

2019.03.26

11 The Deputy of St. John of the Minister for Infrastructure regarding the prospect of an Island-wide ‘park and ride’ bus service: [OQ.79/2019]

Will the Minister bring forward a plan to introduce an Island-wide park and ride bus service, to provide peripheral parking around the Island that would negate the need for road users to drive into St. Helier and, if so, when?

Deputy K.C. Lewis (The Minister for Infrastructure):

The existing and successful LibertyBus service provides a comprehensive network of routes and services and serves nearly 800 bus stops, a benefit from the availability of a public transport facility within a short walking distance. Demand for the service, since 2013, has continuously grown, demonstrating that for many there is no need to drive into St. Helier. While the concept of implementing park and ride sites at locations on the edge of urban areas is sound and the establishment of numerous cities throughout the U.K. and Europe, it generally requires fields alongside major traffic corridors to be acquired and given a tarmac surface, plus additional and heavily-subsidised bus services to be overlaid on the established route network. I can confirm that my department has no budget for doing so and because the necessary funding is unlikely to be prioritised above the Island’s other needs, I will not be putting forward proposals for such facilities to be provided within the next Financial Plan.

3.11.1 The Deputy of St. John:

Will the Minister accept that there is a pressing need to take traffic off the roads, reducing congestion and so reducing idling pollution?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Absolutely. We have had previous experiments in the past. There was La Collette in the 1990s, operated by the then Public Services Department using mini-buses; it still obliged road users to drive on congested roads, through town, to get to the car parks. We had an experiment at Les Fontaines, the Deputy’s own Parish, that was trialled by LibertyBus a few years ago and there was one a.m. service and one p.m. service to serve the Les Fontaines Car Park. Because this location was on the commuting route, very few people used the service and it ceased after just a few weeks. There are also informal areas being used, such as Long Beach in Grouville, that people from St. Martin drive down, park there and catch the bus in. There is an informal park and ride in action at the moment.

3.11.2 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

We all welcome the increase in bus numbers, but does the Minister know whether the actual figures for the reduction in car use, for example, coming into St. Helier and if he does not, why did he dismiss this idea without evidence?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I have not dismissed the idea. As I say, it has been trialled several times in the past and we are more than happy to do so again, if a suitable site can be found. There is an excellent bus service to all the southern routes on the Island and we would love to expand it further north in the rural Parishes if the demand was there. But, as I say, it is growing year on year and I believe over the last few years the service has grown by some 40 per cent.

3.11.3 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

The Minister, again, did not answer the final question which was: can he prove there has been a reduction in cars coming into St. Helier?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I can get hold of the figures for the Deputy. I do not have them with me. But the Deputy may have known that the population is growing, so the figures are obviously growing too. I am doing everything in my power to keep the number of vehicles down on the road, but people have the right to drive a vehicle and we cannot uninvent the car. But we are doing all we can to keep traffic moving and the roads open and clear.

Deputy M. Tadier:

Can I defer to Deputy Ward, if that is possible? I think he was on before me, I am happy not to ask a question.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I did not note Deputy Ward's light, but if he confirms that he did light and you wish to defer to him, then, Deputy Ward, I will take your question.

3.11.4 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I seem to be missing my light today. Can I ask the Minister whether he believes that there has been a cultural change and a greater understanding of the need to improve air quality and to lower emissions? Therefore, the time to trial such a service may be coming back again, because people's ideas and particularly young people's ideas on the importance of such things, are changing.

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

More than happy to do trials, but I am trying not to encourage people to drive their vehicles then get on the bus. I would like people to get on the bus from A to B. The bus service, itself, just under 3.7 million journeys in the first 9 months of 2018, which is 3.5 per cent higher than the same period in 2017, so bus ridership is increasing. We are putting up more and more bus shelters, to keep the population dry. We have green bus shelters put up in the countryside to blend in, where the sea is the background there are silver bus shelters and we are increasing this more and more as funds become available. I would like to increase the bus service even more and reduce traffic on the roads.

3.11.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I think the issue is that the main bus service could be seen as the arteries, but the capillaries that get to people's homes are cars and it puts people off getting the bus. A park and ride enables people to use their car less and then travel into St. Helier, which is where we are seeing air pollution and it is affecting the well-being of our population.

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Absolutely. If an area became available we would be more than happy to use it, but it is not at the moment. As I said, this has been trialled in the past and people have the availability of buses. A lot of people choose to use their own vehicle. Lots of people, maybe in the northern Parishes, do not have a choice but to use a vehicle, but we are trying to expand the system as much as we can. We have trialled various systems, we have tried park and ride, we have tried the Parish hub system where mini-buses pick people up from their Parish hubs and bring them to the bus stop; that, sadly, did not work either. But we are more than happy to try anything to increase the bus service.

3.11.6 Senator K.L. Moore:

Is the Minister's department considering any alternatives to bus travel, such as reinstating the previously, very successful, e-bike scheme, which encourage people to travel actively, which has very many known health benefits?

The Deputy Bailiff:

The original question, Senator, was in connection with park and ride and not generally about improving the health and alternative schemes; we have stuck mostly on topic.

Senator K.L. Moore:

Sir, this is related to the topic, because it is about reducing the number of cars on the road and I am asking the Deputy whether there are alternatives being sought, in addition to the bus service, which is an important part of our sustainable transport policy.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Very well, I will allow it. Yes, Minister.

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Indeed, we encourage the bikes. If funding allows, we may bring back the electric bike system, meanwhile there are regular bikes. Also, if one hires a bike from LibertyBus, a special folding bike, they can take it on the bus and store it in the storage area provided, so it is literally park yourself on a bus and ride. But there are many upcoming things; we are looking at electrification, more and more electric vehicles are coming online. It would be great if we could have more commercial vehicles electrified and that would obviously reduce the pollution, but we are moving ahead as fast as we can.

3.11.7 Deputy D. Johnson of St. Mary:

In the context of improving the bus service for those residents in the northern Parishes, would the Minister advise what steps there are to increase the number of bus stops? I ask this in the context of a resident having made such an application more than 2 years ago and no such bus stop has been furnished. I would suggest there is, therefore, a market for further passengers, should the frequency of bus stops be made more available.

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

If the demand is there, then LibertyBus would be more than happy to put on a service. Infrastructure would be more than happy to assist with installing the bus stop and, of course, a shelter, if the demand was there.

3.11.8 Deputy S.M. Wickenden:

The Minister, in his answers, keeps referring to the previous trials; however, in his own words, the trials were situated in places that had heavy commuter traffic and was not taken up, therefore they were in the wrong place. Will the Minister look into more appropriate trials, rather than just dismiss the idea?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I do not recall dismissing the idea. I said we are more than happy to try anything and I cannot make it clearer than that. But if we can keep as many cars off the road as possible, I am more than happy to look at it.

3.11.9 The Deputy of St. John:

Does the Minister accept that, for many people, there is no choice but to use their vehicles to get into town, as they live well away from any bus routes? If they were given the choice, they would be able to leave their car at an associated car park and travel on the bus into town; that would surely take an enormous amount of people off the road.

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Yes, I do agree that many of the rural Parishes, there are people who are not remotely close to a bus stop. But I repeat, we did try the hub system, where the mini-buses were based at the Parish Halls and could pick people up on request and bring them back to the main bus stop. But they did not work at all, it was run by volunteers and people were sat in mini-buses all day outside of Parish Halls with very little use. But, as I say, more than happy to try anything to encourage people to use buses more, but, as I say, there must be a demand there.