

James Penman
Reading Borough Council

29 November 2023

To whom it may concern,

Informal Consultation: Kings Road Outbound Bus Lane Change of Use

I write to outline our strong opposition to the proposal to allow Private Hire Vehicles (PHVs) to use the bus lane on Kings Road. Enabling access for a wider range of vehicles would increase the volumes of traffic using the bus lane, which would inevitably have an impact on the effectiveness of the lane for its core purpose.

The benefits of bus lanes are that they:

- increase bus service reliability,
- improve bus passenger journey times,
- encourage the use of public transport,
- provide a safer lane for cyclists,
- provide priority for emergency vehicles.

The local bus services that we operate are a vital part of managing congestion and pollution in Reading, serving a wide variety of destinations, and are open and affordable to everybody. The lane on Kings Road area also forms part of a red route, further highlighting the importance of the core purple 17 East-West service that we provide. We do not think it is appropriate for the Council to erode these facilities, especially as no clear public benefit has been identified for doing so.

Kings Road benefits from a comprehensive local bus service carrying millions of residents a year, all provided on a self-financing basis, in part due to the ability to operate services efficiently. The flagship purple 17 route runs 24 hours a day 7 days a week, something that is extremely rare in the UK. It is supplemented by the leopard 3 to the Hospital and Arborfield, the lion 4/X4 to Winnersh, Wokingham and Bracknell, the orange 13/14 to Woodley, the little oranges to the Hospital, Lower Earley and Woodley, and the Hospital park & ride 300. There is also Thames Valley Buses route 127/8 to Twyford and Wokingham, Arriva route 850 to Henley and High Wycombe, First's RailAir 1 service to Heathrow, and the Thames Valley Park shuttle service. We are also in the process of rebuilding the Winnersh Triangle park & ride 500 service back following the pandemic and carpark reconstruction. These comprise of at least 30 buses per hour in each direction, highlighting the importance of the corridor.

Eroding the strength of the infrastructure that supports this extremely comprehensive public service would have a detrimental impact on our ability to maintain the service. Slower, less efficient services suffer from being less attractive to use and more expensive to operate. Whilst the addition of PHVs might sound like a small request, they will cause some additional delays and abstract some patronage from more environmentally sustainable modes, which is not desirable.

In most cities in the UK, only public taxis can use bus lanes, while PHVs are not allowed. This is because public taxis are considered to provide a public service similar to buses, while PHVs are seen as private cars. Public taxis also have stricter licensing and safety standards than PHVs, and they are subject to metered fares regulated by local authorities. Given the apparent lack of a cap on the number of licenced PHVs, opening bus lanes to PHVs could lead to a marked worsening on traffic volumes throughout the day, and worsening safety.

We see this proposal as a commercial request from PHV operators and cannot see any evidence that it would generate an environmental or wider benefit to the local community. Ultimately, PHVs come with the same challenges as privately driven motor vehicles and can price their services based on the time it takes to take private bookings to their destinations outside of the bus lanes. Allowing access would simply undermine bus and taxi patronage.

The petition presented to the Council 1st July 2022, and published in the November 2022 Traffic Committee meeting minutes, quotes just one specific example of how the request would be of benefit to the public. It quotes a "VIP client" who is regularly transported to/from the Airport being needlessly "stranded" on the A329 due to congestion. Given the existence of a high-quality express coach service from Reading to the Airport provided by First Group, there is no reason for the PHV to be used. The transportation VIPs is hardly a benefit to the general public – in fact it is fundamentally wrong to inconvenience the many bus users for the benefit of a few VIPs.

We understand why experiments to permit PHVs were undertaken with the inbound bus lane in June 2013. We suspect that this location is the only example in the borough, on account of it's unique status as a contraflow lane. We disagree that it has been "successful" because the additional vehicles cause delays for buses trying to pass through the short phase traffic signals at Eldon Road, especially as they are not fitted with the same traffic light priority equipment as our buses. We welcomed the restriction on PHVs from outside the borough that was re-introduced on an experimental basis in July 2019, and would formally like to request that the exclusion is extended to all PHVs at the earliest opportunity to bring things in line with the rest of town and reduce requests for other bus facilities to be eroded.

Reading Borough Council introduced a statutory Enhanced Partnership in April 2022, within which there is a legally binding commitment to retain all existing bus priority measures, and to make further improvements subject to the availability funding. Opening the bus lane to PHVs would be an erosion of the facilities currently provided for bus services, and therefore contrary to this legal agreement. The associated Bus Service Improvement Plan proposes additional bus lanes in the nearby London Road that align with the objectives of the National Bus Strategy, and we would like to continue working together to find ways to enhance bus service efficiency.

Yours sincerely,



Robert Williams
Chief Executive Officer