

Mike Ward of Going Forward Buses explains to Whitchurch Web readers what is happening with the bus service through Whitchurch, in a reply to an enquiry from Hilary Jensen....

I am still considering whether a service on Wednesdays could also run but the problem is getting a driver for it. I do have some volunteer drivers who have been really good at keeping a one day a week service going to Berinsfield (Tuesdays) and Watlington (Fridays), but adding a third once-a-week service would need more volunteers, and I have not had any offers despite numerous pleas! Alternatively of course if the driver who has been off sick for two months now is able to return to work, then it is one option I am looking at for him. The problem with volunteers is that they don't really want to make a commitment to definitely being available to run the service, and if I cannot be sure of the reliability of the service I cannot risk it. I will be fined or possibly lose my operator's licence if I repeatedly have to cancel journeys. As it is I only cancelled one journey on any route since the day the driver went off sick (and that was on the day he was taken ill!) due to a fantastic response from the volunteers, which I think is a much better record than Thames Travel or Great Western Railway can boast of. But it was extremely stressful trying to organise it!

The Woodcote experiment was in response to a suggestion that the Greenmore Hill area might generate some much needed extra passengers to help keep the route going. It didn't work (although perversely the very last journey from Reading did have a couple of passengers for Greenmore Hill!). After giving it three months or so it was scrapped. It was also intended as a way to connect with TT's X40 to Wallingford and Oxford but no one seemed interested (despite it being a suggestion from 'potential users' who never materialised!) and TT kept changing their timetable so it wasn't possible to devise specific connections. The latest suggestion I have taken 'on board' is to run via the almshouses at Goring Heath; this adds about two minutes to the journey and will run in a trial basis but will be abandoned if no one uses it.

Just to give you an idea of how difficult it is to run an unsubsidised service in south Oxfordshire and Reading, you probably don't realise that for anyone getting on in Reading with a Concessionary bus pass all we receive is £1.40 for that journey. Even a full bus will barely cover the fuel and driver's salary for that run! Imagine how impossible it is when the average usage per journey is less than half a dozen. But it is the people's choice not to pay enough taxes to allow bus services to be subsidised, and it can only get worse. The contributions from Goring Heath PC (£200 a month) and very latterly Whitchurch PC (£100 a month) were of course much appreciated, but when the service was losing me personally in excess of £1,000 a month it just could not carry on. I am very sorry that it did not work out - unlike the Goring to Wallingford route, which does cover its costs with an average daily usage of around 80 journeys (the 142 was closer to 25 or 30 journeys a day) and a higher rate of Concessionary Pass reimbursement as all journeys are in Oxfordshire and they have (at the moment!) a higher rate - nearer £2.50 to £3 a journey. Some people on that route use it almost every day, just because they want to keep it going!

I hope you don't mind me giving such a long reply but I do value your support and I think you deserve a fuller explanation of the background to the changes than you might get from other operators who are purely driven by profit (pun intended)!

Having said that, you should be aware that I am employing a salaried driver to run the Saturday service to make it as reliable (and comfortable!) as possible, so it has a big hill to climb to cover its costs. I will need to review the usage come the end of the year to see how close it is coming to breaking even. The afternoon services most certainly need more passengers - why not pop to Caversham for a quick shop at Waitrose or Iceland - the 15.12 from Whitchurch, for example, gives 50 minutes in Caversham before returning at 16.27! There is also a service from Whitchurch at 09.40 to Pangbourne to connect with Thames Travel's 143 to Reading. That gets to Reading at 10.10, plenty of time for the 11.35 back to Whitchurch from Blagrove Street. You might ask why not just run a one journey in each direction service - I can't get a regular driver (paid or voluntary) who would make a commitment to do that, and if they were paid the costs would be high as there would need to be time in Reading when they were just waiting for the return journey, and the bus wouldn't be earning any money. The current level of journeys is also deliberately planned to be able to offer a service from Reading to and from Beale & Basildon Parks in an effort to get more passengers on board.

Hope at least some of this is helpful. If you feel it would be worth including any of it in your website or any local publication you might have access to, you are of course most welcome to do so.

Kind regards,
Mike

Mike Ward
Going Forward Buses
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