

A Municipal Bus Service or “a fully commercial” service?

When Swindon Council ended the leg of the journey of the No 18 bus service, from Park South to the Great Western Hospital, they consoled local people with the fact that the No 30 service stopped at Cavendish Square and still served the hospital. It still represented a worsening of the service since it was only hourly and did not run beyond the main body of the day. People using it had long waits before or after their appointments. However, to add insult to injury the Council has now decided to end the No 30, so there will be no direct route from Parks to GWH. So near yet so far.

To get there people will either have to

- walk to Queens Drive where the No 16 picks up at the New College stop, or
- get the No17 to old Walcot and cross over the main road to the New College stop or
- take the No 17 all the way into town and pick up the 16 there.

This inconvenience will surely add to car journeys to the hospital. With a direct bus service people with cars might not bother taking it (especially with the parking problems at the hospital) but without a direct service, taking the car is much quicker.

Whilst the walk to Queens Drive is not a problem for those who are fit, if you are old, disabled, or ill then it's a real problem. Those people who visit the hospital regularly as out-patients tend to be older, often people with chronic illnesses.

Of course, retired people can at least use their pass, but if you are of working age you have to buy a day rider which is £3.50, which is a lot of money for many people. As the Council knows Parks is a centre of high levels of “multiple deprivation”.

The No 18 journey to the GWH was ended because it was not 'commercially sustainable'. The social consequences, now exacerbated by the loss of the No 30 service, have been completely ignored by the Council and Thamesdown Transport.

“Protecting services” by cutting them

In an article in the Swindon Advertiser Lead member Keith Williams said that the changes were “about protecting services, its not about taking services away”. Unfortunately he *has* taken services away from Parks. In a meeting in the area recently, in mitigation of the loss of the No 30, Keith said that we have a very good service. So far as the 17 is concerned it's true. However, this is not because of the benevolence of the Bus company or the Council. It's because local people (in Parks and Penhill) use the service in great numbers. Why? Because in both areas more than 35% of the population do not have a car. In addition both estates are “areas of multiple deprivation”, or in common parlance they have lots of poor people living there.

To imply that because we have a good service it does not matter if some services are cut, is no argument at all. The Council should take account of the social consequences of changes in service, especially given what it says about social aims in its Transport Strategy.

Penhill

The impact of a worsening service on people in Penhill, at the other end of the No 17 bus route is explained here by a resident. Her comments relate to the cut in the No 21 bus.

“Imagine you are seventy years old, quite lonely and you live at the bottom of a big hill. You have no car to get you out to the shops, to visit friends and family, or the hospital. There used to be a regular bus service which gave you the freedom to get out and about whenever you fancied but since the bus service was cut back to the bare minimum you have found that you feel isolated, depressed and forgotten. It's impossible to walk up that hill, it's too steep.

Imagine you are a mum with young children and you need the bus to transport your shopping home.

Imagine getting up on a freezing dark morning. The rain is lashing the skies and the pavement is slippery underfoot. You have to walk 30-40 minutes to get to school soaking wet, then repeat the journey home."

"Key principles" for an updated transport strategy

Swindon is fortunate to have a municipal bus service. There are only 11 left in the whole country. However, the policy of the Council appears to place a question mark over its future, and/or its role. In a document entitled **"Towards an updated local Bus Strategy for Swindon Borough Council"** we read that there are "three key principles" identified as "a basis for consultation" and intended "to inform the direction of future work".

- "1) The development of a fully commercial bus network should be encouraged as a means of best securing a sustainable network of services for the medium to long-term;
- 2) Bus operators should be challenged to fulfil their role in providing services in ways that best meet the needs of the local community;
- 3) The Council should play an enabling role in supporting the development of commercial bus operations."

Let's unpick these "three principles". Point 1 above poses the question, if the bus network is to become "fully commercial" then logically it would not fulfil a social or environmental purpose. As we shall see later this contradicts some of the elements of the Council's Transport Strategy of 2009.

It's not clear what point 2 means. If the company has to provide a "fully commercial service" then its driving logic would be to maximise profit and the "needs of the local community" will be measured not by their social needs *but according to the logic of commodity production*: they can buy a service if they can afford it or if they can't they will have to go without.

Point 3 poses a question mark over the continuation of the Municipal Bus Service itself. If the Council is to play an "enabling role" in support of the development of commercial services then we must ask is the Council looking to end municipal ownership?

At the meeting on Parks the director of Thamesdown Transport expressed the view that it was to the advantage of Swindon Council to own the bus service because the large network enables cross-subsidy to take place, to support services which are socially necessary, ones that a private bus company would not provide. He was right. But if the future direction of travel is "fully commercial" then this advantage would appear to be under threat.

Social and environmental aims

If you examine Swindon's 2009 Transport Strategy you can see a number of contradictions between that strategy and a decision to move towards a "fully commercial" service. For instance, the Council's so-called "One Swindon" document talks of a key priority being "living independently". A great many older residents are able to live independently, in part because they have a free pass and a bus service which enables them to get out and about. If the bus service is "fully commercial" then considerations of that sort will at the very least become of secondary importance, if they are considered at all.

"A shared Vision for Swindon 2008-30" shows Theme 4 as "a healthy, caring and supportive community that recognises provision of services and facilities, and accessibility to them".

The Council recognised a number of "Transport Challenges" which it faced. Among these were "Access to essential support and services will often depend on availability and affordability of transport." It recognised that "Centralisation of services/loss of local and neighbourhood provision puts more pressure on transport needs of vulnerable groups without car access."

"We need to tackle the problem of getting around. This is especially important for those in disadvantaged groups or areas. Gaining access to education, training and health facilities is of particular importance to these groups. The local Transport plan aims to meet the transport needs of all members of the community. The equalities impact assessment carried out as part of the preparation of the plan *will ensure* that this happens. (my emphasis)"

One of the aims of the Council's transport strategy was to

"Maintain and improve access for all residents to key services ensuring that those from deprived areas, those without access to a car, and those from minority groups have an equal level of access as the rest of the community. (Italics in original)"

"Accessibility to key services is a central component in overcoming social exclusion; in particular this relates to health services..."

"Transport is important for older people for basic needs (e.g. reaching basic services etc) but also to sociological and emotional needs, visiting friends and family and interacting with the local community."

"We will help plan and deliver *service improvements*...Measures will focus on *improving* the affordability, convenience and attractiveness of public transport."

Yet despite all these affirmations of the social role of local transport they have taken decisions which impact on the most vulnerable of people and on the "convenience and attractiveness" of public transport. The cuts in the services on Parks and Penhill impact adversely on two of the most deprived communities in the town and on those people who most depend upon the bus service.

Financial Pressures

Clearly the municipal bus service is under financial pressure as a result of government policy, both in terms of direct transport grant and the impact of an unprecedented 28% cut over four years on the resources of the Council itself. During the year 2009-10, according to the Council, the cost of the national concessionary bus pass scheme to Swindon was £2,964,000 but government support grant was only £738,000.

The Council has also faced a 12% rise in fuel prices, the loss of Section 106 monies (that have run out) and a Council Tax freeze. And government is cutting a rebate in fuel duty for operators. To this can be added the impact of the economic crisis which has seen a decline in passenger journeys of around 4 last year.

However, the Council does not have to passively accept this as immutable facts of life. If it wanted to support the interests of local people it could press the government for more money. Just because the ruling group in Swindon represents the same Party as that which leads the government that does not automatically mean that they have to remain silent in the face of central government policies that disadvantage people locally. We see on the national level Tory MPs pressing the government to cut the increase in rail fares, whilst some Tory Councils are refusing to implement cuts in Council Tax benefit. They have the choice of whether to support, or not, policies which adversely affect the poorest and most disadvantaged sectors of the local community.

Defending the municipal bus service

Given the "principles" suggested in the updated Transport Strategy, at the very least it is clear that the future of the municipal bus service is under threat. The 2009 Transport Strategy document predicted that if the town grows as envisaged then we face a big increase in congestion and pollution. It predicted a 153% increase in traffic queuing and a more than 50% increase in all pollutants, by 2026. This strategy document recognised that this will be the future unless there is a significant shift to public transport.

"Congestion will worsen and carbon emissions will grow if the forecast increase in travel demand is met by the private car. The challenge is to make public transport an attractive alternative to car use for a high proportion of the population. "

Yet if the bus service becomes "fully commercial" it's difficult to see how people can be persuaded out of their cars and onto the buses.

Any administration would be presented with difficulties given coalition government policies. However, what is necessary first of all is a commitment to preserve our Municipal bus service and to campaign for increased funding which serves both a social and environmental purpose. Unfortunately Swindon Council's Transport Strategy does not aim to stop an increase in car journeys but to *cut their rate of growth*. It predicted an

increase in traffic levels from 49,468 'assigned journeys' (AM) in 2006 to 73,309 in 2026 and 51,534 (PM) in 2006 to 73,107 in 2026.

The example of London shows that where there is sufficient funding there will be a significant increase in usage. The subsidy for London has been somewhere in the region of three times that elsewhere. No wonder that whilst bus journey numbers were falling in the rest of the country they were rising steeply in London.

Transport is one of the prime examples of what economists call 'external' costs. The state picks up the tab for health costs resulting from higher accident rate on roads and from pollution. Subsidy for public transport offers the possibility of a shift from private car to public transport which would reduce these 'external' costs. The social consequences of a public transport system which is not cheap and accessible, fall on the poorest in the community and will mean that they are unlikely to remain independent for as long as they might.

Sadly it's difficult for service users to be able to make practical proposals in relation to the service overall because the Bus company will not release much information because they deem it to be 'commercial in confidence', at least in relation to the routes with which they face competition from other companies. However, since it is a municipal bus service it should be fully open to public scrutiny or the Councillors who sit on its Board cannot be held accountable to local people. The use of 'commercial in confidence' undermines local democracy.

Swindon needs to maintain its municipal bus service with social and environmental goals being a *key* principle. Perhaps we need to look at how cross-subsidy is used so that those who are disadvantaged do not lose out as a result of decisions taken about bus routes without proper consultation with local communities and full consideration of the social consequences of route changes. Otherwise local people will draw the conclusion that all the consideration of these issues in the Transport Strategy document are nothing more than lip service to social aims.

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For some background information on transport policy see:

<http://martinwicks.wordpress.com/2007/06/11/global-warming-and-transport/>

and for Swindon's 'transport vision' see

<http://swindontuc.wordpress.com/2007/12/31/swindons-transport-vision/>