

2.17 The Deputy of St. Mary of the Minister for Transport and Technical Services regarding feedback from customers about the buses used by Connex:

Will the Minister advise the Assembly what research, if any, has been carried out to establish feedback from customers about the buses used by Connex and outline how the results will be used to inform decisions about which buses to purchase in the future?

The Connétable of St. Brelade (The Minister for Transport and Technical Services):

The Deputy's question is timely as a passenger survey was undertaken this summer by BestChart Limited, a company retained by Transport and Technical Services to provide independent monitoring of bus services claimed by Connex. The results have been collated and analysed and receipt of the report is imminent. This review will help to inform the work towards future revisions of the bus service network being undertaken as part of the sustainable transport policy Green Paper and the type of vehicle appropriate to each route will be considered at that time. In addition, as part of the Sustainable Transport Policy consultation process, I anticipate the views of the travelling public will be sought on the recommendations from a review of the bus contract which is currently being worked on and this will undoubtedly seek feedback on the vehicles that are and should be utilised on the network. I would add that I use the bus service as far as possible and my observations will no doubt inform decisions. I spoke only yesterday with the managing director of Connex and intend visiting bus construction facilities in the next few weeks to establish which vehicles may be suitable to the Island.

2.17.1 The Deputy of St. Mary:

A supplementary. Yes, could the Minister clarify; I welcome the fact that a passenger survey has been undertaken but then the answer very quickly went on to the bus network and so on although he did mention the type of vehicle. Can the Minister confirm what stress in that survey was put on the customers about the comfort and the experience of riding on the buses, because that is what my question is about?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

It may be more appropriate, once the results of the survey come out, for the Deputy to comment on that. At this stage I have not got it in front of me so I cannot answer this question directly, although I am happy to do so when available. I think his point is well made in that customer satisfaction is important and that seat capacity is a consideration, and there are some 6 or 7 seats on most buses which have somewhat more leg room than others and I am sure the Deputy, as a bus user, will well know this and that regular usage of the bus does dictate exactly where you may stand and where you may sit to give you greatest comfort.

2.17.2 Deputy J.A. Martin:

It is encouraging to hear they have done a survey of passengers using the bus service. My problem is that there are many people who want to use the bus services who are not passengers because there are no buses that go on their routes. How are we getting out to them and can the Minister please open up his eyes and get to the people who want to use buses in Jersey because a passenger survey of the existing passengers does not do it. Will he admit that?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

My difficulty is shortage of cash. We have a heavily-subsided bus service and in order to put on more buses to the outlying routes costs money. Clearly, the busier routes are self-sustaining but those to the outer extremities of the Island are not and the decision will have to be made if we wish to increase the subsidy to provide that or whether we adopt a completely different system. This is something which the department will be reviewing when the bus contract comes up for renewal in 2012.

2.17.3 Deputy J.A. Martin:

Sorry, it just seems when you are dealing with Connex... to take one route, we have a very good route - the 18 - that does round Le Squez and into town and back again every 20 minutes. Yet for the last 5 years, I have been trying to get a bus up Mount Bingham, Pier Road, where there are 2 big housing estates all with people over 60; the majority over 60. It is not rocket science to cut out one of these buses and make a smaller bus go up this route but Connex are deaf on it and so is T.T.S. (Transport and Technical Services). Can the Minister look into these simple things that can be done? It is not money, it is pragmatism and it is a bit of experience and talking to the people who really need to use these buses.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I agree with the Deputy entirely and I think we have to very often stick our neck out and try new routes because until we try them we do not really know how they are going to work. In terms of a Mount Bingham service, I am happy to liaise with the Deputy and discuss how we might achieve that.

2.17.4 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Two years ago the Auditor General agreed to do a report on the value-for-money of the Connex bus service before the new contract was agreed. Will the Minister assure us that he will, in fact, remind the Auditor General and ask him to do this report?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I would be delighted to do that.

2.17.5 Deputy J.B. Fox of St. Helier:

Some years ago the late Mick Eden proposed to have a Shamrock community bus route operating around St. Helier and, as far as I am aware, there was no proposal by him that it required any subsidy, except for the current bus company at the time I think paid him a huge sum of money to buy him out. Have we considered advertising potential services of this nature which would complement the existing bus service, would not cost the States anything but provide the service for those that live around and about St. Helier, allowing a better quality of life to come into St. Helier, at the same time fulfil the Minister's traffic policy which are out for discussion at the moment?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

The department is always prepared to consider all suggestions and once again this will no doubt form part of the renewed bus contract. But in terms of a town service the question is finance, once again; that the users of a town service tend to be the subsidised passenger and, in financial terms, it does not stack up. Having said that,

we are keen to discuss, in conjunction with the Connétable of St. Helier, the achievement of some services which I know he is keen to provide.

2.17.6 Deputy M. Tadier:

Would the Minister consider moving towards complete deregulation of the buses to allow individuals with a P.S.V. (Public Service Vehicle) licence to run mini buses as they wish and to move away from the Soviet-style state-owned monopoly bus system that we currently have which is inefficient and is not delivering the service that people want?

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I think there is a thread of truth in what the Deputy says; it may be only a thread, but there is a bit of truth in that the provision of small mini buses from outlying hubs which were served by the regular service is something that we could aspire to and that would cover the last mile which are the areas which, at present, are not being covered as suggested by a previous speaker. So I think that is a route that we could go and I understand there are models for this in other areas and the department will be certainly looking in that direction.

The Bailiff:

One final question then Deputy of St. Mary?

2.17.7 The Deputy of St. Mary:

Yes. Just to wrap up, does the Minister agree that listening to the customers will determine future success and, in particular, will he take on board the issues of the space available for people's legs; and my research shows that 5 foot 6 inches is about the limit of comfort on our buses if you have long legs and 5 foot 8 inches if you do not and, beyond that, you are just under stress. Also the issue of safe luggage racks, and wheelchairs and bicycles. So there are a number of issues and I just want the Minister to comment on whether he will welcome representations from Members of the House and whether he will listen to the customers as a matter of principle.

The Connétable of St. Brelade:

I think one of the department's primary responsibilities is to listen to customer which, of course, includes representations from the House who represent them. In terms of the luggage racks, I was told only yesterday that there will be another 7 buses coming online shortly with the provision of luggage racks and, of course, wheelchair accessibility is a point which we are conscious of and I think we will probably have to wait until the new contract because the expense involved is not insignificant; it means new buses throughout. In terms of leg room, I did note this morning - and I have made a point of counting - there are 7 seats on the present buses which can carry those gifted with slightly longer legs than others.

The Deputy of St. Mary:

Will the Minister be issuing cards to people with longer legs?