

**BLOC Annual Report
2022/2023**

Message from the Chair

This year has been another busy year for BLOC: below are some highlights of the achievements and changes made over the last 12 months:

- Botley Road Closures

The Botley Road closure cut one of our routes in half. We planned for this closure by re-organising several stops between different routes, including grouping all of the Abingdon stops together. This meant that when the road closed, all the services were able to continue operating as usual with no disruption to our service.

- New Consultation Process

We embraced parent requests around the route re-organisation last year to include a transparent consultation process. This resulted in a set of changes that accounted for the views of the full member base. We are proposing writing this consultation into the constitution at the AGM.

- Welfare Issues

There have been a high number of code of conduct and welfare issues over the past year. We brought this up with the school, and agreed that:

- a. The school is responsible for the welfare of children until they are met by parents at the bus stops.
- b. We have agreed the process by which welfare issues are raised with the school (see the Communication Officer's report)

- Bus Fees

The cost of living is something that has been on all our minds over the last year. We negotiated a sustainable increase in bus fees with the bus company. We also released some of the financial reserve to offset the increase, resulting in lower fees in September 2023 than for the same period the year before.

- Finances

We updated the invoicing processes to give parents more notice of the fees due and more time to pay invoices, to help manage their finances. The committee also chased down all outstanding invoices and debts from this year (and some from the previous year) to ensure that the finances are in good standing.

- Governance and Terms & Conditions

We collected and codified the terms of usage of BLOC in a new Ts and Cs document, removing ambiguity and making it easier to find all the rules in one place.

- Part Time Use

For 2023 we are asking part time users to re-register each term, to make it clearer that part time places are only (and have always been) guaranteed on a term by term basis. We are also trying to communicate capacity more clearly and regularly.

As the buses get fuller, this has become more of an issue and a handful of people lost places part way through the year last year which was challenging to manage.

Looking to the future, there are a few open points for future committees to consider:

- Bus Company

We have no written contract with our bus company.

As many of you are aware, Heyfordian - one of the largest providers in Oxfordshire - went bankrupt over the summer affecting several school buses across the county including the Culham Bus Club. Fortunately BLOC was not affected.

We have now agreed on a written invoicing process, to improve our records and move the contractual relationship in the right direction.

Our bus company is very flexible and generally easy to work with, and we have a good relationship with our main contact there enabling us to make the requests - and the majority of the time the service operates extremely well.

I should note that the previous committee researched alternative providers and found that the next cheapest company was almost **double** the price, and most were more than double. This tallies with the fees charged by the Culham Bus Club. Therefore, changing the bus company would represent a significant financial shock to all of us. We recommend that a financial reserve of at least one month's fees be kept back by BLOC in the unlikely event that we have to change bus companies at short notice.

- School Collaboration

The BLOC committee feel that closer collaboration with the school is always better, and the new committee should look for ways to build on how we currently work together.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the volunteer committee members last year for all their hard work, including, but not limited to, dealing with last minute disruptions, breakdowns and traffic; ensuring that BLOC processes like invoicing are executed on time; and responding to parent emails in a timely fashion ... all in their spare time.

Treasurer's Report

BLOC Income and Expense			
£	Year Ended 31 August 2021	Year Ended 31 August 2022	Year Ended 31 August 2023
Contributions	126,538	194,559	229,266
Bus Costs	-128,104	-190,300	-211,905
Presents	-129		
Vouchers		-180	
Trackers		-122	-462
AGM		-50	-64
School TA supervision	-400	-426	
Accounting	-264	-258	-144
IT	-431	-82	-64
Interest income		4	
Surplus / (deficit)	-2,790	3,145	16,628
Reserves as at 1 September	27,045	24,255	27,400
Reserves as at 31 August	24,255	27,400	44,028

BLOC Financial Position			
	Year Ended 31 August 2021	Year Ended 31 August 2022	Year Ended 31 August 2023
Cash at bank	40,226	53,356	93,065
Accounts Receivable	524	478	-642
Accrued Contributions	0	-426	-288
Deferred Contributions	-16,496	-26,009	-48,106
Net Assets	24,254	27,399	44,029
Reserves	24,254	27,399	44,029

- The surplus for 2022-23 was £16,628 (2021-22: £3,145 and 2020-21 had a deficit of £2,790)
- As of 31st August 2023 BLOC held a total of £44,028 in reserves from which £35,028 will be kept in the reserve account for bus fees, non-payments and emergency situations. £9,000 has been deducted from the 2023-24 costs to reduce usage fees. As a result the cost of FT seats came to £325 (2022: £330) despite the increase in bus hire fees.
- Other costs relate to the accounting system, website, trackers and room hire for the AGM.

Registrar's Report

BLOC's founding principle, as amended (Clause 1 of BLOC's Constitution), requires the Committee to strive to coordinate an efficient service from the starting points of set routes to Europa School (the return journeys). The essence for BLOC of the term efficient is a timely and cost-effective service, subject to the Committee's control, which will predominantly be influenced by local traffic flows and market conditions within the bus sector.

At the commencement of the 22/23 Committee term, BLOC was subject to sector price increases following post covid recovery, national fuel increases and inflation. BLOC received many concerns about increasing transport costs and affordability, which required BLOC to balance the two key elements for an efficient service.

In October 2022, BLOC successfully re-negotiated the planned service charge for 22/23, which had previously been poorly negotiated in July / August 2022. This ensured no increments would be made within 22/23. That being said, for 23/24 the service charge would inevitably have to be increased, especially given the pressure that the private bus sector faced (with some local bus companies subject to liquidation orders). BLOC, having foreseen these eight months prior, was able to implement an action plan to manage potential increases: (a) by looking at efficient route capacity and (b) more transparent management of invoicing, debt recovery and cash flow (the latter is covered Treasure's report).

With regards to capacity, BLOC began 22/23 with the following usage metrics:

- Six Routes providing bus transport for 246 full time users (FT), 48 part-time users.

The usage metrics for the commencement of this school year (Sept 2023) are:

- Six Routes providing bus transport for 254 FT, 16 AM PT and 43 PM PT (the 31 of the users for PT PM being on buses 3, 4 and 11).
- There is no capacity left on routes 3, and 4.
- There is no PM capacity on routes 1, 2 and 11, with limited AM capacity on these routes.

Currently, our bus provider does not have the capacity to offer additional buses to cover any potential increase demand, in the event that the BLOC membership was to pursue that course of action. Other operators are struggling to cover demand from other schools or the local authority at equivalent or affordable prices to those we have.

In respect of running a timely service, BLOC will always be faced with challenges to appease all users. Those registering to use BLOC have to remember that this is not a business, but a parent cooperative. Therefore, BLOC has limited options to address time issues, especially where traffic levels are the underlying factor. Bus schedule accuracy is always subject to congestion levels. Though it is worth noting that PM timings are provided only to ensure

parents are at the stops to collect their children, and sometimes that is not the case, which results in buses having to wait. Last Autumn saw the worst congestion around Oxford's ring road resulting in excessive home journey times. Some buses were able to return home timely, but others were impacted by 40-60mins. BLOC did respond by proposing route adjustments that had been promised by the previous committee members to Bus 14 users. The process was not without its difficulties. Lessons have been learnt from that process of proposing and implementing new route structures in Autumn 2022 (caused by the mismanaged introduction of Bus 14). The key outcome is the proposed introduction of a consultancy process for major route structuring, which has been visible since Spring 2023.

The restructuring of routes (due to – (a) capacity demands in Abingdon and East Oxford; (b) prolonged journey times for users of Bus 14; and (c) the Botley Road Closure) have been effective. There is a clear demand in Abingdon, which necessitated a distinct route, and this is currently managed, but will be subject to future review given increasing housing in the area. BLOC has attempted to engage the School for more transparency on pupil numbers in School nodes and to ask that the School does now consider taking onboard more transport accountability. However, there has been no successful outcome on these points. This does now mean that future BLOC committees will face tough decisions when implementing the prioritisation policy. For this reason, the consolidated terms of usage were introduced as part of the registration process for 23/24, including a clear process of Part Time usage requests and term of usage.

Initial Bus schedules can only be finalised after 20th August, after it is evident which stops have permanent users, and then are subject to the Bus provider's agreement, who will possibly have foresight of forthcoming road closures. The finalised Bus Schedules can only be concluded three weeks into the of the school term because the reality of traffic flows may not be apparent until that time. BLOC appreciates that this may not be the most convenient outcome for all, but BLOC is only hiring the Bus services and has no ability to demand a personalised service to fit each family – BLOC has to consider the holistic view of all users.

With limited Bus providers available in the locality, BLOC has to benchmark pricing and timing. The Bus provider is considerate and has been a truly helpful partner in supporting the routes at an extremely cheaper price in comparison with market prices. BLOC is extremely fortunate not to have to increase pricing by over 50%, which is what other facilitators of school transport are challenged with.

I wish the future committee the best in taking on the collective coordination of BLOC and where opportunities exist to enhance BLOC for the benefit of all, I hope they can embrace them.

I would like to thank our Treasurer, with whom I have had to work closely with in my role as the Registrar, for her oversight and productivity this year of matters that cover both our roles. I also thank my fellow committee members for their extreme hard effort, dedication and passion over the last twelve months. Their contribution to BLOC rarely receives the gratitude deserved.

Communication Officer's Report

The school confirmed to us this year that they (Europa School) are responsible for the welfare of children until they are met by their parents/guardians. In our case, this means until children are collected at their bus stop and includes the time on the bus.

Given this, we agreed the process below for handling welfare issues on buses - essentially confirming responsibility for investigating and resolving issues on the buses to the school. This has the added advantage that the school can utilise their welfare teams and contextual knowledge of the children (if behaviour on buses is an extension of the playground) and avoid any conflicts of interest, as BLOC is made up entirely of parents.

