

2018.10.23

7 Deputy K.F. Morel of the Minister for Infrastructure regarding the prospective total cost to the Island of running a free bus service: [OQ.155/2018]

Will the Minister advise the Assembly whether any assessment has been undertaken of the total cost to the Island of running a free bus service and, if so, will he state what the estimated cost is?

Deputy H.C. Raymond of Trinity (Assistant Minister for Infrastructure - rapporteur):

The current cost of supporting the public transport network, including school buses, is approximately £4.5 million. It is estimated that in the first year of zero-fare operation an additional £6.5 million would be required to cover the loss of income, assuming no change in demand. However, it is very probable that large increases in passenger numbers would result, requiring significant investment in additional resources to cope. A free fares experiment in Belgium generated a 1,300 per cent increase in demand over 10 years, requiring a 500 per cent increase in the bus fleet, and that went on to say that not only the bus fleet but it needed drivers and everything else that goes with it. In Jersey, this would increase the annual cost of public transport support to £25 million.

5.7.1 Deputy K.F. Morel:

Thank you, Assistant Minister. Any exploratory kind of calculations done by the department, have they looked into how many Islanders would be likely to use a free bus service? You mentioned 1,300 per cent increases in Belgium, do you have similar figures for Jersey? Respective figures for Jersey?

The Bailiff:

Through the Chair, please.

The Deputy of Trinity:

I do, but the problem with this, a lot of work has gone into it, which I would confirm, over the last couple of years. In fact, we are meeting with HCT, the overriding bus company that runs LibertyBus, this week. I am sure the discussion will come up with regards to numbers and what happens. But, if I may answer the question in a more positive way in the sense that a lot of work has gone into the positives and the negatives of starting a free public service. In any situation, you have to look across the board as to who has done this. The benefits of zero-fare public transport are faster boarding; there are shorter dwell times; removes a source of passenger dispute; it generates increased town centre footfall; reduced demand for parking; can relocate space for public realm development; reduced demand for road space can relocate to bus priority in sustainable modes; environment noise and air pollution; aids social integration and economic participation and it removes cash handling, ticketing, back office costs and everything that goes with it. There is the 'against' side of this with regards to what is being looked at. The greater demand causes more buses to stop more frequently and bus stations, termini, laybys, waiting shelters all become too small and need rebuilding, extending. Decreased congestion levels make private motorised transport more appealing. One of the most interesting things that came out of the report was that one of the things that we have always been talking about in the Assembly is the ability of cycling and people walking. What happens with free bus services: people start - especially in bad weather - automatically going back to the buses and cycling drops. One of the big significant things of all these reports is that people stop cycling, because the buses are free. It does alter choices of those not living close to bus routes and I have got to say that because there are certain Parishes where there are certain buses do not go; therefore, how do you get those people, because it affects more people that are on direct line bus services? The other reason ...

The Bailiff:

Can you try and wrap up your answer, please, Deputy?

The Deputy of Trinity:

Yes, right. I was just trying to put the ... I appreciate that, Sir. It does not really answer your question with regards to numbers. We have looked at numbers across the Parishes and everything and I think there is a discussion to be had, but that is really the positive and the negative of having a private system.

5.7.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

When you look at numbers for the cost of a free bus service, I think you need to take a much longer-term view and look at the other benefits, which are the long-term health benefits of reducing traffic and as somebody who represents an area of St. Helier that suffers enormously from traffic coming into it during the daytime. The long-term health benefits, the less wear and tear on our roads, the lower pollution are all parts of the equation that need to be calculated. Would you consider these, and consider them seriously, when you look at the actual figures and not just go with raw numbers; look at the long-term health benefits for our population?

The Deputy of Trinity:

Yes, I totally agree, I do not think there are any issues in that at all. I think that the benefit of having this, and the suggestions that the Deputy has suggested. I will say that it is being taken very seriously, as I said, especially reiterating the fact that the HCT, which is the overriding owner of LibertyBus, will be here this week. We will be having discussions with them and the points you raise will be brought to them.

The Bailiff:

“The points the Deputy raises.” Through the Chair, thank you.

5.7.3 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Some of what I was going to say has been asked. It is concerning road congestion and pollution coming from cars, which we know is affecting the health of Islanders. What I would ask is: the Assistant Minister said there is a debate to be had. Would the Assistant Minister release all the reports that they have had to-date, so the public can join in the debate and we can look at and see what you are looking at and the costs, and so on, to try and bring this to fruition?

The Deputy of Trinity:

I have no problems with that. I do not know the implications of whether we can do those sort of things, or whether we cannot, but I would certainly bring it up with the Minister when he returns and come back to you, Deputy, to let you know.

[10:45]

I am more than happy for some of this to be disclosed to people, because I think it is vitally important to see exactly what the cost is in running the bus service and the cost in per term with regards to each person that gets on the bus. I cannot agree with you more. But I will add another thing which I did not mention, is that if you take the other side of the coin with regards to pollution, especially as we are now being pushed towards electric cars and electric buses, pollution then tends to go out the window on those sorts of discussions, but I would be more than happy to come back to you.

5.7.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If I may take the liberty of summarising then. The Assistant Minister seems to have said, as far as I am concerned, that we are not going to invest in this, because it might be successful and we might reduce the amount of traffic on our roads and thereby meet our CO2 savings from the greatest current contributor to emissions. But I want to ask about a much smaller investment that might be made by his department into a Hoppa bus running around St. Helier and the built-up environs, which could get people, for many of the reasons that he has cited, onto buses and mobile and contributing more to society and enjoying themselves.

The Deputy of Trinity:

As the Constable of St. Helier was not here, I was not expecting that question, but perhaps I was. Again, it is open for discussion. I think that having taken this role, it is interesting that these discussions are taking place. I have to confirm they seriously are taking place, but there are many things there in the pot. As I said, there are people coming over to discuss where LibertyBus is going; therefore, with the Minister coming back we will certainly take up your views and express them to him.

5.7.5 Deputy R. Labey:

A free bus service would, of course, encourage people to use the buses, as would correcting the anomaly that if to reach your destination you have to go through St. Helier you pay twice. What is being done to address that?

The Deputy of Trinity:

Deputy, I can confirm that that is being looked at as I speak. We are looking at that. It has come up every time in the Assembly and I think it is something that we must look at because, as you keep saying, you are doubling the cost, and the example is given, so I can assure you that that is being looked at.

Deputy K.F. Morel:

It is just to thank the Assistant Minister for his answers and to say I am pleased to know that they are looking at the bus service.