albert Road care facility.

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### QUESTION NO. 4

Paul Matthews to ask the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport:

#### Proposed Bus Service Changes in Caversham

We have been informed by Reading Transport Ltd that Reading Borough Council, its only shareholder, requires a dividend from Reading Transport Ltd.

Reading Transport has proposed major reductions in bus service provision throughout Caversham and Emmer Green in an attempt to deliver this dividend.

The service changes were inadequately described, with a disappointing availability of publicity material and an unreasonably short deadline for comments.

Reading Transport has now issued another confusing set of proposals, in a desperate attempt to respond to passenger concerns, and given a new deadline.

The 10<sup>th</sup> November still does not allow time for proper consideration of the changes. Reading Transport has declared that it has five years of passenger travel data but has not shared this with us or provided passenger forecasts for the proposed bus routes.

We have no confidence in Reading Transport being able to design new bus services, as they are returning to some of the route changes that were a miserable failure five years ago.

The independent Transport Commission, which reported in 2008, recommended a step change to get people out of their cars and on to public transport. Reading Transport seems determined to make this step change in reverse.

**As its only shareholder, will Reading Borough Council insist that Reading Transport Ltd engages with bus users and residents' associations and shares ridership data and forecasts in order to seek an acceptable resolution to the bus service problems in Caversham?**

**REPLY** by Councillor Page (Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport):

I thank Mr Matthews for his question.

I have already made known, both to the Chair and CEO of Reading Buses, my concern at the initially very short and inadequate consultation period, and I welcome the extended period until 10<sup>th</sup> November.

Reading Transport Ltd is a wholly owned subsidiary of Reading Borough Council and operates as a separate legal entity. As a bus operator licensed by the Traffic Commissioner the company is obliged to operate bus services in a commercial manner.

In the past the company has delivered a range of bus services in order to fulfil the transport policies of its owner, Reading Borough Council. For some years the Council was in a position to not require a dividend in the form of cash at a time when the bus company needed all the investment money that it could raise to bring about a transformation in the services offered. This has resulted in substantial increases in passenger numbers over the past few years and has reversed a previously declining market.

In the current financial situation the Council can no longer afford to ignore potential sources of revenue funding and has asked Reading Transport Ltd to contribute a cash dividend. However the need for a dividend does not alter the situation which has existed for some time in Caversham whereby the bus services have been subsidised by other routes across the wider Reading area.

The company has reviewed the Caversham bus services and concluded that some major changes are required in order to reduce the current losses. The initial set of proposals has not met with approval from residents of Caversham and the company has taken on board much of the criticism and comments received. The second set of proposals appears to address many of the previous concerns.

The company is obliged to operate in a commercial environment whereby competitors can and do set up alternative routes which can take away revenue. In view of this it would not be appropriate for detailed customer and revenue statistics to be made publically available.

Caversham as a whole now has significantly more bus services operated by five different companies. None of the other privately owned bus companies are expected to contribute to the delivery of Reading Borough Council transport policies. No other company operating in Caversham has consulted with, or intends to consult with, either RBC or customers or any other body on changes it may make to its bus services. In strict legal terms Reading Transport Ltd is not obliged to consult, but as it is owned by the Council we have always expected it to consult on any proposals for major service changes.

Reading Transport Ltd has extended the consultation period until 10th November but the need to make changes due to financial performance, and the need for 8 weeks' notice of such changes to be given to the Traffic Commissioner before any changes can be made, means that the time given for voluntary consultation cannot be extended indefinitely.

The issue is one of local bus services and local people have already contacted the company and made their views known. Reading Buses will do its best to consider these and move ahead with changes that take account of the main points made by respondents, in order to avoid loss-making continuing at its current level.