

Notes of a meeting held 26th July 2016 to discuss loss of buses 24 and 111

1. Present: DCC Cllr Robert Gould; DCC and CBC Cllr Margaret Phipps; CBC Cllr Sue Spittle; WCRA Chairman Jim Biggin
2. The contract between DCC and Yellow Bus for Christchurch services 24 and 111 comes to an end in July 2016. Yellow Bus has been advised that DCC will not be in a position to support these services beyond that time and has announced that these routes cannot be operated without financial support *and has consequently withdrawn them with effect from 6 August 2016.*
3. Following two consecutive years of operating expenses exceeding income, as part of its overall efforts to reduce current expenditure so that it will be less than income received, DCC is reducing its level of subsidy for buses across Dorset from £2.7 million in 2015-16 to £2.2 million in 2016-17 and then to £1.2 million in 2017-18. Some effort is being made to rationalise services and to increase productivity and efficiency.
4. As part of that process it is saving £191,000 in 2017-18 by removing the subsidy previously paid for the 24 and 111 bus routes. This will account for 19% of the saving targeted in that year.
5. This process follows a pattern established in other Councils of dramatically reducing or completely scrapping bus subsidies (this has been done or is actively being considered in for example: Cumbria, Derbyshire, Flintshire, Hull, Lancashire, Northampton, Oxfordshire, Somerset and Worcester).
6. The whole system is simply not fit for purpose and particularly the funding of the pensioner's bus passes. Despite repeated requests to allow pensioners to contribute part of each bus fare Central Government continues to ignore a growing crisis. As more and more pensioners across the country are left with a free bus pass but no bus to use it on the system is creating exactly the opposite social conditions to those it was intended to engender and is well on the way to joining the ranks of other such infamous Government initiatives as the Child Support Agency and subsidised personal pensions.
7. In parallel with reduced funding for buses, DCC staff reduction and reorganisation will continue. DCC head count has been reduced by just over 1,000 people since 2010 (ignoring the approximately 700 staff transferred to Local Authority Trading Company Tricuro) to an establishment of 2,911 as at 31st March 2016. The head office in Dorchester is being refurbished as an open plan environment and hot desking introduced on a ratio of 7 desks for 10 employees. These measures should increase productivity whilst some small inefficient offices have either not had their lease renewed or have been sold.
8. The staff sickness and absence rates have improved slightly over recent years. Heads of Department are now directly responsible for working with HR to effect further improvement. Cllr Robert Gould indicated that the DCC Staffing Committee receives quarterly reports on this and the last one was in March 2016 which showed reductions in sickness levels in each quarter over the previous year.
9. There has been a real focus on improving attendance levels and at each Staffing Committee meeting a director is required to report on progress within their area of responsibility and the actions that are being taken. Managers are being given training and support to ensure early intervention when problems arise and to help avoid short term absences becoming

long term and thus endemic. DCC are also benchmarking performance against other councils and the private sector. A full report can be seen at:

<http://dorset.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s1997/07.%20Man%20of%20Attendance%202015-16%20-%20Qrt%203.pdf>

10. In 2015-16 DCC made actual savings of £930,000 from central establishment costs and a further £2 million from other sources. In the course of that the number of senior jobs was halved to 15 whilst the nature of the jobs was dramatically changed to make them more accountable to elected members for measurable achievement.
11. A full job evaluation exercise was undertaken in 2015-16 (the previous one was in 2004) including a compatibility exercise involving jobs in Bournemouth and Poole. Following that the annual salaries of the 15 senior jobs were increased from a pay band of £63,348 to £79,714 to one of £80,500 to £91,000. These increases will add around £60,000 to the 2016-17 salary cost. New terms and conditions of employment were implemented to remove such things as overtime payments but continuity of membership of the Local Authority Staff Pension Scheme was maintained.
12. Apart from the actual bus service there remains the issue of the public consultation carried out by DCC *after having already decided to cut the subsidy for the buses*. This effectively means that the consultation appears to local residents to have been a waste of time and public money and brings the whole issue of DCC credibility into question.
13. Cllr Robert Gould explained that the initial decision to cut DCC bus subsidy per se without looking in detail at individual routes was taken following the events of October 2015-January 2016 during which Central Government forced radical change in funding upon all Local Authorities (see www.wcresidents.co.uk then "*latest updates 2016*" and at 30th June 2016 *ACRA Summary of Local Government Reorganisation*)
14. The fact that the contracts for routes 24 and 111 were coming to an end then forced DCC into taking detailed decisions. DCC officers appear to have done this without consulting any local Christchurch representatives. Thus such things as the closure of both the doctor's practice and the pharmacy in The Grove and their relocation to Christchurch Hospital were not considered. No satisfactory reason for this lack of consultation was offered by Cllr Robert Gould.
15. The DCC public consultation did mention that the current bus network could not be maintained and that a reduction of £1.5 million was targeted. However, it made no mention of the decisions already made regarding services 24 and 111. If it had done so the answers given would likely have been rather different to those actually recorded. This alone renders the results of questionable value and supports the view that the consultation was to some degree a waste of time and money. It has certainly damaged the local reputation of DCC.

Jim Biggin

28th July 2016