

COLCHESTER BUS USERS' SUPPORT GROUP (C-BUS)

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5th ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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FIVE YEARS OF C-BUS

C-BUS was formally constituted at a meeting on 29th September 2003, however the first committee meeting was on 12th June 2003 so we are already past our fifth birthday in work terms. The idea of a local bus users' group had been initiated during meetings with Colchester Borough Council officers and councillors earlier in the year. The Council's much-vaunted 2001 New Transport Policy was then still 'new', and the idea was that the council and local people would push together to make the bus operators do more for Colchester. Many of us were naively assuming that the Council was actually intending to *implement* at least some of the encouraging pro-public transport proposals in the new policy! - Alas! - it was all to turn out very different – before we had even got our feet under the table there came the shock of the Bus Station closure proposal, and we soon found ourselves spending much of the time working *with* the bus operators against the Council! The Bus Station issue also brought a massive increase in our workload, and it is doubtful whether any of us would have offered to get involved had we known in advance how many hundreds of hours a year we were going to end up spending on C-BUS issues.....

Another main theme of our experience to date is the amount of time we have had to spend on *basic executive actions* i.e. doing things that ought to be done by the local authorities or the bus operators themselves, notably in the field of providing basic written information. We have now seen some things improve on this front; in cases where they haven't, it has become clear that it is a lot less bother to (e.g.) just put up timetables at stops ourselves, than it is to try to get the powers that be to do what needs to be done!

We had no idea at the start how the local bus industry would react to the idea of having a local user group hovering over them (there are still so few bus users' groups in the UK that most people in the industry will have had no experience of dealing with them). In fact only some of the small operators have been 'unable to cope' (and this hasn't been of great importance, as there tend to be few problems with most of their routes). Nobody from the main operators has stood on their dignity, and we must particularly mention the way in which we have been accepted as part of the system by all at our principal operator First. The problem in dealing with bus operators is not so much the *attitude* of their management but rather the fact that they all

seem to have one frontline manager too few to keep a proper grip on things! Which of course is one reason why user groups are needed.

OUR SUCCESSES 2003 - 2008

** Major improvements to Colchester evening and Sunday services in 2004, notably the introduction of an evening and Sunday 65 service vice the previous minimal services in North Colchester, improved evening and Sunday service on the 1, improved Sunday 64 service vice the old 4, improved Sunday service to the University and Wivenhoe, and rerouting of the Sunday 76 service via the University. Since 2004 the evening and Sunday services in Colchester have been the best in Essex.

** Getting ECC to produce timetable leaflets for the 50/92, 83, 87/247, and 88 combined service.

** Pushing for all timetable leaflets to show *the whole week's service* in the same place. [In 2003 there were still a lot of separate 'ECC' timetables at bus stops, with no indication on the main timetable that any evening or Sunday service existed]. All NC stop timetables, and their booklet, now show the whole week's service. We have also got ECC and First to agree arrangements under which First timetable leaflets will henceforth show the whole week's service even if other operators run the evening and Sunday journeys.

** Defeating the CBC cabinet / officers' attempts in 2005 to have the High St made the 'Temporary Bus Station', and subsequently working with CBC and Buchanans to make the Temporary Bus Station at Queen St as good as possible.

** Defeating all the wholly inadequate schemes put forward for a replacement Bus Station in Osborne St / Vineyard Gate.

** Great reduction in early running since the start of our 'Let's Stamp Out Early Running' campaign in August 2005. [See Newsletters 11 and 17 for results].

** Pushing for the recasting of the former ECC 'Sunday Travel Club' into a 'Passenger Information Service' available to all as a supplement to the timetable books.

** Reinstating of the new bus layby in Queen St (stop F) which was removed from the plans in the middle stages of the St Botolphs Masterplan production.

** Additional bus stops on the 61 in Haven Road and Rectory Road Wivenhoe.

** Some (but far from complete!) success in getting proper information displayed during diversions, including use of the town centre telematics screens (which had been intended to display messages from the start but had never been used for this until we demanded it).

** Forcing alteration to the phasing of the St Botolphs roundabout signals after all bus routes in Colchester had suffered gratuitous delays for two years because ECC would not change the phasing after CBC decided to open up the former St Botolphs St bus lane to all traffic.

** Complete retiming of Sunday 88 service in 2007 after three years of very early running due to overlax schedules.

** Rescheduling of Sunday afternoon 62 journeys after endemic very late running in autumn 2007 caused by overtight schedules, with a Sunday 61 service being introduced as part of the changes made in reaction to our complaints.

** Retiming of morning peak 65 journeys in 2008 to improve running from Highwoods 0845-0945.

C-BUS does not claim to be the sole cause of all the above changes! - indeed it is not always clear whether

changes are made purely because of one's own intervention, and some ideas may have been in the mind of the bodies in question already.

OUR OWN WORK 2003 – 2008

** Bus Station passenger surveys October 2003 (in connection with FoE) and Head St passenger surveys March 2005 (ditto). [CBC's decision to shut the Bus Station had been made without any knowledge of how many people actually used it].

** Town centre bus surveys conducted 10-15 times a year since 2003 over 90-minute periods, providing the information on punctuality and usage needed as background facts for seeking changes.

** Regular checking of the timetable displays at bus station and town centre stops and drawing the attention of ECC and the operators to errors (and putting up replacements ourselves when they don't act!).

** Ongoing checking of ECC timetable books, and First and NC timetable leaflets, for errors, plus suggesting improvements in presentation.

** Recasting of the place indexes in the ECC NE Essex book.

** Production of the 'BARGAIN BUS TRAVEL IN COLCHESTER' leaflet in 2005, with subsequent 2006 edition. In the course of this the full correct facts on ticket and pass validities had to be sorted out with ECC and the operators after many years of 'drift'.

** Production of the 'NORTH EAST ESSEX VISITOR ATTRACTIONS BY TRAIN & BUS' leaflet in 2007.

** Full survey of the location and condition of all bus stops in Colchester, leading to the production of the Colchester Bus Stops map for members in 2007, and submission of a list of missing and uncertain stops/poles/flags to ECC, plus requests for a few additional stops.

** Setting up of the C-BUS website.

** Production of a combined timetable for Wivenhoe – Colchester (after it became clear that nobody else was willing to do this), now available on our website and as a link from the Wivenhoe website home page.

** Production of the 'Where to Catch Your Bus in Colchester Town Centre' map now incorporated in the ECC NE Essex timetable book.

AND SOME THINGS THAT WE HAVEN'T GOT ANYTHING DONE ABOUT !

- Illegal parking at town centre bus stops
- Getting northbound buses to call at the General Hospital main entrance.
- Getting a service for the Leisure Centre.
- Filling the gaps in the early evening 1, 2, and most particularly 8/8A services since the summer 2005 NC cuts.
- Getting a proper passenger assistance officer at the Bus Station.
- Getting the telematics to work properly!! (although it has got less bad in 2008).
- Getting full collaboration in dealing with the effects of street closures, instead of ECC CBC and the operators all considering it is not *their* job to inform passengers properly.

LATEST / FORTHCOMING SERVICE CHANGES

Errors in ECC June 2008 book

The book was printed with the *pre-May 2008* 2 and 8 timetables. A reprint has now been done with this corrected, and can be distinguished by the yellow band on the cover.

Although noted correctly in the Summary of Changes pages, the 93 and 755 timetables do not show that the 1520 from Ipswich is a through journey to Colchester.

Suffolk changes 18.8.08

Another round of major changes in Suffolk – the only thing directly affecting us is that the 0820 and 1525 93 departures from Colchester will be retimed to 0815 and 1520.

Changes to ECC Contracts from 31.8.08

None of these involve timetable changes.

1, 2, and 8 evening services to be operated by First vice Network Colchester.

11, 15, and 83 to be operated by First vice Network Colchester.

78 evening and Sunday journeys will all now be operated by Network Colchester.

First changes from 31.8.08

60 – New service between town centre and Prettygate, see article below.

61 and 62 – Wholly revised Sunday services, with (almost) all buses now running to/from North Station at a combined 30 min interval. An extra vehicle has been committed, which will enable this to be done whilst retaining enough layover time to ensure that the service does not go to pot on busier Sundays as happened in winter 2007/8.

The idea of 'swapping over' the 61 and 62 termini in Wivenhoe has not been implemented as expected, and there are no changes to the weekday services.

65 – Restoration of 10-min interval service to Tollgate between 0900 and 1500 Mons-Fris. Improved frequency during Sunday shopping hours – see article below.

70 – 0750 from Great Tey replaced by 0725 from Braintree, and 509 school journeys withdrawn.

74 and 76 Sunday services – These will now terminate at / start from Head St, vice North Station. This is being done to give a better chance of running punctually at busy times. The change has been made in connection with the 61 and 62 changes; overall there will be more Sunday buses between the University and North Station than now.

Forthcoming First Changes

It was revealed by Bob Dorr at a recent public meeting that First intend to increase the frequency of the 70 and 71 to half-hourly from December 2008, with low-floor vehicles being introduced. The 70 will be interworked with the 352, which will mean direct buses between Colchester and Broomfield Hospital. This would represent the most significant enhancement of any Colchester 'country' routes for many years (see table in May Newsletter).

WAR SPREADS TO SHRUB END

We commented in the last Newsletter on the likelihood of First taking umbrage at Network Colchester's introduction of the 6 and diversion of the 8 in Highwoods to follow the 65 route. (This after all is what Thatcherite 'competition' is all supposed to be about). We didn't have long to wait as in June First registered a new route 60 to commence on 1st September, between the town centre loop and Prettygate, exactly following the 1 route. This is to run every ten minutes Mons-Sats from 08xx to 17xx, plus a few earlier journeys too. Most of the buses are timed to leave Queen St *one minute* before a 1!

However one suspects that this route will have a short life, and that both it and the 6 will soon disappear.....

[This will in passing provide an experiment on how well the Queen St layby can handle a larger number of buses – up

to 26 per hour – without blocking traffic].

MORE IMPROVEMENTS TO COLCHESTER SUNDAY SERVICES

After several months preparation we submitted a report to ECC in May re the need for changes to some Sunday services to put an end to very poor reliability in the afternoons.

We noted that most Sunday services still have the *same* timings (usually much tighter than the weekday timings) and the same service interval for the *whole* of the day on Sundays, even though Sundays 1100-1700 have now become a major shopping time, with more car traffic at Sunday lunchtimes in particular than there is at this time of day on weekdays. Again, whilst it is perhaps unlikely that bus users will ever have quite the same enthusiasm for Sunday shopping that motorists have, there are now far more passengers on most routes during shopping hours, whereas Sunday evenings remain the deadest time of the week.

Additionally there now seem to be ever more Sundays each year when further delays are caused by town centre street closures for events, or main roads are closed for street repairs with lengthy diversions and abnormal traffic congestion, which is all too much for tight Sunday bus schedules to cope with.

We were particularly concerned by the 65 which one feels ought to be the most successful Sunday route but which has in practice been subjected to lot of very late running and turning short even on 'normal' Sundays. Our observations on the High St fair Sundays in November/December 2007, and on Good Friday 2008, showed that the 65 service collapsed completely on those days (which no other ECC route did, despite bad delays). We suspect that repeated bad experiences may have been putting people off using the route on Sundays and contributing to the limited passenger growth seen to date.

As we understood that money was currently very tight at County Hall, we suggested various alterations that would not involve any increase in bus mileage; but we are pleased to report that ECC have agreed to put two extra vehicles on to the 65 from 1000 to 1700, which will enable an increase to 20 minute frequency during this period, whilst also allowing eased schedules for greater reliability.

We also expressed concern about the 8c, which seems to work OK on many Sundays but is far too tight to cope with any significant traffic congestion or diversions. We feel it is not acceptable to have schedules which one knows will cause collapse on a good number of Sundays each year. One suggestion is that a spare vehicle be kept at Queen St on 'bad' Sundays to be brought into service as necessary. No decision has been made on this yet.

The extra 65 journeys, plus the extra 61 journeys referred to earlier, will mean a total of *35 more* journeys on Colchester town routes on Sundays from September, as compared to the start of 2008.

LEXDEN APPLAUDS THE 4

Another public meeting of Lexden residents, at Home Farm School on 22nd July, saw many compliments from the floor for the friendly and reliable operation of the 4 (and ended with a round of spontaneous applause for Hedingham's Robert MacGregor !). The real gripe of people in this area is that many moved there in the knowledge that the 5 provided an established 30-min service 0800-1800, but in recent years it has shrunk to a rump. In fact few of the audience admitted to using the 5, and it was only referred to in dismissive terms – perhaps a reflection of the ghastly service provided in the first months of NC control when it was supposed to run every ten minutes but you were lucky if anything actually turned up.

MacGregor stated that he had tried to get ECC to support a 30-min service on the 4, or introduce an afternoon or Saturday service, but no agreement had been reached to date. He also felt that the 4 might become commercially viable if operators were paid a proper reimbursement for senior citizen passholders.

Also present was First Managing Director Bob Dorr who announced that the 65 would revert to a 10-minute interval service throughout from September. (However as those present were mainly people living *furthest* from Lexden Road, this was not received with the same degree of joy as it might have been in Stanway!).

The decision to restore the full 10 minute service on the 65 means that almost all the ideas produced by the expensive 'consultants' hired by First in spring 2007 have now had to be abandoned. The only 'benefit' from them was a lot of negative publicity and customer dissatisfaction.

WELCOME BACK 0900

After four months of 0930-2300, Colchester passholders had their 0900-2400 validity restored from 4th August, fulfilling the promise made by the new CBC administration. The whole 'plot' by 'certain persons in Chelmsford' to

impose the reduced hours all over Essex is now falling to pieces as ever more Districts revert to the old hours. Tendring has also now made the change back (so all three of CBC's neighbouring Districts are now back on 0900).

The sum of £100,000 quoted in the press as the 'cost' of the change back is not a definite cost at all, but only an estimate by the scheme administrators of what the net result might be. As explained in the May Newsletter, the actual cost is derived from the journeys *actually made* during the year (and only becomes known at the year end). Weather etc will also have a major impact on the outturn figure.

Remember that this change by CBC does not (in law!) permit you to board a bus *at a stop outside the CBC area* before 0930 or after 2300 on weekdays. This will be largely theoretical for most people but it does mean that CBC passes are still not valid on the 2400 X22 from Stansted on Mon-Thurs nights.

WILSON MARRIAGE – YOU CAN GET STUFFED!

Any hope that Essex might have had it in them to actually *do* anything to help non-motorists continue attending Adult Education classes in Colchester were dashed when the 2008/9 prospectus arrived on our doormats in June. Of course they don't actually tell you to go away! - rather they provide the helpful information that 'many bus routes' serve Barrack Street. Should yours for some strange reason not be one of them, it is explained that you can now have the pleasure of walking from East Hill via Brook Street. (The chance to walk along Brook St 30 - 60 times on dark /wet nights is no doubt deemed to be part of that 'better quality of life' that the Adult Education programme will bring you).

GOVERNMENT DESTROYS BUS COMPANY ?

Up to 2007, Chambers seemed to be the very model of an efficient small operator, having built up hourly services on the 84 and 753 corridors, routes which might have gone downhill in the wrong hands.

Then, as reported in Newsletter 16, they were hit by the new EEC directive banning bus routes over 50km in length unless all buses had tachographs fitted, and had to split the 753 at Sudbury to the inconvenience and extra cost of through passengers.

At the same time they have been badly affected by senior citizen free travel – small firms cannot cope with delayed payments and low levels of reimbursement as well as big groups can.

Unfortunately they are not putting their case very well. Further customer alienation has been caused this summer by their suddenly deciding to abolish all return tickets in reaction to fuel cost increases, instead of simply increasing all fares by an appropriate small percentage. Making people 'pay twice' is scarcely a way of encouraging business! It appears that anyone going from Colchester to places beyond Sudbury now has to buy *four* tickets for their trip, costing something like twice what it did last year.

All this highlights sharply the way in which fare-paying passengers are now in danger of becoming third-class citizens. Alienating them will make operators even more dependent on passholder reimbursement payments.

We have been unable to get Chambers to answer the phone, in consequence this piece is based on third-hand 'facts'.

NEW ALL-ESSEX TIMETABLE BOOK

In October 2008 an all-Essex timetable book is to be published by ECC as an experiment, in lieu of the five area books. The price will be ?1. It will of course be rather big! (460 pages). It is hoped that this will make it easier to achieve reliable publication dates, intended to be every February June and October. Reactions are awaited!

**NEXT MEMBERS' MEETING will be on Monday 15th
September 1400hrs at the Friends Meeting House as usual**