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## **Newsletter of BABUS - Bedford Area Bus Users' Society, May 2012**

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### **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2012**

Will take place on Saturday 16 June 2012 at the Central Library, Harpur Street, Bedford. The formal business session will start at 10:15 to be followed by the Guest Speaker, Mr Stephen Morris, General Manager, Bus Users U.K.

### **MEMBERSHIP**

We are pleased to welcome new members from Bedford, Biggleswade, Cranfield, Lavendon and Lidlington. Thanks to those members who have already paid their subscriptions for 2012-13

Our membership year runs from 1 April until the following 31 March. **To continue to receive all the benefits of membership**, renew your membership by sending a cheque for £3 (£12 for group membership) payable to **BABUS**, to the Membership Secretary, Simon Norton, 6 Hertford Street, Cambridge, CB4 3AG. Please enclose a stamped addressed envelope if you would like a receipt by post; alternatively ask for a receipt by email.

**For enquiries, contact BABUS through the website at <http://babus.org.uk> or on the BABUS Enquiry Line 0871 218 2287 or 0871 218 BBUS (24 hour answering and fax service). NOTE THIS IS A NEW NUMBER. If you leave a message and would like us to call you back, please leave a phone number. You may send a fax to 0871 218 3293**

## **ANNUAL REPORT TO MEMBERS FOR 2011-2012**

This report attempts to cover some of the wider activities across the BABUS area and the work undertaken on behalf of members. It should be seen as covering contributions by all members of the Executive Committee.

Many of you will know that founding BABUS member Alma Tebbutt who looks after some aspects of publicity has been quite unwell for several months and is still unable to attend meetings. We have missed her quiet input and are grateful to Martin Brookes who has been active in distributing our publicity material.

Our membership has continued to increase numerically and that reflects our attempts at raising awareness of our activities across Bedford Borough and the former Mid Beds component within Central Bedfordshire. BABUS now enjoys the support of nineteen corporate bodies together with fifty-six individual members. Of course this increase in membership places additional demands on our limited resources and calls into question our ability to deal with the increasing workload we have experienced over the last two years.

If we are to continue to function in an effective manner we really must confront the fact that a small number of individuals are carrying a heavy, if not excessive, workload. We need new blood to help with the work and we need people with relevant skills who are prepared to give their time, and we need them now.

The recent and unexpected loss of Brenda Jowett, referred to later in this Newsletter, only serves the need to strengthen representation at Committee level. The wider membership at the individual level cannot continue to ignore this issue. Between now and the AGM on 16 June we would ask that all members give this matter some serious thought. One necessary pre-condition is that you must have access to a computer terminal or laptop and be conversant with e mails - this is due to the short time we sometimes have to deal with items and the ever increasing, almost prohibitive, costs of corresponding via Royal Mail. Are you prepared to step forward?

It is not the intention here to replicate reports that have already been covered in the Newsletter. The Newsletter is the only means of contact between BABUS and a substantial proportion of the membership. It is reasonable to

ask if this is enough and should we be doing more to inform and engage with individual members. There is the website and the bulletin boards and we know that those resources are professionally managed and highly valued by the minority of members who use them. We are continually grateful to Alan Hopkinson and to Suzy Scott for their support in producing and maintaining these lines of communication.

Should we be doing more? Other user groups hold open meetings where the general membership can raise queries and discuss matters of common interest. It is some time since we held an open meeting, outside of the AGM; the poor attendance at that event did not justify the high cost of room hire.

We continue to routinely meet with the two local authorities, Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council, and with the two significant operators, Stagecoach East and Grant Palmer. We hold regular semi-formal meetings with these partners and do not take them for granted. Without their support BABUS would have no reason to exist. These regular meetings place heavy demands on our Secretary, Godfrey Willis who is supported by our Vice-Chairman Colin Franklin and a few others. Attendance at these meetings is kept fairly tight in terms of numbers; we achieve more that way.

However, primarily as a result of increased activity involving BABUS, outside the formal planned meetings with partners there has also been a move towards informal ad hoc sessions. These are often called at short notice to deal with urgent queries and can take place several times each month. Sometimes there have been several in a single week! These discussions often go unreported where they attempt to cover on-going issues or relate to information provided 'in confidence'. These events go some way to explain the large increase in workload. They also reflect the level of trust accorded to BABUS by our partners who appreciate that they can discuss matters in an effective manner, seek our views, and know that confidences will be respected.

These discussions have resulted in significant improvements. An outstanding example, involving goodwill and hard work by the two authorities and the two operators has been the collaborative timetabling of services on the Bedford-Amphill-Flitwick route which has produced significant benefits for bus users at certain times of the day.

Another major development which can be traced back to the efforts of Colin Franklin is the reconfiguration of Bedford Bus Station. We still need to be patient but the changes we have been pressing for have been accepted in principle. All town centre bus services will be re-located within the Bus Station area; these include Cedar Coaches and Grant Palmer buses.

Of course we would always like more. Although most Stagecoach and Grant Palmer vehicles have been equipped with the necessary transponders we would like to see more real-time information displays at selected key locations such as Bedford Midland Station and Biggleswade Bus Station.

Bus operators and local authorities are facing cost and financial pressures. Our area has been more fortunate than most in avoiding major cuts but these pressures are likely to increase in future and not diminish. BABUS attempts to take a realistic view of impacts on bus users in our area by encouraging operators and supporting authorities to consider alternative options. We have been involved in discussions over some rural north Beds services and have given our support to timetable changes that have resulted in greater reliability of operation at the expense of some reduction in frequency. At the same time there have probably been some 'lost causes' and these include the ongoing failure to provide an effective service for Fairfield Park, Stotfold and into the new Shefford Health Centre.

Problems that should be more transient in nature include bus access restrictions and poor passenger information provision during the rebuilding work at Milton Keynes Railway Station, the impending disruption through road closures between Bedford and Bromham, and re-opening of the former A600 road through Shortstown.

We have varying degrees of contact with other agencies and groups. We have had valuable support from Passenger Focus and have had a useful dialogue with Bus Users UK. Some informal contacts have been made with bus user groups in north Herts, Stevenage and Northampton. The latter group is especially important in the context of redevelopment proposals for Northampton Bus Station where there are concerns over possible adverse impact on bus users. We have valuable contacts with Bedford Commuters' Association (BCA) where we have parallel interests and concerns over

local area transport plans and bus-rail interchange at Midland Main Line and East Coast Main Line stations.

We have particular concerns over the incompatible bus timings at Sandy Station and the withdrawal of the bus link at Arlesey Station.

There have been discussions with BCA on the feasibility of a peak-hour commuter feeder bus from surrounding communities into and from Flitwick Station. With the ever increasing fuel and parking costs BABUS is working at persuading commuters to use local buses rather than their cars – obviously *after* good interchange facilities have been provided!

Further accounts of specific meetings and developments will be found in the Newsletter.

Peter G Williams, Chairman; Godfrey Willis, Secretary

### *In Memoriam*

**We regret to inform you of the passing of BABUS stalwart and founder member and long time committee member Brenda Jowett. Brenda passed away in Bedford Hospital on 14<sup>th</sup> April aged 73 after a short illness. She had been the eyes and ears of BABUS around the Bus Station for some time as she made her daily journey from and back to Turvey and had been able to alert the committee to issues almost as soon as they arose. We will very much miss her.**

**R.I.P.**

### **CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL LIAISON MEETING**

After a long gap, a BABUS liaison meeting took place chaired by Paul Dodge - Head of Transport of CBC on 13 April. It was agreed that these meetings should take place twice a year. Forthcoming bus service changes and road rail interface issues were discussed. Mr Dodge advised that the Authority had purchased 300 new bus stop flags and 200 timetable cases to use in the programme of updating roadside information. A renewal programme is to commence within the next few months and the assistance of BABUS may be sought to speed this up. As a result of BABUS's representations on bus stop information, bus stops in Cranfield were all updated by mid April.

## **BOROUGH TIMETABLE BOOK**

Bedford Borough reissued the timetable booklet from February 2012; there are no major changes but the previous edition was already out of print and this new version just updates the minor alterations that have recently taken place.

## **SMART TICKETING COMING TO BUS SERVICES IN BEDFORD BOROUGH**

Press release from Andrew Commons, Corporate Communications, Bedford Borough Council:

Bedford Borough has successfully bid for over £200,000 of Government funding to improve bus services for local residents. As part of the Better Bus Areas Fund 2012, Bedford Borough Council has been awarded £218,170 to introduce smart ticketing, install more real time information displays as well as providing subsidised tickets to encourage more people to travel by bus. The smart ticketing system is similar to the Oyster cards used on the London Underground. It will allow local residents to add credit to their smart card when it suits them and simply scan it when they get on a local bus. 10 'real time' information displays will be added to bus shelters on the busiest routes in the borough and there are also plans to introduce a range of ticketing initiatives to encourage greater bus use, thereby helping to reduce congestion.

Mayor of Bedford Borough, Dave Hodgson, said: "I am delighted the Department for Transport has recognised that we are committed to improving bus services in Bedford Borough. At a time when many other local authorities are cutting their support for bus routes we are investing in improving the service. By working with our local operators we have significantly expanded Sunday services as well as extending services to run until 11pm. We are also maintaining our support for rural bus services which we know are a vital link for people living in villages around the borough."

## **REPLACEMENT OF BUS SHELTERS IN BEDFORD AND KEMPSTON**

Bedford Borough Council has retendered its contract for the provision of "Advertising" Bus Shelters in the town area. A number of "non-advertising" shelters are included and as a result seventy nine shelters will be replaced/upgraded.

BABUS has highlighted to the Council's officers shelters which are on roads no longer served by buses (e.g. River Street outside Tesco) or are on the "wrong side of the road" for current Bus

Services (e.g. Tyne Crescent) and it is intended that the former will be removed and latter repositioned unless space will not permit.

Once this replacement programme is complete then the Local Authority will attend to "their" shelters currently in the wrong positions. Much of the work will have been completed by the time you read this article.

## **CONCESSIONARY FARES ALL DAY**

It has been confirmed that use of Concessionary facilities within the Borough before 09:30 on Mondays to Fridays will continue in the new Financial Year as it did in 2011/2012. Bedford Borough Council has found the savings they were seeking from other sources.

## **NEWS FROM MILTON KEYNES**

Milton Keynes is also benefitting from the Better Bus funding to the tune of £2.8m to be used to extend RTPI (electronic passenger information) displays at key bus stops and introduce smart ticketing. Under the Green Bus initiative Milton Keynes plans to introduce electrically powered buses on Route 7.

## **PASSENGER FOCUS – EAST OF ENGLAND USER GROUP MEETING, ELY, 27 JAN 2012**

**By Peter Williams**

BABUS Acting Chairman Peter Williams was invited to attend a meeting for East of England Bus user groups at Ely on 27 January 2012. The purpose of the meeting was to explain how a re-structured Passenger Focus (PF) might be able to support public transport user groups. Passenger Focus is the government-funded independent passenger watchdog for public transport users.

It was pointed out that two years ago, PF had an expanding role with more funding and greater powers. With the change in government there was a 50% budget cut requiring a review of the way in which PF can operate. It is felt that PF can still provide an effective service and is still able to represent the interests of passengers. There has, however, been a need to refocus on a smaller range of priorities.

The national rail passenger survey is being maintained together with the recently introduced bus passenger survey. PF will still be responsible for handling complaints from rail passengers' with Bus Users UK retaining responsibility for bus passenger complaints.

PF intends to maintain its research team and apply adequate resources to long-term strategy issues.

PF will focus on matters of punctuality, effects of disruption of services, and value-for-money issues. It will continue to work with the rail and bus industries and seek to provide input to the Transport Select Committee. It will aim to work with local authorities where cuts in bus services are under consideration.

What can Passenger Focus do to help user groups?

There is a long tradition of user groups established to further the interests of rail passengers though bus user groups are a more recent development. These user groups represent a wealth of experience and wisdom, are all run on a voluntary basis with no paid staff, represent an informed and expert non-political lobby, and provide stability and continuity in industries where change is continuous. Weaknesses in user groups were seen to be almost their totally male domination, and a tendency to dwell on 'pet subjects' whereas operators might be more open to an approach based on positive and supportive feedback.

PF should be able to assist groups intending to conduct their own passenger surveys at, for example, a defined railway station. User groups needed to concentrate on evidence and not unsupported assertions and could usefully look to the research undertaken by PF. In order for user groups to be taken seriously they needed to take care to present justified criticisms and produce professional and responsible press releases and media statements.

In discussion, delegations attempted to set down priorities; these included:

- Greater discipline in changes to bus timetables and coordination of rail and bus timetable changes;
- Effective consultation with operators and local authorities aimed at improving the passenger experience through rail re-franchising, timetable changes, bus service cuts;
- Sharing of best practice between rail and bus user groups.

The Passenger Focus website had been restructured and now provides a 'toolkit' of resources for user groups. This includes guidelines for mystery shoppers, fieldwork and analysis of results.

A valuable day with useful contacts being made and it is good to see BABUS being recognised as a worthwhile partner to this national body.

## **BETTER BUS AND GREEN BUS GRANTS AWARDED**

Transport Minister Norman Baker has announced grants worth £101m in total from the government's Green Bus and Better Bus Area funds.

Local authorities across England will receive a share of £70m under the Better Bus Area fund to boost economic growth, improve partnerships with bus companies and increase bus passenger numbers.

The £70m will be shared between 24 local authorities which have impressed the Department for Transport with their bids for funding and who will receive up to £5m each. This money will support a range of improvements including multi-operator tickets, traffic lights that give buses priority over other traffic, real-time information, and improvements to shelters and stops.

The DfT has made available an additional £20m on top of a previously planned £50m to improve local bus services under the Better Bus Area fund. Bids were evaluated according to how well they promoted growth, reduced carbon and encouraged partnerships between local authorities and bus operators. The projects were also assessed for deliverability, financial sustainability and value for money.

A further £31m will be used to buy 439 low-carbon buses with money from the Green Bus Fund. This has been created with the aim of reducing emissions and air pollution levels and encouraging bus operators and local councils to switch to hybrid-electric, fully electric or gas-fuelled buses.

Five bus manufacturers will benefit from orders for their eco-friendly hybrid, electric and gas buses - Volvo, Wrightbus, Optare, MAN and Alexander Dennis.

This is the third round of the government's Green Bus Fund and operators were allowed to bid for up to 80% cent of the cost difference between a low-carbon bus and its diesel equivalent. Round one was launched in 2009 and paid up to 100% of the difference with round two paying up to 90%. The budget for round three was increased from £20m to £31m with the additional funding coming from savings and under spend found elsewhere in government.

By switching to low-carbon buses, the winners will also be eligible to claim additional government subsidy through the Bus Services Operators Grant to run these buses. Bus operators and local authorities will be given six pence per kilometre to support them with energy and fuel costs. These payments are set to continue in 2013.

## **BUS/RAIL INTERCHANGES IN CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE.**

A Working Group of the Committee has met with Bedford Commuters' Association and prepared a joint paper to Central Bedfordshire Council regarding the lack of good (or even acceptable) bus to train (and vice versa) interchanges at stations within the authority's area especially for commuters.

The key reasons for our concerns are:

- The large number of commuters who park at stations each weekday.
- The number of "kiss and ride" commuters.
- The inexorable rise in fuel charges.
- Regular and non-regulated rises in Car Park charges at stations and adjacent locations.
- Frustration in adjacent streets both to residents and through traffic by the presence of parked vehicles.
- The stations with which we are concerned are Flitwick, Harlington, Arlesey, Sandy and Biggleswade. None of these stations demonstrate a serious attempt to provide access by bus either by location of nearest bus stops or services timed to suit commuting journeys.

BABUS believes the problem needs addressing as there is no indication that any of the cost pressures referred to above will abate and that with potential further housing development in the catchment areas then the number of commuters will increase. Indeed, Network Rail and First Capital Connect are engaged in a programme of lengthening station platforms to accept 12-car trains to cater for this projected growth whilst there is no equivalent programme to provide any enhanced access for passengers wishing to travel to stations by bus or who could be persuaded to do so.

It is early days, but we anticipate a debate shortly and will keep members informed.

## **ANNIVERSARY CORNER**

There are three anniversaries this year which can be said to have contributed to the present bus service pattern in and around Bedford which members might find interesting.

### **- ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO**

The land for St John's Bus Garage in Bedford (yes, the present one!) was purchased in 1912 by the New Central Omnibus Company of London for £720. Obviously the site has been extended over the years but this was the first foothold in our area of a major bus operation.

### **- SIXTY YEARS AGO**

In May 1952 the whole of the Midland area of the Eastern National operation passed to United Counties (including the above bus garage!) and it is from this transfer that many of today's bus routes in the former county emanated. Approximately 240 buses and coaches were part of the deal plus garages at Bedford and Biggleswade in "our" area along with small outstations at Clophill, Cambridge, St Neots and Toddington. Other garages such as Aylesbury, Luton, Hitchin and Huntingdon also transferred.

One item of interest is that the route numbering introduced from the takeover has just about survived to the present day with Cedar Coaches 151,152 and Centrebus 188, 190 still relating to fairly similar pieces of geography as in 1952.

### **- FIFTY YEARS AGO**

The local train service between Bedford and Northampton was withdrawn in March 1962 (the similar local service to Hitchin had gone two months earlier) and United Counties introduced the concept of "Limited Stop" services to the area. This was quite revolutionary at the time but with the Coachlinks initiatives which coincided with de-regulation 26 years ago and X5 etc. this is all "old hat" now.

## **STOP PRESS**

BABUS was recently invited by Bedford Borough Council to meetings with bus users in the North Beds area at Melchbourne Village Hall. As a result, and our input, there are changes planned to Routes 26 and 30 with the introduction of a new through route between Yeilden, Melchbourne, and Knotting to Bedford plus the reintroduction of a timetabled service from these villages to and from Rushden.