

What's wrong with the buses?

People in Northampton are always moaning about local buses. They frequently blame the council. I'm only going to say this only once – the council no longer runs the bus service. When it's bad, it's not the council's fault.

The bus services used to be run by local councils. Mrs Thatcher sold them off for much less than they were worth, creating several new millionaires. The idea was that privately-run services would be better, more competitive, more efficient.

Great in theory, but in practice there's a flaw. A really big flaw. Many bus routes lose money. Not enough passengers, long routes reaching to the more out of the way places, costing a lot in fuel. When the council ran the service it accepted that there was a social need for these services, so the routes that made a profit paid for the ones that lost money.

What happened when the bus services were privatised? The bus companies began to blackmail the councils. They complained when a route was losing money, and threatened to cut the route unless the council paid them a subsidy. The council had no choice – you can't just stop a bus service to an area of the town. There will always be people who can't drive and can't afford a taxi. They still need to shop, go to the doctor, the dentist, the hospital, go out for fun.

Added to the subsidy issue, which now amounts to hundreds of thousands of pounds of your money and my money paid to the council in council tax, there's the issue of free bus travel for pensioners.

Don't get me wrong. It really is great to see buses travelling round the town with some passengers on for a change. I was certainly getting angry at seeing buses hurtling round Northampton completely empty. I resented the fact that the council subsidy was being wasted on fuel and the cost of the driver, all for no purpose.

The problem with free bus travel for pensioners is this. The Government decided on this policy, they instructed the councils to implement the policy and the bus companies collected the data of the 'lost' fares and submitted claims to the council for this money. But the Government doesn't give the council all the money for this subsidy, so we are all paying for this, and it means that the council probably has to cut another service to pay for this, particularly this year, as they won't be able to increase council tax instead.

So the pensioners travel for free, but some council staff will lose their jobs as a result and some services will be cut. There are certainly some hard decisions in local Government.

It's interesting to reflect on the aims of the privatisation, then look at the actual outcome. The aim was creating competition. That has happened to a limited extent. It can't be competitive in the same way that washing powder is competitive – imagine if there were three or four bus companies fighting for passengers, so the buses raced each other to the stops to pick people up? But does competition mean lower fares? No. When my children used to use the bus to get into town it was, I recall, about £4.50 return. That's a lot of money, and frankly it was cheaper to drive them into town and collect them rather than give them the fares – even taking account of the maintenance cost of a car as well as the fuel. Bus fares are so expensive now, no wonder the pensioners were so pleased with the free passes.

Bus travel was always meant to be affordable public transport – a cheap means of travel for people who couldn't afford a car or chose not to drive. Coach travel is still like that. Whereas a train ticket is now so expensive that it costs as much as going to a pop concert, a coach ticket will take you the length and breadth of the country for just

a few pounds. But buses are expensive, unless you travel the same routes regularly and get a season ticket. For the occasional traveller, the price has gone up so that they are no longer a cheap means of travel. People who are long term unemployed and want to attend training get their bus fares reimbursed, because they can't afford the fares on Jobseekers Allowance.

It's too late to go back, but wouldn't it be good to have a bus service run by the council, not for a profit, but simply to cover the costs, so that anyone on a low income could just jump on a bus without thinking about the price of a ticket. My real dream would be completely free public transport, so that very few people would want to use their cars. That would transform our carbon footprint at a stroke. If Thatcher had done that all those years ago, we'd have fewer millionaires but far fewer children with asthma. I know which I'd prefer.