

PROPOSED CUTS IN SUPPORTED BUS SERVICES

Friends of Lewes Society is the civic society for the town of Lewes and has been in existence since 1952. It has almost 500 members. Whilst its main objective is to conserve and enhance the urban and natural environment within and adjacent to the town it also considers other issues that may prevent the public from appreciating the special nature of the town. Among these issues is the availability of public transport which is more sustainable than taking cars on every journey with the concomitant increase in congestion which is damaging to historic buildings.

Whilst it is recognised that some bus journeys have only a handful of passengers on them, the reason for this low patronage needs to be investigated. In many cases it is that the public are unaware of the current provision or that they have had a bad experience in the past when a bus has failed to run. Although publicity of the current supported network in Lewes has improved since Compass became the provider it could still be better whilst marketing initiatives to encourage bus travel would also help. Experience on the commercial services is that a frequent service coupled with good publicity increases usage whereas the County Council's proposals would have the opposite effect and decrease usage and increase car travel.

The Society agrees with the four priorities identified by the County Council in deciding which bus services should continue to be supported. It also welcomes the possibility that discussions will be held with bus operators about growing the commercial network. It suggests that the Community transport organisations could be encouraged to provide services in areas or at times when there are no conventional bus services.

It is noted that none of the documents issued by the County Council mention that a proportion of the County, including the town of Lewes, is within the South Downs National Park. At a time when the National Park Authority is promoting public transport and is currently supporting some Sunday bus services it is perverse for the County Council to be proposing service reductions in the National Park. Have there been any discussions between the County Council and National Park Authority over a common approach which satisfies both bodies objectives? Does the County Council consider that its current proposals satisfy its responsibilities under s.62 of the Environment Act 1995? The proposals also negate the County Council's own exhortations for the public to adopt more sustainable practices which must include using public transport and by so doing contribute to the policies that should arrest climate changes.

The subsidy paid to the bus operators must depend on the number of buses that are needed to maintain it. Within Lewes town one vehicle could be saved by running a 129 service from Nevill to Malling Estate every 45 minutes throughout the day and changing the timetable of the 123 so that the incoming bus from Newhaven went straight back. This would be better than the hourly frequency put forward in the County Council's proposals. Malling is already partially served by the commercial 28 route whilst the High Street is already served by the commercial 28/29 routes as well as the supported services 121, 125 & 166 of which the latter also partially serve Nevill. As far as Landport Estate is concerned the present service appears to be well used and as there is no alternative provision in that area the present frequency should be maintained, although it might be possible to reduce costs by cutting out an early morning or evening service.

Since the economic viability of Lewes as a market town is dependent on shoppers from the villages surrounding it a network of supported services is necessary to maintain this and prevent an even higher number of cars trying to park in the town. Any reductions in provision should be on the basis of current usage rather than an over-arching formula that dictates that hourly services become two hourly and those of lesser frequency run on certain days of the week only. Whilst the Society has no hard knowledge of the usage or subsidy patterns to make specific proposals, it recognises that if the number of buses in use could be reduced savings can be made. More integrated timetabling would help and whilst layovers may be necessary to counter traffic congestion and provide staff breaks there may be scope for reducing these.