

Appendix 4

22 JUL 2022

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20th. July, 2022

Graham Flexman,  
Town Clerk,  
New Milton Town Council,  
Town Hall,  
Ashley Road  
New Milton, Hampshire.  
BH25

Dear Graham,

Consultation on Proposed Changes to Passenger Transport Services.

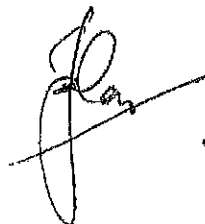
It is a long time since we last met. I hope that you are well.

I enclose my response to the above consultation. It is rather lengthy but necessary, with so many changes in offices at MCC.

The response form, of the 'tick box' variety, does not allow adequate opportunity to fully explain the importance of the service that Congo provides for its users.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to let me know.

With kind regards,



John W. Warden.

COPY

Hampshire County Council,  
Passenger Transport Group  
The Castle,  
Winchester, Hampshire

Submission by John Warden.

Barn Farm,  
Lower Mend End Road,  
Sway, Lymington,  
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18th July, 2022.

Sirs,

Consultation on Proposed Changes to Supported Passenger Transport Services.

I make this response as Chairman of the Gango Users' Forum and also as the Transport Representative of Sway Parish Council (SPC).

My comments are related primarily to 'Proposal One' which seeks to make operational changes to community transport services supported by Hampshire County Council (HCC); in particular the way in which changes would affect the New Forest Gango Bus Services C32 and C33.

Before giving reasons why there should be no changes to these services I will begin by giving a background to my involvement. I will then make general observations on the consultation pack.

Background.

In 2006, under a similar HCC review, it was proposed that the Lymington Gango services be withdrawn completely in 2007.

Historically, a few years earlier, many Gango services were introduced in Hampshire, using 'pump priming' monies from Central Government. HCC soon began to receive National Bus Awards for the services. However, many of these services began to fail. This appeared to be due mainly to a lack of targetted promotion.

Users of the Lymington Gango services disputed the passenger numbers cited by HCC and organised a petition against the withdrawal of Gango.

The petition was presented to County Council leader - the late Ken Thornber, CBE - at a meeting of SPC in early 2007. More than 40 petitioners attended to support a detailed report on the importance of Gango to the community.

It was agreed that the proposed withdrawal of Gango be delayed for three months (later extended by a further six months) to give time for promotion and reassessment.

Continued

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Passenger Transport Group.

Consultation on Proposed Changes to Supported P.T. Services.

The late Ken Thornber had earlier written to me explaining that it was costing HCC a subsidy of more than £10.00 per passenger trip (p.p.t.), which was unacceptable.

It was following the SPC meeting that a small number of Cmggo users met to save the valuable Cmggo services. I was elected chairman and the name Cmggo Users' Forum was decided upon.

Since 2007 I have attended every Hampshire Passenger Transport Forum meeting in Winchester and Lyndhurst. Another forum was attended in Eastleigh when public transport for the disabled was discussed.

These forums were attended on behalf of the Users' Forum and as transport representative and later Councillor of SPC.

The quality of the presentations at these meetings with face to face dialogue opportunities amongst delegates, officers, councillors, transport managers and stakeholders is of enormous value. HCC should be very proud of the role such meetings play for everyone.

Although not relevant to bus services, I came away from a forum meeting with the idea of station adoption, which I reported to SPC. I was then asked to chair the inaugural meeting of Sway residents which led to the formation of 'The Friends of Sway Station', one of the earliest station adoptions in Hampshire. Thank you HCC.

Having in the past received notice from HCC of forum meetings, I am sorry that I did not learn of the recent zoom meetings on 9th and 13th June until well after they took place. Meaningful attendance would have been helpful.

Working closely with the Heads of Passenger Transport and up to ten Community Transport Officers the timetables of the Cmggo services were changed, the name changed to New Forest Cmggo Bus and passenger numbers increased. By the end of 2008 there had been a 274% increase on the passenger figures quoted by HCC in 2006. The subsidy rate p.p.t. by then had fallen to well below £5.00.

Twelve years later - at the end of 2019 the subsidy rate was £6.44 p.p.t. This compares well with 2008 when inflation is taken into consideration and was then deemed acceptable to HCC.

All of the above facts will be found in previous consultation responses, letters and other forum material in the HCC archives.

Continued.

One final piece of background information concerns the day which the late Ken Thorber spent on the Congo Bus, from start to finish, as part of his fact finding assessment of the service. This shows the dedication of a leader of a large Shire County.

Ken Thorber spoke with the driver and all passengers. At the next SPC meeting he told us how impressed he was with the discussions he had with a group of variously disabled young adults from Wootton Hall, the residential home for students at the Fortune Centre of Riding Therapy (explained later in this response).

### General Observations.

The Information Pack is well presented and has clearly been designed to justify the need for HCC to make huge savings in its budget to April, 2023.

I have studied the consultation paper carefully.

The commitment to be carbon neutral is commendable, essential and understandable.

There appears to be little, if any, commitment to show how the Council's duty to target the people who need public transport the most, is to be implemented.

Whilst I wish to support HCC where I can, I do have concern at the way in which the consultation is geared to show low passenger numbers on most services and the routes that are supported by subsidies. Most of the routes showing the lowest patronage are countryside routes where many more elderly and disabled people reside.

The comparison of administrative year 2019/2020 (where passenger numbers were, perhaps, satisfactory) with administrative year 2020/2021, is not likely to produce anything other than a huge difference in numbers.

The first lockdown started on 16th. March, 2020 but the variously changing limits to personal freedom did not finally end officially until the beginning of 2022. A fact not fully acknowledged in the pack.

The figures for the New Forest Congo's six day week dropped from more than 300 passengers to less than 30 passengers, almost at a stroke.

Continued.

The Covid 19 pandemic and lockdowns affected everyone. The Nation readily accepted that the N.H.S. bore the greatest impact. Working practices change travel, leisure and commercial industries have a heavy burden too. Apart from the roll-out of the vaccination programme, which was brilliantly achieved, the impact of the virus on the elderly and infirm was ignored.

It was here that such public transport services played a vital role. Cango locally was used to get users to their vaccination appointments.

The Consultation pack does acknowledge the affects of Covid 19 but it does not acknowledge the impact it had on the more vulnerable members of society, who depend on public transport.

It should not be forgotten that the vulnerable elderly and disabled, who are already worried by the mental health issues of mobility, loneliness and falls in the value of their savings, will also have a greater sense of worthlessness if their vital transport is changed or removed.

The final paragraph on page 11 of the consultation pack would be seriously worrying to readers who fall into the above category.

Cango passengers are considered 'Family', with the drivers included. Users regularly communicate with their elderly and disabled friends to allay the fears of loneliness. At the start of the pandemic the drivers volunteered their time to collecting medication, food items and other essentials for the more vulnerable users. The booking clerk had two lists running at that time.

It is to be hoped that more recognition is given to such matters in the consultation process. If it is not, greater costs will pass back up the chain, to the cost of social services to H.C.C and the extra burden on Doctors and the N.H.S.

This could be the reality of cuts or changes to public transport services.

Continued.

Headlined reasons for seeking no changes to the New Forest Congo Bus Services C32 and C33. (Congo).

SWAY as a Defined New Forest Village.

Sway is one of the four 'Defined Villages' of the New Forest National Park.

The other three are Lyndhurst Village (Capital), Ashurst and Brackenhurst. All four have similar population numbers (around 3,500 residents).

When it comes to public bus services Sway has always been deprived. Ashurst, Lyndhurst and Brackenhurst have always had commercially operated public bus services providing a minimum one hourly service in each direction, which at times is half hourly. They also all have Sunday and Bank Holiday services.

During the summer Lyndhurst and Brackenhurst also have the New Forest Tour Buses, operated for the New Forest National Park Authority.

Since the start of the century (in 2001) Sway has had Congo services only which operate three services each weekday and Saturday between Lymington and New Milton. As stated previously Congo has had a highly successful operating period from 2008 to the start of the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020.

After boundary changes, the civil village of Sway acquired a large area of Tiptoe from the ecclesiastical parish of Hordle and Tiptoe. The large expansion of Sway civil parish resulted in adding greater distances from its boundaries to its centre. In the case of Tiptoe the road distance is just under two miles. Other parts of Sway already had similar distances to its boundary.

The following headlined reason, when linked to distances, is a major factor which emphasises the importance of Congo.

SWAY. Its topography and comparison with other Hampshire villages.

Hampshire is generally composed of countryside with high quality agricultural land with large farms and estates. There are also fewer roads.

The New Forest has established, over almost a thousand years, a pastoral system based almost entirely on commoning. As a result the commoners' small holdings and other small farms have led to much greater networks of lanes and small roads. (Continued).

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Sway. Its topography and countryside comparison with other Hampshire villages.

The topography of Sway also includes two linked valleys, which create many change in level. The Avon Water valley between Sway and Tipton is the deepest. Roads outside Sway village centre have no footpaths. All residents find this unsafe when walking. The B 3055 is a major road which skirts the village and has no pavements on the Tipton side and is almost too risky for cyclists and unusable for pedestrians.

For these reasons the Congo flexibly routed services have proved successful.

The Fortune Centre of Riding Therapy. (Formerly a wing of Riding for the Disabled).

This important charity at Wootton Hall, has started to use Congo again after the pandemic. It is used by the young students to help them integrate into society for their future well being. Later they then use Congo for daily access to work placements on farms and riding establishments in the countryside. Some of these vulnerable students find more suitable work placements in Lymington and New Milton, at charity shops, retail and other establishments. Several students attended the presentation to the Leader of HCC in 2007.

Without the flexible Congo services none of the students could learn skills for the future.

Average Age of Residents.

Census returns have shown that the coastal strip from Southampton Water to Christchurch has the highest average age figures for the whole of the United Kingdom. Highcliffe, Barton-on-Sea (New Milton T.C. area) and Milford-on-Sea (Lymington area) being the highest. Congo is used for access to these places (part of journey). Lymington, New Milton, and the countryside villages and hamlets of Sway, Tipton, Wootton and Boshley are also included in the highest average age figures. Congo serves them all.

Hospital Appointments and Visiting.

The Congo timetable and its bookable stops was changed in 2007, in conjunction with the officers of HCC. The then new Lymington Hospital siting was included in the Lower Buckland roam zone. The manager at the hospital was consulted. It was arranged that, if patients mentioned their reliance on Congo, appointments might be arranged to fit in with the Congo timetable.

The afternoon visiting times at the Hospital were considered and the timetables gave relatives and friends enough time to spend virtually the whole visiting period with patients and return home by 6.00.

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### Care Homes.

There are several care homes in the main room zone of Congo. Partners of patients use Congo, sometimes in electric buggies, to get to them. Care workers and even patients of these homes, use Congo. Enquiries are made regularly, including, only three days ago, a Lymington lady booked Congo.

### The Ukrainian Invasion.

Following enquiries from a host family, the Congo Users' Forum has been able to explain how Congo can be used. On Tuesday, 6th July a Ukrainian refugee and her daughter caught the Congo service to Lymington. Due to the language barrier, she jumped up to speak to the driver at a roundabout on the A 337 main road at Ampress. Fortunately a passenger was able to intervene, the driver diverted from her planned route and stopped at the very point the lady required. It was at the industrial unit for 'Kid to Ukraine!'. This unit featured two days before on the Countryfile programme on B.B.C. An example of the skill and tolerance of one of the two main drivers, who have received many awards for their service to Congo users, should also be recognised.

### Previous Budget Cuts and consequences for Congo.

The four yearly review, seeking savings due to reductions in funding from Central Government, has affected Congo.

The reviews have inevitably meant that funding is passed further down the line in order to maintain services or the services are cut. To many people this is euphemistically called 'Fiscal Dumping'.

At the last review the back-room staff in Winchester were withdrawn and booking services dispensed with.

County Councillors, Town and Parish Councils took on the role of wrangling and paying for a booking service for the successful N.F. Congo services. The partnership created has been brilliantly managed and arranged and Congo users are well catered for.

The Congo Users' Forum took on the advertising and leaflet/timetable production. Advertisements appear in the main local newspaper and the parish magazines.

No further cuts or changes to Congo services should be made.

Continued.



Plea for Status Quo.

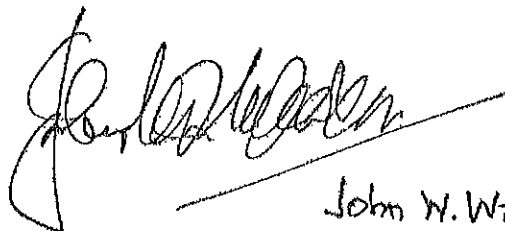
Passenger numbers and fare payments in the first half year of 2022 have shown a good improvement. The figures, when compared with the acceptable calendar year 2019 (before the pandemic) are now approaching 70% in passenger numbers and 90% in fare payments.

The Congo Users' Forum is confident that these figures will increase further and its promotional efforts will not cease.

Please do not cut or reduce the previously acceptable New Forest Congo Bus services C 32 and C 33. They are a life line to so many people.

With respect,

Yours truly,



John W. Warden.

