

## Changes to Bus 17, Public Meeting on Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> October at 7pm in St Michael and All Angels Church, Partridge Green

Thank you to the large number of residents who attended this meeting with James O'Neill, the Commercial Director of Stagecoach South, David Crockford, Public Transport Manager, WSCC and John Milne, MP for Horsham. We were able to count over 145 people as they arrived, but a few more probably came as we got started.

Olivia Izzard, meeting Chair, introduced the meeting and our panel.

**Item 1)** The meeting opened with an update on the **Bus Usage Survey** by Cllr Richards, based on 160 responses.

### *Key points were:*

- Almost half of the respondents were over 67, and 38% had one or more issues with mobility.
- The vast majority of bus journeys had been between 10.30am and 3.30pm, prior to the timetable changes (65-68%). Journeys towards Cowfold and Horsham were Weekly 40%, Irregular 24%, Monthly 22% and Daily 12%. Journeys towards Henfield and Brighton were Irregular 44%, Monthly 41%, Weekly 22%, Daily 6%.
- Bus usage was evenly spread across all days of the week, in both directions. The most frequently cited reasons given for journeys included social and leisure, medical appointments, train connections, shopping, family commitments, work, volunteering, college and school.
- **160 People** said the new timetable will adversely affect them, many of whom said they would no longer travel by bus in the direction of Horsham. Some indicated that they would **use their car again**, for journeys where they would previously have used the bus. Others said they have no choice as they do not drive, and would have to continue using the bus.
- **Very few people see the walk to Shermanbury as viable**, in order to take advantage of the extra buses in the evenings or on Sundays. The road is very busy, narrow if you have a pushchair or mobility scooter, and unlit which makes it difficult to walk in evenings and especially in winter. The average journey time from the KGV Bus stop is 23 minutes, from Mill Lane it is 47 minutes.

### *Comments and concerns:*

- No direct bus to and from Horsham at the **right time of day**.
- Time – **increase journey time**, to wait for two buses each way, with no guaranteed connection. Several reports of buses not stopping to pick them up, cancelled buses resulting in expensive taxi fares from the station.
- Waiting – some stops have **no seat or shelter**, others have a seat outside the shelter, meaning a choice of being wet/cold or seated.
- Busy Roads – **no safe crossing points** except in Henfield, which has the shortest gap between connecting buses, increasing the chance of missing the onward connection
- **Train connection in Horsham** seen as much more difficult – increased journey time to station, waiting for two buses and carrying bags across the road for the connecting service.
- Most frequent comment, **people saying they can't use the bus any more**, and will therefore be isolated. They also feel that their independence has been taken away.
- Several people said they can **no longer get to work or college** as easily.
- Friends and family will have a more difficult journey visiting Partridge Green.
- Some people said that they might have to move out of the village as there are no drivers in their family and do not see this revised service as a viable option.
- Many comments about the aim of funding from central government and local authorities is to **increase bus use and reduce car dependence, and now the opposite will happen in PG**.
- **Timetable efficiency** – why is the route still going to Churchill Square, when the major hold ups are always in Brighton. Ending at Old Steine would save more time than the PG loop. Also, why is Mannings Heath still in? Only one stop, and a very short walk to the one on the main road?

**Item 2) The online petition** was presented by local resident Chris Halliwell, which attracted **1591** signatures. The paper version was signed by a further **227** people, all asking for the direct service to Horsham to be restored.

**Item 3) Questions** were posed to our panel by Cllr Hamblin-Boone, which Stagecoach and West Sussex County Council had seen ahead of the meeting. Their responses are summarized below.

**Can you explain the process by which this new timetable was decided between WSCC and Stagecoach, specifically where PG was cut out.**

The route change was entirely a Stagecoach commercial decision, a consequence of a detailed punctuality and financial performance review. They didn't consult as they knew what they wanted to do and didn't feel it was fair to raise people's expectations.

Route and timetable changes are submitted to each Local Transport Authority at a statutory 10-week notice period and then to the area Traffic Commissioner office with 6 weeks' notice.

**When was it decided that the £200k funding from WSCC would be used to enhance the evening and weekend services from Henfield rather than use the money to maintain the existing service?**

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There is no ongoing third-party funding for Service 17 to cover the ongoing cost of the additional bus needed to reliably serve Partridge Green on all trips (estimated at circa £210k p.a.). There is short-term kickstart Bus Service Improvement Plan support for new evening and Sunday trips spread over two years. There is no money from Year 3 - the intention is that trips will then be viable without subsidy.

### **How are Stagecoach monitoring the number of passengers travelling between Partridge Green and Horsham? Now with the £2 fare you don't have to state your destination so how do the company know where people get off?**

£2 fares on the bus are still sold to a stated destination. We report passenger numbers boarding at every fare stage on all our routes to monitor growth or decline, as well as total numbers of every service.

### **Can we see the data?**

We're unfortunately not able to share detailed commercial data, but I'm happy to try and give a broad overview of passenger trends to help our discussion. For example - in the four weeks we've had so far, passenger numbers on the service are in the region of +25%.

### **How many passengers are using a bus pass?**

Approximately one third of customers on the 17 use a Concessionary bus pass.

### **As senior citizens have to use their bus pass twice when going from PG to Horsham via Henfield does this mean WSCC are being charged twice?**

Yes, we are reimbursed for each trip made when boarding a bus. WSCC said that Stagecoach don't receive the full fare but a proportion.

### **Why are we excluded from the Sunday service even though the funding was supposed to be for an enhanced Sunday and evening service?**

There is not enough time in the 3-hour round trip to include Partridge Green the alternative would be the cost of a fourth bus which would be very unlikely to cover its running cost. Stagecoach committed to look at the new evening and Sunday trips after a full punctuality review for the route.

### **Originally we were told that changes were made purely on timekeeping but this has since changed to a catalogue of reasons. What other loops did Stagecoach consider cutting? For example, why go up Churchill Square and not turn round at Old Steine since there are at least 12 other buses going from Old Steine to Churchill Square.**

The changes have been made on the basis of timekeeping - with the 3-hour round trip from Horsham to Brighton and return not being feasible with the additional time required for the Partridge Green loop in each direction. On Time punctuality has improved considerably, by more than 20%, since the change was introduced. Stagecoach like to provide buses at the same minutes past the hour at each stop; if they add in Partridge Green it makes the loop longer than three hours and would make it harder for people at other stops to remember when their bus is arriving.

### **The new timetable states that connection is not guaranteed. However, the reasoning from WSCC for not objecting to the changes was that there would still be a connecting service. Are we guaranteed a connection or not?**

We're not able to guarantee any connection, because we unfortunately cannot guarantee road traffic conditions beyond our control. Our drivers will do the best they can to keep to time and allow customers to change buses whenever possible.

### **Why did WSCC block Sussex Coaches from providing a school bus service- at the parents' expense, not the council's - to Horsham for children affected by the changes? Granting a licence for that service would only affect the pupils who have to wait till 4-23 pm for a direct service to PG, or use an earlier service and go through to Henfield and back again - hoping the connection is on time. The coach goes through the Village every morning but WSCC have said it is not allowed to stop.**

The County Council does not decide which routes can or can't run and did not block (or attempt to block) Sussex Coaches from running a commercial service. My understanding is that Sussex Coaches do not run through the village every morning and it would be for them to decide whether they provide a service or not.

### **When is the new current timetable due to be reviewed?**

There is no set date for any timetable review, with the previous timetable having been in place for several years. We monitor each route on a continual and ongoing basis and plan to make changes no more than one or two times each year. At the minute, we've no plans to change Service 17 but will continue to monitor passenger numbers and punctuality across the whole timetable.

**Item 4) Our MP John Milne** spoke to the audiences and has promised to continue to press for restoration of our direct service to Horsham, and is in the process of setting up a meeting with Stagecoach.

**Item 5) Members of the audience** challenged James O'Neill on Stagecoach's decision making process, the disregard for the community, reminded him that they are providing a public service which is subsidised by the tax payer, and urged him to reconsider the changes. The strength of feeling was evident, but there was no commitment from Stagecoach to reconsider the service.

The meeting closed with most people in the room feeling very dissatisfied with the responses given, and the community vowed to carry on campaigning.