

Bus Service – Communications



*The Ombudsman's Report
into Bus Service – Communications
by the Department of Public Transportation*



December 2021

Bus Service – Communications Investigation Report

INTRODUCTION

There was increasing awareness of the impact of the daily cancellations and delays in the bus service on the Bermuda public. We were concerned that some members of our community, such as seniors, physically challenged individuals and students, may be disproportionately affected by frequent cancellations and delays.

The bus cancellations adversely affect a significantly large number of people and caused a serious disservice to the public. We carried out preliminary inquiries and commenced an investigation into the Authority's administration of the public bus system. We determined to investigate the issues surrounding the Authority's communication with the public about the frequent and persistent cancellation of scheduled service for bus routes.

The investigation in the public interest examined the Authority's consideration of all reasonable resources to communicate the bus cancellations as widely as possible; and the clarity, efficiency and timeliness of the Authority's communication with the public when cancellations occur.

The primary direction of the investigation focused on communication with public bus service users generally and those who do not have ready access to electronic information about bus cancellations. The investigation also took into account:

- 1) persistent cancellation of scheduled bus routes;
- 2) circumstances of the unavailability of buses given the length of time the problems have existed;
- 3) significant reduction in the number of available buses and a bus schedule that does not accurately reflect the current number of buses in use to service the schedule.

The investigation identified that some of the overall issues confronting the Department and the Ministry in connection with the public bus service are complex and some, such as the number of buses, require time to achieve a solution. There were also developments in the course of the investigation which led to some changes

in the investigative actions. This effected the direction of parts of the investigation and the time taken to adjust for these developments. Additionally, both the Department and our Office have had to make significant and consequential operational adjustments during the Covid-19 emergency. Even with these factors taken into account, it was important that the Report be completed so that recommendations could be made to implement necessary changes in the public communication methods of the Authority, particularly as this relates to the Department of Transportation. It was essential that we bring the investigation to a close and finalise this Report.

In response to points raised in the investigation process, the Department did make some changes to the methods of communication and the way it communicated with the public. Some of the changes were responsive to communication needs that were identified and resulted in improvements in the Department's communications process. These changes were welcome and did go some way in improving the information provided to bus users and members of the public. Further, the Department has now accepted in full the recommendations to the Report, which is very positive and beneficial, and will now proceed with the implementation of recommendations of this Report.

Further issues identified by my Office included:

- 1) administration of parts of the public bus system;
- 2) lack of funding to purchase new buses, as per the usual annual order of 10 to 12 buses, as no new buses were ordered between 2009 and 2014;
- 3) lack of a full complement of mechanics;
- 4) the number and state of the bus fleet due to retirement and maintenance programme not being accurately put into the system; and
- 5) there was no Maintenance Manager in place from 2012 until 4th March 2018.

BACKGROUND

During the past several years there has been frequent and persistent cancellation of bus routes. These cancellations have an adverse impact on bus users and the general public. Our Office took notice of this issue and launched preliminary inquiries with

the Department of Public Transport to determine whether there was cause for an investigation by our Office.

Our discussions with the Department initially focused on the reasons behind the disruption to the bus service. The Authority provided the context in which the high number of bus cancellations occurred. This was identified as consisting of: a failure to reinvest in the fleet from 2009 to 2014 that resulted in an increase in the weighted average bus age in 2011 of ten to eleven years, instead of the recommended industry standard of seven years; difficulty in accurately adhering to a structured in-depth maintenance program, which may not be surprising, in a crisis situation; and a depletion in the availability of trained mechanics on staff due to retirements and resignations,. These issues resulted in a significant reduction in the number of serviceable buses and a bus schedule that requires 88 buses at a time.

An assessment conducted in November 2017 by the German truck and bus company, MAN, identified forty-two buses purchased between 1997 and 2002 that needed to be replaced. The purchase price of a new bus from MAN was estimated to be approximately \$365,000. The replacement of forty-two buses raised issues related to budgetary constraints. Any resolution of these issues would require the allocation of public funds which falls within the purview of the Government and is ordinarily not the subject matter of an ombudsman investigation.

Given the length of time these issues existed and the time it would likely take to resolve them, we discussed the Authority's communication processes designed to provide the public with timely information regarding cancellation of scheduled buses. During our discussions, the issue of communication of cancellations with the public became a major concern for our Office. We were aware of bus users' expressions of dissatisfaction with the Authority's communication about bus cancellations. These cancellations resulted in disruption to work-life, disruption of travel to and from schools, and disruption of travel for leisure activities.

The increasingly high number of bus cancellations, which were widely covered by media, generated many comments in the community. We heard from an affected bus user who had difficulty walking and used a walking cane. We were told their route had frequent cancellations leaving them waiting without notice and left stranded. We also heard concerns raised about female bus users waiting at bus stops at night,

unaware the buses they were waiting for had been cancelled. We determined that the public interest of the situation warranted an investigation, and we informed the Authority of our intention to investigate the issue of how it communicates bus cancellations to the public. Section 5(2) of the Ombudsman Act 2004 (“the Ombudsman Act”), gives the Ombudsman jurisdiction to investigate, on her own motion, any administrative actions taken by or on behalf of an Authority where she is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to carry out an investigation in the public interest.

Our investigation consisted of meetings and discussions with the Authority and research on how some overseas bus authorities communicate cancellations. We took into account information provided by bus users and the public. We also examined best practices for government authorities’ communication with the people they serve. During the course of our investigation, we looked into the Authority’s communication with public bus service users generally and those who do not have ready access to electronic information about bus cancellations. We found that, consistent with government agencies the world over, the Authority relies heavily on digital platforms to communicate with bus users. The difficulty with this approach is that there are significant segments of the population who only have limited access, or no access at all, to the internet.

INFORMATION GATHERED AS PART OF THE INVESTIGATION

The Authority informed us that in previous years, with the support of the Department of Communications, it posted cancellation notices on its Facebook page and in the media. The cancellations were announced on the community bulletin board and other radio broadcasts, and an email was sent to the public schools. Due to the increasing number of cancellations, the Authority restructured its approach to one that disseminated the information via a wider range of digital formats. The updates were posted on the Bermuda Government portal where it was positioned in the same area as the bus schedule. The Department broadened the range of email recipients by organising a public broadcast email. A public relations campaign invited passengers to sign up to receive an update on the bus service twice daily.

The current methods allow users to view the information whenever they need to. The information has also been reformatted so that it can be readily accessed and viewed on a mobile phone or other handheld devices.

The Authority explained that it came to the conclusion that broadcasting the cancellations over the radio was not effective due to the speed with which the announcer goes through the list of cancellations, particularly when there is a large volume of cancellations. While we understand the point the Authority makes, the Ombudsman believes that the radio announcements were still valuable to some bus users as this medium was their sole source of information regarding bus cancellations.

In order to manage the expectations of school students, parents and educators, the Authority produced and implemented a new school bus schedule in September 2018. The new schedule incorporated service to some schools in the public bus route while dedicated buses remained assigned to The Berkeley Institute and Cedarbridge Academy. The Department distributed the new schedule to the public and private schools via email to each school. The Department reported that it also sends a broadcast email to public and private schools daily to provide up-to-date information about the buses that are assigned to service the schools according to the School Bus Schedule.

In October 2018, the Minister joined with the Director of the Department of Public Transportation to discuss the challenges and subsequent solutions that were slated for the ensuing months to improve the fleet and provide a more reliable schedule. The Ministry scheduled a press conference on 12th December 2018 to announce plans to implement a new winter schedule with effect from 7th January 2019. The new schedule was intended to eliminate daily cancellations associated with the shortage of buses. However, implementation was delayed pending agreement from stakeholders.

The Authority informed us that the standard bus schedule is publicised on the Bermuda Government portal. The schedule lists the times and frequency of buses on various routes. On any given day where there are cancellations, this information is documented and published on the Government portal before 5:00 am and 4:00 pm. The same information is sent in a broadcast email at 5:00 am and 4:00 pm.

THE DEPARTMENT'S INTERNAL MANAGEMENT OF CANCELLATIONS

The Department explained to us that decisions on bus availability are made each day for the next day's service by one of the 15 traffic supervisors who is assigned to Desk One (also called HQ One) in the evening. The Desk One supervisor displays buses according to work rosters that have been developed to accommodate the schedule. This takes account of the number of buses in operation and available bus operators. The bus in service count is extremely fluid in that buses are placed out of service for various reasons, wet seats or other cabin issues, road traffic accidents, mechanical faults which can happen at any time and without warning. The Desk One and Desk Two traffic supervisors make instant decisions on any cancellations and redeployments based on changes in the number of buses in service. The continual changes in the bus in-service level affects the accuracy of the information because a bus returning to service at 5:00 pm can be deployed to a 6:00 pm run that was cancelled and publicised as such at 5:00 pm. The Authority is exploring systems that can provide real-time information on the status of buses and service cancellations to bus users.

THE AUTHORITY'S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT BUS USERS

In response to our inquiries about what information the Authority has captured about its customer base, the Authority explained its data-collection strategy and methods included an automatic passenger counter system that was installed on approximately 60% of the buses but has been inactive since 2011. The Authority received a quote for expanding the system to all buses and affecting the necessary upgrades.

Additionally, the Authority received responses to an RFP for electronic fare media (E-ticketing). The system would improve access to purchase fares, improve revenue collection and revenue protection. In addition, the system would provide much needed ridership data including where, when and how a fare is purchased; as well as where, when and how often it is used. While this data could be used to inform schedule improvements, the Authority does not have a data-collection method that captures the demographics of their customer base.

THE AUTHORITY'S METHODS AND PROCESSES FOR COMMUNICATING BUS CANCELLATIONS

As the issues continued with the bus service, actions were taken to improve the provision of information to bus users and members of the public electronically. The information on the bus cancellations was originally provided in the form of a PDF document that was difficult to download and view on some devices. This information was reformatted to provide a clearer view of the information and require less data service on the passenger's device to access the information. In addition, the broadcast email was repackaged to accommodate mailing to thousands as opposed to tens of users.

The Authority should consider different means of communication between the following; frequent bus users, occasional bus users, students and visitors. The public has been invited to sign up to the email updates. The occasional bus user can find the information by searching on the Government portal www.gov.bm. On the first page, there is a section called Quick Links, which provides a link to the cancellations under the heading "Bus Alerts". Bus cancellations that affect students are emailed to the schools every weekday. The individual school administrators are responsible for relaying information to their students. Many students are technologically savvy and are equipped with handheld devices that display the bus cancellations by way of the website or email alerts. The bus alerts are accessible to individuals and entities that serve or have a connection to visitors. The online information is accessible to anyone that has internet access. The goal of the Department is to deliver real-time cancellation information in the future.

The current web portal can be updated at any time and multiple times per day. This may be part of the solution for communications with persons who can use the electronic systems but it does not help those who do not have access to the systems for various reasons. The challenge is the time required to adjust the schedule and generate the cancellation list for publishing on the portal. The system is manual and cumbersome. An updated computerised dispatch system is required to enable real-time scheduling notifications to the public and third-party mobile device applications.

In the early stages of the investigation it appeared, no one within the Authority was designated to disseminate information to the attention of those who choose to use the buses. The information is updated to the Bermuda Government portal only for viewing by anyone locally or globally who choose to use the information. Once the information is posted to the portal, it is automatically emailed by Mail Chimp to subscribers.

The communication process is reviewed and improvements implemented as feedback is received. The PDF of the cancellations was reformatted to allow for better viewing; the template for the cancellations has changed several times to ensure that the relevant information is passed onto passengers; Mail Chimp was added to the process of emailing the cancellations to facilitate a more far-reaching audience; more staff have been assigned to send out the information to ensure that someone was specifically tasked; adjustments to the staff members carrying out the function were made as a result of attrition, and bus cancellations were communicated to the schools directly.

Although steps have been taken to consider wider and more effective communication with bus users, there have been insufficient actions toward properly addressing the deficiencies in communications with all bus users. The format of the information posted to the web portal was modified for improved viewing in 2018. Additionally, the portal links were modified to ensure that the bus alerts link was included in the list of quick links on the www.gov.bm homepage. Passengers can therefore access this information with one click from the homepage. Recognising the technology is available to provide real-time scheduling updates, the Department has engaged Google Transit and a local GPS service provider. The Authority is working to create the General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) file format required for publishing the Bermuda Bus Schedule on Google Transit, thereby enabling real-time tracking of vehicles and notifications of service changes.

The Department was asked how many times in a given year it conducted a general review of the communications process. The response provided was that the current schedule requires 88 buses daily. On average, the Department has 55 to 60 buses available per day. As such, there is an excessive number of cancellations daily. This did not respond to the point raised. The Authority asserted that it has placed emphasis on implementing a reduced schedule that better aligns with the fleet numbers.

The Department's operations include providing a public bus service, a school bus service and sightseeing tours. In response to the low capacity of the service, the Authority suspended the sightseeing operations and reduced the number of buses assigned to the dedicated school bus service. The Authority explained that this placed the primary emphasis on delivering service in accordance with the published schedule for the public bus service. However, where any conflicting demand arose priority would be given to routes that also service schools.

In consultation with the Department of Communications and the Ministry, it was decided in January 2018 that the best course of action was to discontinue the radio broadcast of the cancellations and to engage in a more targeted approach to distributing service cancellations. Some radio stations, such as Irie 98.3 FM, continue to provide weekday morning updates on the bus cancellations. The radio stations do this of their own accord through access to the bus alerts on www.gov.bm. We heard the Government system is sometimes not reliable and radio stations cannot always access the bus cancellation information.

The Authority was asked to identify who is responsible for getting information about cancellations to bus users: They referred to section 8c of the Public Transportation Act 1951 which states that: the Board shall cause to be published from time to time in the Gazette and in at least one other newspaper – particulars of any alteration in any such table or timetable. The Board no longer exists and its duties have been split between the Department management and the Ministry.

Due to the accelerated nature of the changes, the information is not static enough to place in the newspaper ahead of time with any level of accuracy. In order to strengthen the accuracy of the information, the notices are posted twice a day in the Official Gazette of the Government of Bermuda which is the website www.gov.bm.

The method the Authority has for obtaining feedback from bus users or members of the public is via email to info@dpt.bm. Additionally, bus users and members of the public call the Department of Public Transportation and the Ministry to provide feedback about the bus service.

The Authority was asked how they dealt with feedback (complaints, inquiries, and suggestions) received. Complaints are investigated and addressed; inquiries are

researched and answered, suggestions are considered and implemented according to practical financial feasibility.

THE AUTHORITY'S COMMUNICATIONS

Meetings and actions have been taken by the Authority to update and improve the communication process. The Department of Public Transportation has met with the Department of Communications, Department of Information and Digital Technologies, Mail Chimp, Google Transit and Electronic Communications Limited in order to establish the best way to achieve improvements to the dissemination of the cancellation information. In so doing, the following changes were implemented:

- a) Reformatted PDF that improved the layout and accessibility of the information
- b) Changed the content of the template of the bus cancellations
- c) Provided a greater capacity to send out the email notices via Mail Chimp
- d) Redeployed staff and shifted the traffic supervisors rosters to accommodate the twice-daily dissemination of bus alerts
- e) Developed a school bus schedule 2018
- f) Engaged Google Transit and GPS service providers in the development of a General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) file format necessary to facilitate real-time scheduling updates.

As a result of the communication limitation difficulties which our office identified, changes have been made by the Authority in the communications processes. The Department has researched methods of sending real-time notifications to the public. The monitors at Central Terminal are to be upgraded so that the real-time information can be posted.

The Authority was asked what information it communicated to bus users and members of the public regarding new buses on the road. The Ministry and the Department have communicated that eight new buses were in production. The Ministry also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Rocky Mountain Institute for assessing the feasibility of electric buses for Bermuda. The study considered advanced diesel, diesel electric hybrid and electric vehicle technology to inform the next request for proposal for new buses.

The Authority communicated to bus users and members of the public regarding work to refurbish the number of buses to be brought back into service. Work on 14 buses purchased in 2009 was commenced in November 2018 to extend their service life and improve the reliability of the fleet. Updates for this and other fleet improvement initiatives are communicated by the Minister through periodic press and radio interviews.

The Authority provided some information communicated to bus users and members of the public on what and when it was anticipated for there to be improvements. Significant improvements were expected by September 2019. The Authority noted the challenges that they were undergoing in the Department of Public Transportation.

FURTHER STAGES BETWEEN 2019 AND 2021

Management support, Operations and Administration are the three sections within the Department that must communicate information to the public. If the kiosk at Central Terminal must be closed early or will open late, the following process is engaged:

- 1) The Office Manager will advise the Director or the Administrative Assistant to the Director who advises the Public Relations Officer (PRO) at the Department of Communications.
- 2) The PRO sends a draft statement to the Office Manager, the Director and the Permanent Secretary for signoff.
- 3) If all approve, the statement is released to the media.

If there is a high profile issue, the following course of action is taken:

- 1) Director advises the PRO, the Permanent Secretary and copies the Assistant Director, Operations.
- 2) The PRO sends the statement to the Director, the Permanent Secretary and the Minister for sign off. Recently, the Assistant Director, Operations is copied.
- 3) If approved the statement is released to the media.

If an answer to a question from a reporter or member of the media is needed, the following takes place:

- 1) The PRO advises the Director, the Permanent Secretary and the Minister, recently the Assistant Director, Operations is copied.
- 2) The Director provides a response and the PRO sends a draft statement to the Director, the Permanent Secretary and the Minister for signoff. Recently the Assistant Director, Operations is copied.
- 3) If approved the statement is released to the media.

The Authority noted that four key people have been recruited since the start of the investigation; the Director, the seconded Assistant Director technical; the Maintenance Manager; and the Human Resources Manager. A job description for a Facilities Manager was also prepared because there is an identified need for a dedicated officer to manage that area of the Department.

As the investigation proceeded we inquired further with the Authority.

We requested information on how many schools the Authority emails and how many students are serviced by this. The Authority emails 25 schools. The administrators of each school communicate the status of the buses to the students. The 2018 Public Transport Survey estimated that approximately 660 nursery and preschool children (22%) and 4160 primary (27%) middle (43%) and high school (42%) students take a public bus to school.

We requested information on how many bus users subscribe to the public broadcast email service, and how many are employees of the Bermuda Government. There were 748 subscribers. A request was made to the Department of Communications to obtain details on the subscribers; however, as some may have opted to use their personal email address, it is difficult to determine which subscribers are in fact, government employees.

We requested an update and explanation of the progress made on finding and acquiring a system that would provide real-time passenger information and the status of buses and bus cancellations. The Ministry issued an RFP in 2019 for a Digital Fare Media Solution. These systems have the ability to incorporate GPS Fleet

Management, Computer Aided-Dispatch and real-time passenger information using an app based platform.

The Authority indicated that more staff have been assigned to ensure that information on bus cancellations are communicated to the public. We asked the Department to identify the number of employees. There are 11 traffic supervisors that have the responsibility to list the bus cancellations whenever they are working on Desk 2. The traffic supervisors fill a range of roles that include dispatching buses, supervising bus operators, conducting inspections, attending accidents, researching and resolving customer queries, overseeing the delivery of special movements, and are responsible for the smooth running of the service and the Department outside office hours and on weekends. The added responsibility given to the traffic supervisors is to list the bus runs that are cancelled into a template and upload it to the Government portal for publishing at 5:00 AM and 4:00 PM daily.

Regarding the status of efforts to engage Google Transit and a local GPS service provider to acquire a flexible real-time scheduling and cancellation system the aforementioned method is effectively real-time passenger information. In addition to the Digital Fare Media RFP, efforts were made in 2019 to produce GTFS files required for Google Transit. We were told the project came to a halt due to resource constraints and required skill sets.

The Public Transportation Act section 8(c) requires that any alterations to the schedule must be publicised. The public bus schedule was altered in March 2019 with the implementation of the new 50 bus schedule. This schedule proved unsuccessful and was withdrawn six weeks later, in April 2019. Prior to enacting the changes, publications were issued by way of press releases, radio, newspaper, online and digital display at the central bus terminal.

We also enquired about the status of the memorandum of understanding that the Department had with Rocky Mountain Institute to study the feasibility of electronic buses or other vehicles. The Department has worked with the Rocky Mountain Institute to complete an RFP for the procurement of cleaner, accessible and appropriately sized buses, open to clean diesel, electric and hybrid diesel electric drive trains. The Department expected to take delivery of new buses in 2021/2022, to bolster the fleet and allow for the retirement of aged buses.

The Authority asserts that historical methods of informing the public about bus cancellations was problematic. Previously those cancellations were posted on community bulletins, and radio broadcasters would announce schedule changes over the airwaves. Newspapers were not considered a useful way to provide information on cancellations as the information was not static. The changes in cancellation information was often out of date by the time of publication. Due to the increases in cancellations, it was important to re-evaluate the means of communication and to improve communication for all users, and find a more user-friendly approach so that bus users could obtain the information.

Updates are posted on the Bermuda government portal where they can be positioned in the same area as the bus schedule. The portal links were modified to ensure that the bus alerts link was included in the list of quick links on the front page of the portal so as to permit passengers access to the information with one click from the homepage. Updates are provided twice a day. Initially, the information was provided in a PDF format, but this platform was often hard to download and view on some devices. The information was reformatted to provide a clearer view of the information and to require less data service on passenger's devices.

A public relations campaign was run to invite passengers to sign up to get an update on the bus service two times a day via email. Once information is updated on the government portal, it is automatically emailed via Mail Chimp to subscribers. As of 2019, 748 subscribers received the email alerts.

A broadcast email is sent to all public and private schools daily to communicate the buses that are positioned to serve the schools. Twenty-five schools and educational institutions receive the daily emails. The Authority is exploring the purchase and implementation of a real time electronic software which would permit passengers to track where precisely their bus is on route. This software is utilised by many bus providers in Europe and North America.

As the investigation was reaching completion the Department provided further information on its communications process and on the status of the bus service. The information was provided in response to points raised which had formed part of earlier stages of the investigation. For the communications, this also reflected the communication actions to inform the bus users and the public about the Covid-19

protocols and procedures. This demonstrated the areas where improvements and changes had taken place in the communications process. It also updated developments in the bus service including the ordering and phased delivery of new electric buses and where planned changes in response to points raised with the Department had taken place or were being implemented.

The Authority informed us that social media and general advertisements had been released to direct people to gain information on bus schedules and cancellations by dialling the Department's main phone number – 292-3851. Traffic Supervisors answer all incoming calls to the main phone line. Passengers interested in route information would ask the supervisor and they will relay the information without transferring the passenger to another person. Answers are tailored to their needs and added context can be offered that would not be available through a recording or a post on social media.

The Authority also verified that Age Concern and associated agencies are subscribed to the Bus Alerts broadcast emails and retain the information for any one that needs the information.

They also verified that media outlets are subscribed to the Bus Alerts broadcast emails and are encouraged to disseminate the information through the airways. Irie 98.3 FM consistently has the list read out.

Digital display kiosks are also placed at Central Terminal to give information on the service and information on bus movements are announced over the PA system.

We asked the Authority to explain why an automated telephone line to check on changes, cancellations and delays was deemed unsuitable. The Authority explained that the information would be outdated as soon as it is recorded because buses go out of service or return to service after being repaired and bus operators call in sick or return to work at any time, which positively and negatively effects the bus cancellations. A live person with accurate information is more effective and available up until 12:00 am and returns to work thus answering the telephone calls at 5:30 am, well before the service starts.

All traffic supervisors participated in a training course facilitated through the Department of Human Resources called “Customer Service Over the Phone” to

assist with handling calls from passengers that may be upset over the volume of cancellations.

OBSERVATIONS FROM OVERSEAS

In conducting this investigation we thought it would be helpful for the purposes of context to see how other jurisdictions notify the public of bus service interruptions or delays. In Houston, Texas, passengers can receive an email or text using smartphones about service delays, interruptions, changes and detours that can affect their routes. They can also access the bus company's Facebook page, Twitter feed and a telephone line for customer service.

In Canada, most school districts are responsible for moving students. Given the challenges of the Canadian climate, a system for notifying students and parents is imperative. For example, the Northern Lights Public School district in northern Alberta primarily uses an app to notify bus users of delays or cancellations. Additionally, it provides a telephone line for inquiries.

The most robust scheme for notifying the public about bus cancellations was found at the Halton District School Board in Burlington Ontario. Bus cancellations are communicated via:

- 1) a telephone recording on the Board's main switchboard
- 2) television stations
- 3) radio stations
- 4) an alert message page on its website
- 5) a mobile app
- 6) an Instagram account
- 7) a Facebook page; and
- 8) a Twitter feed

FINDINGS

Pursuant to section 5 of the Ombudsman Act 2004 ("the Act"), the purpose of the investigation is to determine whether there is evidence of maladministration by the Authority with respect to its obligations to inform the public of bus cancellations.

The focus of the investigation was on the Authority's communication of bus cancellations and the bus service generally. Reference is made to bus users and the general public because, as a public service, members of the public generally also need to have information about the service, in the event they need to use it. The number of buses available for service involves an assessment of the allocation of public resources by the Government. This issue deals with how and why the Government sets fiscal priorities, the issue is not within the remit of the Ombudsman Report.

Pre-investigation and during earlier stages of this investigation demonstrated that the Authority was not focused on communication of cancellations with bus users. Our attempts to encourage improvement did not result in acceptance of the importance of this. As the investigation progressed, the Authority's response was to use communications limited to email and information using the internet which did not take account of bus users who do not have access to information through the internet. We then saw an acknowledgement of the need to reach bus users in the course of the investigation, which represents important progress.

We have thoroughly reviewed the information collected during the investigation. We have assessed the relevant information having regard to the provisions of the Ombudsman Act 2004.

1. **I must conclude** that the communication of the bus cancellations does amount to maladministration in that the communication process is inadequate in providing information to the widest number of bus users and the general public about bus cancellations and the bus service.
2. **I find** that the Department does not appear to have sufficient knowledge of the make-up of bus user population to facilitate communication.
3. **I find** that I do not accept the Department's elimination of the use of broadcast media (radio) to communicate with bus users. It is not justified as there are bus users who rely mainly on this method of communication.
4. **I find** that the Department has tried and continues to try, to address communication issues it must deal with.

5. **I find** that despite the Department's consistent efforts to address communication issues, it has not effectively communicated as widely as needed.

Notwithstanding the Authority's efforts to mitigate the challenges with a reduced bus fleet and attempts to communicate resulting bus cancellations, this investigation identified gaps in the Authority's communication and highlights the impact of these gaps on vulnerable persons including the elderly, physically challenged and lone individuals seeking to travel by bus at night.

Our conclusions with respect to this communication issue should in no way be perceived as an assessment of how the Authority more generally manages bus cancellations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the course of discussions with respect to the recommendations to the Report the Department accepted all of the recommendations made. As with other matters we will continue to be engaged in the implementation of the recommendations. The response to the recommendations has been helpful and constructive. I am pleased by the approach the Department has now taken, which will be of great benefit to the public.

1. **I strongly recommend** that the Authority consider those who do not have access to, or proficiency with, technology and provide alternative means. These may also be the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in our society. They are often older. It is likely that there will be continued and greater use of technology for these purposes, but that fact alone does not mitigate or eliminate the Authority's obligation to ensure that information about bus cancellations and the bus service is provided to all its users.
2. **I recommend** that the Authority develop a communications plan for the Department of Public Transportation, to set out the policies, procedures, actions and responsibilities for the communication with bus users and the general public. The Authority should aim to complete this by 25th February 2022.

3. **I recommend** that the communications plan have a clear requirement that it be reviewed and updated twice in each year.
4. **I recommend** that the Department reconsider points raised on the use of broadcast media (radio) and the Department provide information using all available communication methods and platforms including radio.
5. **I recommend** that the Department review its disproportionate reliance on electronic communications systems and methods, to ensure that the Department uses all available means of communication to reach the widest number of bus users.
6. **I recommend** that the Department carry out a short term review of existing bus users to confirm the most effective means of communication to provide information to all bus users and the public generally.

CONCLUSION

The public bus service in Bermuda remains an essential part of the transportation system for the Island. The service has been under some pressure in recent years as economic conditions have had an effect on the maintenance and replacement rate for the buses in service. The resulting bus cancellations have reduced the service available to the public and its effectiveness, particularly with the reliance bus users place on the system, as demonstrated during the Covid-19 public health emergency. Clear, effective and wide public communication is one of the underlying principles of this Office and this Report aims to bring about improved communications by the Authority. Some improvements have been made already, including updates on cancellations that can be obtained using a designated telephone information system.

In the modern communications age, there is an even greater need to utilise the full range of communication methods and platforms to reach the widest number of users and the public. The proposed changes set out in the Findings and Recommendations in this Report seek to improve the Department's communications to provide the best information to all bus users in a form that is readily available, to enable them to make full use of this important public service.