

QUESTION NO. 1

Mike Facherty to ask the Chair:

Reading Buses 22 Service

We are very fortunate that Reading Borough Council owns Reading Buses.

What steps will the Chair take to reassure the community that Reading Buses will maintain the existing 22's service?

REPLY by the Chair of the Traffic Management Sub-Committee.

I invite Councillor Page, the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

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

I thank Mr Facherty for his question.

Reading Buses' consultation on the future of the pink routes in Caversham was undertaken to address the issues that currently see the Caversham network of buses lose a considerable amount of money per year - over £0.5m.

Use of services north of the river has been in decline in contrast to the rest of the company's bus network that is in growth. The company has supported these loss-making routes as long as possible, but it was clear that action desperately needed to be taken.

Reading Buses attended two public meetings that allowed them to hear concerns from residents face-to-face, and they also received well over 600 individual feedback responses. Concerns centred on provision for older customers who may rely on the services more than the average bus user, but may not use the service that frequently. The company listened to this and all other concerns and proposals.

The outcome of this consultation is to retain the current route structure, so all Caversham residents will continue to be served by buses on the same roads as now. However there is still a vital need to make savings and so, given opposition to plans to link some routes using Oakley Road to increase service in this area, the only choice remaining is to reduce daytime frequencies in Caversham Heights on pink 22 to a level that is financially sustainable given current levels of use.

Despite needing to reduce losses, Reading Buses remains keen to pursue enhancements where they can be delivered efficiently within existing resources and has also identified a number of new improvements due to the consultation.

There will be minor revisions to timetables in order to better space the times of buses between Caversham Centre and Central Reading, improve train connections at the Northern Interchange and optimise early morning and late evening journey provision.

Caversham Heights Pink 22 is currently the least used service of the Caversham network and so is the service that will see the most changes.

- Pink 22 will continue to operate every half hour during weekday morning and evening commuting times, but will be reduced to hourly off peak (after 9am and up to 3pm) and on Saturdays. Appropriately timed school journeys will also be included.
- The lightly used hourly Sunday service will be replaced with a trial service of smaller minibus type buses operating a modified timetable. Alternative buses will also be available to more users thanks to the negotiation of a new joint ticketing arrangement on the recently relaunched Thames Travel 'River Rapids' X39/40 which serves many stops on the nearby main road. Both Reading Buses return and day tickets will be accepted on this half hourly service (hourly on Sundays) between Reading, Caversham Bridge, St. Peter's Hill, Woodcote Road and Upper Woodcote Road (as far as Shepherd Lane). Information about this will be included in Reading Buses' publicity to provide one source of bus information for all routes serving the area.
- Pink 22 will continue to serve Albert Road and The Mount and will additionally be enhanced to offer a much requested through link from Caversham Heights and Caversham Centre to the Royal Berkshire Hospital Monday-Saturday, by replacing route 19 to/from Lower Early.

The future of the service

Reading Buses is currently working on the full detailed timetables and will make them available at the earliest opportunity.

It is important to note that, whilst it has been heartening to see the strength of support for the Caversham bus services, Reading Buses cannot hide from the fact that these services are in decline and require cost savings and increased customer numbers to secure their long-term future.

I and Reading Buses ask that all those who have been active in feeding back and wanting to keep the buses as they are now help to spread the word about the changes, and support these services by using them.

The revised plans deliver less savings than originally intended, so only an increase in customers will help secure the long-term future of the bus routes in Caversham. If everyone who responded to the consultation and attended the recent meetings were to use the buses regularly, the future of this service would be secured.

QUESTION NO. 2

Stephen Roberts to ask the Chair:

Reading Buses 22 Service

Reading Buses have a reputation for excellence in Reading, winning awards for 'Putting Passengers First' in 2016 and 'Making Buses a Better Choice' just a few weeks ago in 2017. Reading Buses have raised expectations of its services and we seek reassurance in the current climate for the maintenance of the 22 service at least to the existing level of provision.

Bearing in mind....

Caversham Heights' demographics has the highest percentage of residents over 65 in the Borough. A substantial number of passengers on the 22 have concessionary bus passes. The bus is their lifeline.

Congestion will become worse with more people taking to their cars (for those who have one) and further disadvantaging those who do not have access to cars and for whom the bus service is an essential lifeline.

Reading already has a heavily congested road network. Caversham is a major part of this network and when it is congested the rest of Reading grinds to a halt, as has occurred in recent months. Locally, the Cow Lane bridges will continue to be a source of congestion for much of 2018 and further cars joining the already heavily congested road network will continue to slow down movement.

A fit for purpose 22 bus route is part of the solution to improvements in Reading's overall public transport network. In addition, the reduction of the 22 to an hourly off-peak service goes against Green Travel and Transport Policy expectations.

There are limited facilities in Caversham Heights, no doctors surgeries, pharmacy, adult education, supermarket and schools (at the moment), and it is necessary for all residents to travel into Caversham Centre to access amenities. Reducing the bus to once an hour will cut off vital parts of the community from those living on the route without access to a car.

The changes will impact the young, elderly and disabled negatively.

The 22 route serves five residential care homes - staff and residents need a regular bus service.

Commuters come and go throughout the day, not just within rush hours. It is necessary for many shift workers to access their place of work between the hours of 10am - 2pm, a reduction to once an hour is going to cause great hardship to many.

The community never asked for a direct bus to the hospital, but instead better information on where to change to a connecting bus to take onwards to RBH. We fear a bus travelling all the way to Lower Earley and back again once an hour is going to result in regularly delayed buses on an already severely cut service.

REPLY by the Chair of the Traffic Management Sub-Committee.

I invite Councillor Page, the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

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

I thank Mr Roberts for his question and would refer him to the reply I have just given to question 1.

Please see response below to question 1:

Reading Buses' consultation on the future of the pink routes in Caversham was undertaken to address the issues that currently see the Caversham network of buses lose a considerable amount of money per year - over £0.5m.

Use of services north of the river has been in decline in contrast to the rest of the company's bus network that is in growth. The company has supported these loss-making routes as long as possible, but it was clear that action desperately needed to be taken.

Reading Buses attended two public meetings that allowed them to hear concerns from residents face-to-face, and they also received well over 600 individual feedback responses. Concerns centred on provision for older customers who may rely on the services more than the average bus user, but may not use the service that frequently. The company listened to this and all other concerns and proposals.

The outcome of this consultation is to retain the current route structure, so all Caversham residents will continue to be served by buses on the same roads as now. However there is still a vital need to make savings and so, given opposition to plans to link some routes using Oakley Road to increase service in this area, the only choice remaining is to reduce daytime frequencies in Caversham Heights on pink 22 to a level that is financially sustainable given current levels of use.

Despite needing to reduce losses, Reading Buses remains keen to pursue enhancements where they can be delivered efficiently within existing resources and has also identified a number of new improvements due to the consultation.

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The future of the service

Reading Buses is currently working on the full detailed timetables and will make them available at the earliest opportunity.

It is important to note that, whilst it has been heartening to see the strength of support for the Caversham bus services, Reading Buses cannot hide from the fact that these services are in decline and require cost savings and increased customer numbers to secure their long-term future.

I and Reading Buses ask that all those who have been active in feeding back and wanting to keep the buses as they are now help to spread the word about the changes, and support these services by using them.

The revised plans deliver less savings than originally intended, so only an increase in customers will help secure the long-term future of the bus routes in Caversham. If everyone who responded to the consultation and attended the recent meetings were to use the buses regularly, the future of this service would be secured.

QUESTION NO. 3

Judith Dawson to ask the Chair:

Reading Buses 22 Service

Reading Buses' decision to cut back the 22 bus service, instead of improving the frequency as had originally been proposed, shocked the community. The changes being imposed on this route were not consulted on and are in stark contrast to that of the earlier proposals made. Prior to the consultation no one had been informed that the bus service was at risk of being cut to one an hour.

We ask the Chair to support Concerned of Caversham's call for Reading Buses to retain the current 22 service level and request that the Council support and encourage the company to deliver the necessary and justified expectations of the community.

REPLY by the Chair of the Traffic Management Sub-Committee.

I invite Councillor Page, the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

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

I thank Ms Dawson for her question and would refer her to the reply I have just given to question 1.

Please see response below to question 1:

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QUESTION NO. 4

Jackie Holland to ask the Chair:

Traffic Lights at the Junction of Gosbrook Road and George Street

I would like to know the thinking behind the phasing of the traffic lights at the junction of Gosbrook road and George Street (B3345) which are particularly bad in the peak morning hours when trying to turn left to go over Reading bridge. Clearly adjustments are required as they have been causing significant backlogs for some time and this morning the tailbacks were right through onto the Henley Road which is totally ridiculous when there is little traffic coming from the Caversham direction.

REPLY by the Chair of the Traffic Management Sub-Committee.

I invite Councillor Page, the Lead Councillor for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport to make the response on my behalf.

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

I thank Ms Holland for her question:

There is no deliberate change to the timings at the junction of George Street with Gosbrook Road. The site has a fault in the way that it collects and processes the traffic demand. A temporary fix was applied over the Christmas holiday period and the contractor is now back in Reading to ensure the fault is permanently resolved and the traffic signals are responding to traffic as expected.

We are aware that the issue did recur earlier this week as commuters returned to their usual travel patterns and our maintenance contractor has assessed that situation separately.

The issue is not fully resolved yet but our contractor has committed resources until it is to our satisfaction.