

2015.02.24

3.12 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Minister for Transport and Technical Services regarding the users of the bus service and changes to bus fares over 2014 and 2015:

Will the Minister give Members details of the rider-ship of the bus service, including the numbers using pre-paid cards and an estimate of the overall changes to bus fares over 2014 and 2015?

Deputy E.J. Noel (The Minister for Transport and Technical Services):

Bus rider-ship across all Liberty Bus services in 2014 totalled just over 4 million passenger journeys. This is 10.6 per cent rise over 2013, and the first time this 4 million figure has been achieved in a 12-month period. The split of payment methods was as follows: cash on the bus for 56 per cent of the journeys; pre-paid AvanchiCard for 36 per cent of the journeys and the use of unlimited travel cards of 8 per cent of the journeys. The changes to the single bus fares can be summarised as follows: on-bus cash payments, 20 per cent increase on all adult and children tickets, although the AvanchiCard is mandatory on the school bus network, cash is not accepted on the school bus services; AvanchiCard fares for children have increased by 5 per cent; Avanchi pre-paid zone A has increased by 10 per cent and Avanchi pre-paid zone B has decreased by 10 per cent. Avanchi unlimited prices have also changed as follows: monthly tickets have decreased by £4; weekly tickets have decreased by £4.50 and annual tickets have decreased by £42.35. I will happily circulate hard copies of these details to States Members after the Question Time.

3.12.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The intention of my question was that the Minister should state what the overall change has been because of the division in the rider-ship. It appears that over half are still paying cash, and that is where the price has gone up substantially over R.P.I. (Retail Price Index) compared to a lesser proportion paying through card, where the fares may have gone down. The overall is a rise, I believe, on those figures. Does he have a figure for how much that is over - as I suspect it is - inflation?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I do not have a crystal ball or any other method of predicting the future. These increases are coming into effect on 1st March this year and the purpose of them is to encourage people to move away from a cash basis. The card system allows for quicker boarding, more convenience for passengers and allows them to take advantage of the reductions in fares overall.

3.12.2 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I am sure the Minister welcomes, as I do, this increase in bus usage in Jersey, but would he not agree with me that we need to press for an overall reduction in bus fares to further incentivise bus travel and to reduce traffic congestion, to free up parking spaces, particularly now the relative cost of motoring is likely to come down as fuel costs drop?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

We need to maintain a bus service that has as limited a subsidy from the taxpayer as possible, but we also - I agree with the Constable - need to increase usage of that service. It is the quality of that service that counts, as well as the fare structure. Liberty Bus are moving to bringing incentives to reduce the cost of bus travel in comparison to the main alternative, which is people using their cars. That is welcome. For 2016 they are working on a single flat fare for travel among the Island and doing away with the 2 zones, zone A and zone B. There are a number of initiatives coming through, including for parents of schoolchildren to have a term or yearly payment for unlimited travel for our schoolchildren. Steps are being made to make the bus service both better in terms of quality but also more affordable.

3.12.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the Minister return to the House with a figure which gives the average price rise for this particular initiative, these changes? It is not that question of jam tomorrow and look into the future; it is what the bus company proposes. Does he have a figure; will he bring it to the House, of what the average overall increase will be in this particular case?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I am an accountant, not a magician. The figure that Deputy Southern is requesting is simply not calculable, because it relates to future bus travel throughout the year. Hopefully the measures that have been taken by Liberty Bus will allow the public to make informed choices and to get a culture change away from cash to the AvanchiCard system and therefore the public can take advantage of the lower fares.

3.12.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I am aware that the Minister sometimes has problems with R.P.I. and whether calculating a change is greater or less than R.P.I. but the calculation is perfectly do-able. If you know the proportion of people riding under each ... yes, it will change in the future, but now, as of March, there will be a price rise for those people paying cash and a price drop for some of the people paying by card. It is not hard to work it out. Will he set his officers to work out what the average price rise is and return to the House with that figure?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I have given full details of the price rises and indeed the price reductions going forward. The figure that Deputy Southern is asking for is not calculable, because the whole purpose of this exercise is to change people's behaviour away from cash payments to using the card system, which will give them a reduction in their travel costs.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

The Minister is misleading the House. It is perfectly calculable, as he knows well, because I taught him physics a long time ago [**Laughter**] and he does know to handle numbers, so it is about time he showed it.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

He did not necessarily do a good job, Sir.