

9 August 2016

Mrs Suzanne Wylie
Chief Executive
Belfast City Council
City Hall
BELFAST
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Telephone: 028 9025 8109

Dear *Suzanne***Re: Christmas 2016 – Transport Management Arrangements**

Translink is starting to plan public transport services for Belfast during the busy pre-Christmas 2016 period. Given the economic importance of this festive period for local businesses we would welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with the Council to reduce congestion and keep the city moving, encouraging more people to shop and socialise in the city.

The pre-Christmas period last year was a particularly challenging one for bus and car users in and around the city centre. This was primarily as a direct consequence of queuing on entry to off-street car parks and / or circulating for available parking spaces, recurring hotspots were on Chichester Street and Victoria Street. It is generally accepted that the adverse effects of this seasonal congestion impacts on all road users in terms of journey time and ultimately reduces the attractiveness of Belfast as a shopping destination. However, it would be Translink's view that in comparison with out-of-town retail centres, Belfast City Centre has a unique asset, as it can offer additional travel options over the private car with its current bus and rail networks. Translink would therefore wish to collaborate with Belfast City Council to consider how best to encourage greater uptake of these sustainable transport modes.

As such, we have undertaken a review of the Christmas travel arrangements for the past years to get a better understanding of what works best. During 2013 and 2014 additional weekend park and ride services and discounted fares were offered and we heavily promoted these and public transport as a better way to access the city – this approach worked well and was endorsed by the then DRD Minister in the statement shown below:

"I am aware that there have been calls for free on-street parking in the lead up to Christmas but in previous years we have seen that this led to an increase in congestion and created parking safety issues. The measure developed by my Department, in conjunction with Translink, provide better choice and value for all road users which will lead to more people using our city centres for Christmas shopping, providing a vital boost for our traders".

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However, last year 1500 free city council car parking spaces were promoted and the additional traffic had a significant impact on the performance of our bus services with a level of disruption similar to difficulties we experienced in 2011, notably the last time free parking was offered. This manifested itself in the following ways:

Reliability of Service: Passenger's Charter reliability commitments are to operate 99.2% of our planned services. This fell to 97.4% in December 2015, significantly below previous years. To put this into context there were over 2,000 journeys recorded as not operating in December 2015 due to service disruption.

Punctuality of Service: Passenger's Charter punctuality commitments are to operate 95% of our planned services on time. This fell to 84% in December 2015, significantly below previous years. To put this into context, customer complaints, linked to operating conditions, grew by 28% in the pre-Christmas period due to service disruption.

The impact on bus users was significant as were the knock on costs to our business in terms of the extra resources needed to try and compensate for the additional running time incurred pre-Christmas 2015 (estimated to be of the order of £250k) as well as lost fare box revenue e.g. there were 62% fewer passengers on the bespoke Saturday Park & Ride services in 2015 compared to 2014.

Our assessment is that, if Translink experienced these problems then undoubtedly car users did too. Free parking spaces, available after 6.00 pm and all day Saturday and Sunday seemed to be taken up fairly quickly. As a result car users had to regularly wait in long queues or instead, circulate looking for spaces at alternative commercial car parks, further impacting on traffic progression around the city. Furthermore, many shoppers were unaware that the free parking was evenings only during the week which also caused traffic congestion even before the normal rush hour periods and may have deterred people from coming into the city to shop later in the evening.

We want to continue to help make Belfast an attractive, vibrant city for shopping and socialising, not only all year round, but particularly this Christmas. Independent research shows that Metro bus passengers (accounting for more than half a million passenger journeys per week) help to maintain retail sales. Quite apart from this economic reality, greater use of sustainable modes has environmental benefits that will resonate with the Council in respect of air quality. Finally, there are issues of equity as 36% of households in Belfast have no access to a car, so our local bus and rail networks are a key mode of access.

Christmas is such an important financial catalyst for the heart of the city and we know that congestion not only impacts on our services but can also affect local businesses and retailers as people can be put off by delays and disruption and find alternative locations to visit. I would urge the council to take on board lessons learned from last year when reflecting on this year's decision on car parking.

There are many options which we could discuss together, for example:

Instead of offering free car parking - we could agree a set of offers for people using park & ride facilities around the city, and on Metro, to encourage these as a more efficient way to travel into the City for shopping and socialising. We could promote this together and have discounts in store for people showing their travel ticket.

Improve communications - work with public and commercial car parks to display the number of spaces left in the city at park & ride facilities so that people are given the P&R option before driving in to contribute to congestion.

Selective car parking incentives - work together to selectively offer car parking incentives and Park & Ride, for example evenings versus week-ends.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet in the near future to discuss these options, and others, to put in place a transport plan for the City that will ensure a successful festive season and will see more people take that all important trip to Belfast to shop, socialise and soak up the Christmas spirit!

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Conway', written in a cursive style.

Chris Conway
Group Chief Executive