

PET(4)-14-12 : Tuesday 16 October 2012

P-04-380 : Bring back our bus! Petition against the removal of scheduled bus services from east Lampeter, Cwmann & Pencarreg

Email from Peter Hoskins

These remarks are offered in addition to those I submitted on 19/5/2012.

The current state of provision of conventional bus service between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen remains a contentious issue. Since the introduction by Arriva of their controversial service 40 between these places the anger of inhabitants of settlements no longer adequately served by conventional bus service resulting from their casual omission by Arriva from its route has increased. Meetings have been held with both Westminster and Cardiff Parliamentary representatives. The already bad situation is exacerbated by the extension of the notorious Bwcabus scheme which is offered as a substitute for conventional service and found to be thoroughly unworkable although enthusiastically promoted by the Welsh Government and the local authorities who are all blind to its manifest shortcomings.

The source of the unsatisfactory provision now suffered is the premature withdrawal by First from participation in service X40 in December 2009 leaving Arriva as the sole participant. This was a most regrettable move on the part of First and one in which they later allegedly saw the folly. The word was that they then approached one or both local councils and sought to resume participation but were turned down. If there is any truth in this then the local councils are implicated and in my view should be asked to give reasons.

Arriva then took over the X40 service on a temporary basis without participation from any other service provider and later secured the contract for the whole of it. The truncation of two services was allegedly approved by the Welsh Government. These were (1) the 6.30 departure from Carmarthen which began from a newly established outstation in the old station yard in Pencader running out of service to Lampeter until March 2010 and (2) the 19.15 departure from Aberystwyth which terminated at Lampeter town hall and then similarly ran out of service back to Pencader.

These truncations caused significant inconvenience and hardship to regular users. Needlessly running out of service angered former passengers north of Pencader who were no longer able to board to get to work in Lampeter and beyond. Naturally losing custom is a speedier business than recovering it. It took time for former passengers to realise that service had been partly restored. Many former passengers never returned. The last service from Aberystwyth similarly lost a significant amount of business. Passengers would board at Aberystwyth and travel all the way to Carmarthen perhaps to continue by train.

Lampeter students at regular intervals filled the bus on a Friday evening to capacity for a night out in Carmarthen. The last X40 service from Aberystwyth to Carmarthen became the 17.20 departure at the hands of Arriva.

Matters took a serious turn for the worse earlier this year when Arriva thwarted the plans of the Traws Cymru Network project to establish a successor service T1 to service X40. The eleventh hour submission by Arriva of applications to register two commercial services 40 and 50 obliged the Traws Cymru Network Manager to suspend immediately the tendering process to seek service providers to undertake the operation of the planned service T1 upon the award of contract. Overnight what had been the best service yet between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen was replaced by the worst.

Arriva service 40 has from the outset been an unmitigated social, financial and operational disaster. The Optare vehicles provided to X40 participants had to be surrendered to the authorities who owned them and had made them available for the duration of this subsidised service.

Arriva deployed a number of unsuitable and less robust vehicles on services 40 and 50. In no time these vehicles proved to be unreliable.

Services ran late, broke down en route or were cancelled. Passengers were lost and revenue from service 40 fell appreciably. Times and routes did not suit many users of the former service X40.

Running times between Aberystwyth to Carmarthen were arbitrarily reduced by approximately half an hour for no other reason than to cover the outward and return journeys with the time allowed by law beyond which a mandatory break must be taken by the driver. The working timetable was soon shown to be unworkable and has been noted by VOSA inspectors who have consequently undertaken a succession of visits to the Arriva Aberystwyth depot.

A series of timetable changes since the inception of service 40 has not in any way alleviated the inconvenience and hardship suffered by inhabitants of settlements from which service has been withdrawn. A drastic reduction in the level of Aberystwyth town and country services was imposed on 23rd September 2012. This has inevitably resulted in further inconvenience and hardship for service users. For example the 19.00 service to Carmarthen has been withdrawn while the 18.00 southbound service now terminates in Lampeter. The last departure for Carmarthen leaves at 17.00 hours. Paradoxically the activities of other local service providers flourish and increase. Arriva service X32 has been withdrawn as a money loser but in contrast the new service T2 appears to be prospering.

The situation I have sought to describe cannot be suffered indefinitely.

It calls for remedial action by the Welsh Government and the local authorities in Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire. The prohibition of subsidised services over routes traversed by commercial services must be challenged and overcome. Money wasting distractions such as Bwcabus must be exposed for the scandalous misguided misadventures they are and abandoned with all haste. I cite the example of West Yorkshire County Council with links to some relevant pages on their web site.

My attention was initially drawn by an item on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01mnr3d>

West Yorkshire URLs:

<http://www.wymetro.com/>

leading to:

<http://www.wymetro.com/news>

leading to:

<http://www.wymetro.com/news/releases>

leading to:

<http://www.wymetro.com/news/releases/12-06-22QCs>

leading to:

<http://www.wymetro.com/news/releases/qualitycontracts/>

leading to:

<http://www.wymetro.com/news/releases/qualitycontracts/Questions>

<http://www.wymetro.com/news/releases/qualitycontracts/CC>

and others.

These matters have to be considered seriously by the Welsh Government and jointly by Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire County Councils if there is any concerted interest in restoring conventional bus services to what they were in this area in December 2009. While the interests of service providers are allowed to remain treated more favourably by the law than the public interest there can be no prospect of remedy.

In conclusion I should like to draw the attention of readers to the necessity of improving the level of conventional bus service in the area not just for the benefit of local inhabitants but for the benefit of tourists. These have traditionally provided revenue to the area but are not well served by public transport. Many of them enjoy travel by bus and occasionally some from over the border are surprised to find that their English free travel passes are not valid in Wales. If the interests of tourism and of the wider business community are not to be threatened by inadequate bus services then remedial action must be taken promptly and not delayed. Bwcabus and other on-demand services are of not the slightest use to tourists and only stand to impede random and spontaneous travel by all of us for no justifiable reason. The provision of public transport remains a very contentious issue in this area and deserves more favourable attention than it has received from the authorities of late if it is to survive practically unregulated as it currently is in the hands of private enterprise. The Welsh Government and both local authorities must take into consideration social as well as financial issues.