

BLACKPOOL COUNCIL
REPORT
of the
HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES
to
THE GATEWAY AREA PANEL

THE GATEWAY AREA FORUM MEETING
HELD ON WEDNESDAY 27TH JANUARY 2010

1. Introduction

The Chairman of the Area Forum and Ward Councillor for Brunswick, Councillor Simon Blackburn welcomed members of the community to the meeting and apologised for the lack of parking, but explained that it was one of the perils of living and working in the inner wards.

Councillor Blackburn explained that the evening would consist of a joint presentation by Mr Trevor Roberts, Managing Director and Mr Guy Thornton, Operations Manager, Blackpool Transport Services Limited regarding the proposed reduction of public transport services.

2. Context

The Area Panel at its meeting held on 9th December 2009 had agreed that the theme of the Area Forum would be to consider the proposed reduction of public transport services by Blackpool Transport Services Limited and an invitation to the Forum would be extended to residents outside the Panel Boundaries that had previously attended Area Forum meetings.

3. Theme

Mr Trevor Roberts, Managing Director, Blackpool Transport Services advised the Forum that he had only been in post since mid summer 2009, but had come from a similar environment. He explained that he proposed to provide a background to the Company and an explanation as to why services had been economised and how those services had been identified. Mr Roberts added that discussions were ongoing with the Local Authority and as such, some information might not be available.

The Forum was advised that Blackpool Council was the owner/ shareholder of Blackpool Transport Services Limited and appointed nominated representatives to the Board who under the Companies Act acted as Company Directors. Mr Roberts explained that the service operated under the Transport Acts 1985 and 2000, mainly on a commercial basis and some services where the income from fares did not cover the operational cost were supported internally from routes that were more profitable. He reported that where it was not possible to provide a commercial service the Local Transport Authority, Lancashire County Council and Blackpool Council, were able to support services financially.

Mr Roberts explained that last year saw changes to the reimbursement arrangements paid to Blackpool Transport Services Limited through the Lancashire Concessionary

Travel Scheme. For a number of years arrangements existed between Local Authorities and operators for a 73% reimbursement rate. However, in February 2009, Lancashire Concessionary Travel Scheme imposed at 52.5% reimbursement figure, a significant reduction for operators. This figure had not been accepted and the operators were appealing to the Secretary of State as they believed the reimbursement figure to be unfair and were asking for the Concessionary Travel Scheme to be reviewed. Mr Roberts explained that Blackpool was in a unique position, as the Travel Scheme did not permit pensioners outside of Lancashire to use the tram system, but allowed free travel on buses. He added that the loss of revenue and the lower reimbursement figure had resulted in an overall loss of £1.3m, a cost the Company could not absorb. Mr Roberts reported that the appeal had not been heard, but reported that he was hopeful of a reasonable settlement particularly in light of the recent Government decision to redistribute the Concessionary Travel Scheme money, with Lancashire being awarded an additional £3.56m.

The Forum was advised that internal changes had been made to Blackpool Transport Services to find a solution and a review of six months of ticket machine data including mornings, evenings and weekends to identify the weakest services, for example those with single figure travellers. Mr Roberts acknowledged that those changes would affect a small number of people, but they were necessary to safeguard the other services. Mr Roberts explained that 12 weeks prior to the proposed changes being implemented on 1st February, Blackpool Transport Services was required to notify the Local Authorities. He added that he had received no response from Lancashire, but following discussions with Blackpool Council three evening services, which were due to be cut had been reinstated.

Mr Roberts advised the Forum that careful analysis had been undertaken to ensure minimum effect on services, but the Company could not operate at a continual loss. He explained that internal solutions as to how the Company operated were being reviewed, for example a lack of presence and inspection of the service on the street. Mr Roberts informed the Forum that he did not believe that residents were receiving a reliable service and did not like to see three buses operating in convoys and therefore proactive changes were required.

Mr Roberts concluded that there were many issues to tackle and if the outcome of the Concessionary Travel Scheme was not positive, a further review of service provision would be needed.

Following the presentation, local residents asked a number of questions.

A resident enquired if it had been accurately reported that smaller towns had received larger rebates than Blackpool. Mr Roberts explained that it would not be appropriate for an Operator to comment. However, he added that over the last six months the Department for Transport had consulted on the distribution of the concessionary travel special grant allocations to Local Authorities for 2010/ 2011, with a view for the funding to be allocated to the regional authorities.

A member of the Forum expressed his concerns that it had been reported that the over 60's would be means tested to qualify for a free bus pass. He was also concerned that employees of Blackpool Transport Services were advising passengers to arrive at the bus stop ten minutes before a bus was due and many of the stops did not provide shelter.

Mr Roberts agreed that if services ran to time this would not be necessary and he added that drivers did their best to ensure prompt time keeping. He added that some bus shelters were owned by Blackpool Transport Services, but the majority were owned by the Local Authority. Mr Roberts referred to an article in a recent trade

magazine, which reported that the Government was reviewing the eligible age of retirement with the view of gradually increasing the retirement age. It was agreed that this matter would be investigated and the outcome reported at a future meeting.

A local Councillor referred to a letter from Blackpool Transport Services dated 1st December 2009, which stated that any improvement in future funding to the Company as a result of the Government consultation or to the current outstanding claims would be considered as and when any specific information was tabled. He enquired why in light of the Company receiving an additional £600,000 were services being cut and 50 drivers made redundant.

Mr Roberts explained that Operators had been asked to accept 59.5%, including 2.5% for additional costs and relinquish their rights. He added that this was not sufficient and whilst an additional £600,000 had been offered, this did not cover the £1.3m losses as a result of the Concessionary Travel Scheme not allowing passengers from outside of Lancashire to use the tram system. Mr Roberts reported that the reimbursement figure was not due to increase next year so questions were being asked as to where the additional £3.56m awarded to Lancashire would be allocated.

A resident asked why buses were using Corporation Street, as there were often delays of up to 10 minutes due to the quantity. Mr Thornton explained that they were in consultation with Blackpool Council to seek an alternative location within the next six months.

A local resident asked who cleaned the buses and the bus shelters as they were often in a poor condition, particularly the bus shelter on Horncliffe Road, which had been littered with vomit and dog faeces for months.

Mr Thornton confirmed that the buses were cleaned prior to leaving the station, but there was an issue with providing bins due to the risk of terrorism. It was agreed that the cleansing of the bus shelter would be investigated by Blackpool Council and the outcome reported at a future meeting.

A Forum member reported that due to the high level of unemployment in the town large numbers of people relied on public transport and enquired whether this fact had been taken into consideration when identifying the services to be cut.

Mr Thornton explained that the six-month data analysed had included all journeys/ services during early mornings, mornings, afternoons, tea time, evenings and averaged the number of passengers during three summer months and three winter months. The outcome of the analysis identified those services with single figure travellers, where the fares were insufficient to cover the running costs of the service. He explained that by reducing those services the minimum numbers of people were affected.

Mr Tim Brown, Chief Planning Officer, Blackpool Council and Senior Officer for The Gateway Area Forum added that when approving the development of commercial areas Blackpool Council tried to ensure that they were accessible by public transport and also sought a contribution from the developer for the provision of a bus service.

It was asked by a resident why an additional service, Line 15, had been added to Talbot Road and Grange Road when there were already sufficient services.

Mr Thornton reported that the Line 5, serving the hospital and town centre, was struggling to cope with the demands on the service and in contrast, the Line 15 was suffering from a lack of passengers. He added by introducing the Line 15 to cover part of the route of the Line 5 service this would alleviate the demand on the Line 5 and

potentially increase the passengers on Line 15, which would be cut completely unless passenger numbers increased.

Several Forum members raised their frustration that buses travelling to the south of the town were unable to access the promenade via Church Street, causing unnecessary congestion around Corporation Street.

Mr Roberts supported the members' comments. It was agreed that the views of the Forum would be reported to Blackpool Council for further consideration and the outcome reported at a future meeting.

A resident asked why he had received a letter of invitation to the meeting to discuss proposed changes from Blackpool Council and also a list of revised changes from Blackpool Transport Services.

The Chairman, Councillor Blackburn explained that the meeting had been convened as soon as the proposed changes had been announced and the purpose of the meeting was to ascertain if residents shared similar concerns as the local Councillors. Mr Roberts added that Blackpool Transport Services had made a business decision and may reconsider if specific comments were made, rather than generalisations.

A member of the Forum asked if Blackpool Transport Services believed in training their staff and why was there not a contingency plan, despite the knowledge of the introduction of the Concessionary Travel Scheme.

Mr Roberts reported that under the EU directive all drivers were required to take a Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) either 8 hours over a year or 5 days over 5 years. He added that he had only been appointed in June 2009 when the Scheme was already operational, but he was now in negotiations to agree a suitable reimbursement figure.

A resident reported that on a number of occasions the wrong journey had been recorded on the buses ticket when using the Concessionary Travel pass and when reported no action had been taken.

Mr Roberts explained that this could be human error, but reiterated that there was insufficient presence of staff to assist drivers and make regular checks, but within the next month by reutilising staff he hoped to be able to interface with customers more, provide support to drivers, safeguard their revenue and supervise the business.

A Councillor reported that incorrectly issued tickets could be sent to the Department of Transport for investigation and a fine could be imposed on the issuing Company.

It was asked if there were plans to close the existing bus depot and were Blackpool Transport Services the guaranteed operator of the new trams.

Mr Roberts reported that the Rigby Road site could be redeveloped, but this was not part of Blackpool Transport Services mid term plans. He added that the upgrade bid was based on Blackpool Transport Services operating those services and a commitment had been given by both Blackpool Council and the Department of Transport.

A resident commented that there was a perception that Blackpool Transport Services was preparing for a takeover and a large number of different operators were evident particularly in the Poulton area.

Mr Roberts confirmed that Blackpool Transport Services remit was to make sufficient

profits to fund the upgrade of the tramway system, if Blackpool Council sold the Company, under the Transport Act 1985 services would not be able to operate. He added that Lancashire County Council, as were all Local Authorities, was able to tender for services and that all bus services were open to free competition.

A member of the Forum enquired why the Line 16, serving the east of Blackpool was being withdrawn, as this was the only bus serving the hospital. She also expressed her concern, as a disabled pensioner, about the dangerous raised bus stops within the town centre and the lack of provision on the trams for people with mobility problems.

Mr Roberts confirmed that the Line 16 service was not to be withdrawn. He explained that the raised kerb level at town centre bus stops were to assist passengers using the low floor buses and that all trams would be Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) compliant by 2019, all single level buses would be low floor by 2015 and double-decker buses by 2017. Mr Roberts reported that ten existing trams were currently being refurbished and trialled to include wider step and door access, but this also necessitated the need for widen of the tracks to allow trams to pass.

It was noted that similar comments regarding the raised kerb level at town centre bus stops had been raised at a previous Forum meeting and it was agreed that the matter would be reported to Blackpool Council for further consideration and the outcome reported at a future meeting.

A resident suggested that bus drivers should be trained to deal with situations where dedicated wheelchair spaces were occupied by non-wheelchair users.

Mr Roberts confirmed that disability awareness was part of the Certificate of Professional Competence, but would reiterate the point to drivers.

It was queried by a number of residents why the Concessionary Travel Scheme did not permit passengers from outside of Lancashire to use the trams.

Mr Roberts explained that the existing tram services and the upgraded trams were classed as light railway and as such the core Concessionary Travel Scheme did not include this mode of transport, but it was believed that the Local Authority had the ability to override this decision. It was agreed that this matter would be investigated and the outcome reported at a future meeting.

A passenger on the Line 11 service reported that due to the large number of schoolchildren using the service along Talbot Road, she had to catch two buses, one to get into town and another to continue the same journey as the Line 11. Mr Roberts agreed to discuss the matter on an individual level after the meeting.

A resident reported that he had written and emailed Blackpool Transport Services on a number of occasions since November and had yet to receive a response. Mr Roberts was disappointed in the lack of response and agreed to discuss the matter on an individual level after the meeting.

A resident expressed that in his opinion the bus problems in Blackpool were because there was not a modern bus station.

Mr Roberts explained that town centre space was a premium and that a bus station was not relevant provided that there were appropriate bus stops allowing for town centre access. He added that a co-ordinated approach was required to address the congestion issues.

A bus user commented that Blackpool was a low-income town and in comparison the bus fares had been vastly increased. She suggested that by reducing the fare prices more people would use the service.

Mr Roberts advised the Forum that with effect from 1st February, Blackpool Transport Services would be trialling this theory on certain services. He added that the current cost of a day ticket was £3.95, but passengers purchasing this type of ticket from any Pay Point, available in a wide number of local shops, would receive a 95 pence saving.

It was suggested that visitors arriving in the town were left confused due to the poor or inadequate signage.

Mr Roberts reported that plans for the redevelopment of the Blackpool North Station under The Talbot Gateway proposals would result in a better interchange. He added that Blackpool Council's Travel and Road Safety Team was also reviewing signage around the town.

A local Councillor expressed his concern that pensioners were being blamed for the introduction of the Concessionary Travel Scheme and that many pensioners felt insulted. He believed that Blackpool Transport Services had acted in haste and residents were being punished by the unjustified reduction of the Line 14 service. He enquired if this service would be reinstated once a solution had been reached.

Mr Roberts confirmed that Blackpool Transport Services did not blame pensioners, but the Company was looking for a reasonable reimbursement. He added that the Company had acted upon the projected cash flow, which identified serious issues and it would be irresponsible to take no action. Mr Roberts explained that the Line 14 service had been openly tendered by Lancashire County Council, but despite the proposal for the service to be operational by 1st February, the successful tender had still not been announced.

Councillor Blackburn invited residents to attend the Cherry Tree Area Forum, on Wednesday 3rd February at St Christopher's Church, Hawes Side Lane where the same topic was being discussed, if they had not had an opportunity to voice their opinion.

Councillors Question Time

Due to time constraints it was not possible for residents to ask their Councillors questions.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of the meeting was to provide residents with an opportunity to receive a presentation from representatives from Blackpool Transport Services Limited and voice their opinions on the proposed reductions to public transport services.

A number of issues had been raised as documented in the report and these would be investigated and reported back to the Area Panel in the first instance.