

A Genuine Consultation; Not Just a Vote

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Abstract

In 2018 Auckland Transport (AT) started to trial AT Local, an on-demand rideshare service on the Devonport Peninsula. In 2020 the trial ended and AT decided to publicly consult on the future of public transport in Devonport.

AT consulted on two options:

- Option A: Enhance local bus services and remove AT Local
- Option B: Retain local bus services at peak times only and retain AT Local at off-peak times with a smaller operating area.

The consultation method and final decision demonstrate caring for the people.

The consultation was extensively promoted to ensure the whole community knew it was happening and could participate. Brochures were delivered to every household and large-print and audio versions were available. People could discuss the options with AT at public information sessions. Feedback was collected through online and paper surveys.

Respondents were asked for their preferred option. Respondents were also asked why they preferred that option, how both options could be improved, and why they used AT Local and local buses.

The information collected by the additional questions was crucial to AT's decision making. A range of themes were raised, including efficiency and fairness when spending ratepayers' money, and people's willingness and ability to adopt new technology. These illustrated the complexity of designing public transport to meet the varied needs and preferences of increasingly diverse communities.

We received 704 responses. 52% preferred Option B; 45% preferred Option A. AT implemented Option A. Public transport patronage has increased since Option A was implemented.

This project could be considered an example of AT doing what we want regardless of public feedback. Instead, this paper will show how this project is an example of a genuine consultation – one that was more than just a vote, and that resulted in outcomes that benefit the community as a whole.

Introduction

Devonport is a suburb on Auckland's North Shore which sits at the end of the Devonport Peninsula. There is a single road, Lake Rd, connecting Devonport to the rest of the peninsula. Many residents on the peninsula rely on ferries for transport to the City.

In September 2018 a new bus network for the North Shore was implemented, including changes to bus services in Devonport. Given the reliance on ferries for travel, there was a considerable emphasis on buses that connected with ferry sailings, but local travel was also important with limited parking in the town centre ('Devonport Village')

In November 2018 Auckland Transport (AT) introduced a trial of an on-demand rideshare service, AT Local. This was principally designed as 'first and final leg' transport for access to the ferry but could also be used for local trips within the designated Service Zone.

In mid-2020 it was decided the AT Local trial would end. The continued duplication of AT Local and local bus services could not be justified. Particularly AT needed to reduce operating expenditure in response to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Rather than just end the trial, AT decided to consult on two options. One removed AT Local but improved local bus services; the other kept AT Local, albeit with a smaller operating area, and reduced service on two local bus routes. After consultation, 52% of respondents preferred the second option which would retain AT Local. AT decided to implement the first option, that which would remove AT Local and make improvements to local bus services.

This paper will look at why AT made that decision and how based on the feedback received it was considered that this would benefit the community as a whole.

Background

The Devonport Peninsula is on Auckland's North Shore and is largely residential. The area includes a local shopping centre (Devonport Village) and the Devonport Navy Base and Dockyard, which employs approximately 2,000 people. The Navy Base generates up to 1,200 vehicle movements per weekday. Other than local primary schools there is a secondary school, Takapuna Grammar and the adjacent Belmont Intermediate. Of the 26,000 people who live within the Devonport and Takapuna Central areas units, approximately 6,200 people work in Devonport (2013 census).

The Devonport Peninsula has a single arterial road, Lake Rd, for access to and from the peninsula. The section of Lake Rd affected by the consultation, is used by 15,000 – 20,000 vehicles per day (2015 traffic count). Traffic is heavy on Lake Rd in both directions at peak times.

Public transport

At the time of consultation, the southern section of the peninsula was served by five bus routes and three ferry routes (although one ferry, Stanley Bay, was to be removed at the end of the year). AT Local operated in the area between Belmont and Devonport.

In 2018 AT introduced a new bus network for the North Shore. Routes 806 and 807 were extended to run all-day, seven days a week. These routes were previously run at peak times only, Monday to Friday. Feedback received suggested that parking in Devonport Village was an issue, therefore increased local bus services were required.



Figure 1 - Devonport Peninsula bus services as of October 2020 (Shaded area is the AT Local Service Zone)

Routes 801, 806, 807 and 814 were all scheduled to connect with ferries to and from Downtown, at least Monday to Friday. AT did receive feedback that the 806 and 807 did not always provide reliable ferry connections. This was due to both routes being operated by a single vehicle and therefore both routes not being able to connect with all ferry sailings.

AT Local

In November 2018, AT introduced a 12-month trial of an on-demand rideshare scheme, AT Local. This was a 'corner-to-corner' service, booked and paid for through a smartphone app. Although people were able to use AT Local to travel between any two points within the Service Zone, one of the reasons for choosing Devonport for the trial was to provide connections with ferry services.

Towards the end of the trial in late 2019, it was decided to extend the trial to evaluate how AT Local would perform over summer. Devonport and the surrounding areas are a popular summer destination, this could contribute to additional patronage. The trial was extended to May 2020.

End of the AT Local trial

After a period of suspension while Auckland was at COVID-19 Alert Level 4, AT Local started running again when Auckland entered Level 3.

Due to the degree of duplication between AT Local and local bus services, and the need to reduce public transport operating expenditure following the lockdown, AT decided to end the AT Local trial. Rather than simply end the trial, AT wanted to consult with the local community, as their views and local knowledge could help AT make a well-informed decision.

AT would consult on two options:

- Option A: remove AT Local from Devonport and increase frequency on routes 806 and 807 at peak times. Look for opportunities to make other bus service improvements.
- Option B: keep routes 806 and 807 at peak times (Monday to Friday) only and retain AT Local at off-peak times (including weekends and public holidays) with a reduced Service Zone.

It was necessary for AT Local to have a reduced Service Zone under Option B to minimise duplication with all-day bus services in Bayswater. It would not have been equitable for Bayswater to be served by bus services and AT Local when AT Local was the only public transport option for Stanley Bay and Cheltenham at off-peak times. People in Stanley Bay and Cheltenham could have faced a longer wait for AT Local because someone in Bayswater had simply chosen to use AT Local instead of the bus service that also served their area.

Consultation

Implementation of either option would have a significant impact on many people.

If Option A was implemented, AT Local would be removed from the Devonport Peninsula. Although it was a trial, AT Local had been operating for almost two years at this point – its users had become accustomed to the service. In February 2020 (before the pandemic) AT Local was used by an average of 290 people each weekday and users reported high levels of satisfaction.

If Option B were implemented, Stanley Bay and Cheltenham wouldn't have been served by any traditional, fixed-route, fixed-timetable bus services at off-peak times, including weekends and public holidays. In February 2020 the Stanley Bay and Cheltenham bus services were used by 75 and 86 people each weekday respectively. It is also worth noting that Cheltenham is home to the Torpedo Bay Navy Museum – a popular visitor attraction.

The consultation was therefore promoted through a range of channels to ensure as many people as possible knew the consultation was happening and how to participate:

- A brochure detailing the options was delivered to every household in the AT Local Service Zone – 6,496 addresses
- The brochure was also distributed through AT Customer Service Centres at Albany, Constellation and Smales Farm stations; Akoranga Station; Downtown, Devonport, Bayswater and Stanley Bay ferry terminals; AT HOP retailers; local schools, clubs, businesses, churches, museums and community groups; Devonport Library and other community facilities; and William Sanders Retirement Village. In total, 9,568 brochures were distributed
- Posters were installed at every bus stop in the AT Local Service Zone – 83 bus stops
- Paid advertisements were placed in the two local newspapers
- A member of the project team met with a journalist to discuss the project, resulting in an article and editorial in a local newspaper
- The consultation was promoted through targeted, promoted posts on AT's social media accounts

398 properties were in the AT Local Service Zone, but outside the mail delivery zones for this area. Members of the project team therefore hand delivered brochures to these properties to ensure occupants received the information.

To enable vision-impaired members of the community respond to the consultation, large-print and audio versions of the brochure were distributed through AT's Public Transport Accessibility Group.

The consultation had a dedicated page on the AT website – www.AT.govt.nz/projects-roadworks/devonport-at-local-and-bus-service-changes. While the brochure focused on a comparison of Option A and Option B, the webpage outlined the options, and then focused on describing the proposed bus services and AT Local. Both options and their potential impacts were relatively complex, so presenting the details in alternative ways helped deepen people's understanding of the proposals. This approach also made the information accessible to as many people as possible – if someone found it difficult to understand the proposals as they were presented in the brochure, they could find the same information presented in a different way on the AT website.

It was important for respondents from Stanley Bay to know their ferry service was going to be removed shortly after this consultation closed, as their alternative public transport option for travel to the City at peak times would be to take the bus to Devonport and then transfer to the Devonport Ferry. Under Option A, they would have had a connection with every Devonport Ferry; under Option B, they would have had a connection with every second Devonport Ferry. Due to the very different levels of service Stanley Bay residents would experience under the different options, the removal of the Stanley Bay Ferry was explicitly covered by both the brochure and project website.

Three public information sessions were held at the Devonport library. These were an opportunity for people to discuss the options with members of the project team and to ask questions. Sessions took place at different times of the day and days of the week to try to ensure there was at least one session everyone could attend. Team members spoke with around 30 people at these sessions.

Consultation feedback highlights

Consultation feedback could be submitted online through the project website (the “online survey”) or by completing the freepost paper survey that was included in the brochure (the “paper survey”). The online and paper surveys asked the same questions, so respondents were free to choose the survey format that best suited them.

Eight of the 11 survey questions were open text questions. While the open text questions were more complex and time consuming for the project team to analyse, they enabled respondents to fully express their opinion, particularly when completing the online survey which gave unlimited space to respond.

The following paragraphs outline some highlights from the feedback – a full Consultation Summary and Decisions Report can be downloaded from the AT website www.AT.govt.nz/media/1984955/consultation-summary-and-decisions-report.pdf.

General feedback

704 people answered at least one question. The most common age group was “45-54 years” with 24% of respondents who stated their age. The second most common age group was “65 or older” with 23% of respondents. Almost all respondents lived in the project area (99%) and used the local public transport services (98%) and were therefore directly affected by the project outcomes.

Preferred option

Option B was preferred by a small majority of respondents – 52%. The survey only offered these two options, and the online survey would not allow respondents to skip this question. However, 3% of respondents used the next open text question to explain that they didn’t like either option and that they wanted something different. AT analysed these respondents’ feedback separately, rather than make an assumption regarding which option they would have preferred if AT couldn’t deliver the services they requested.

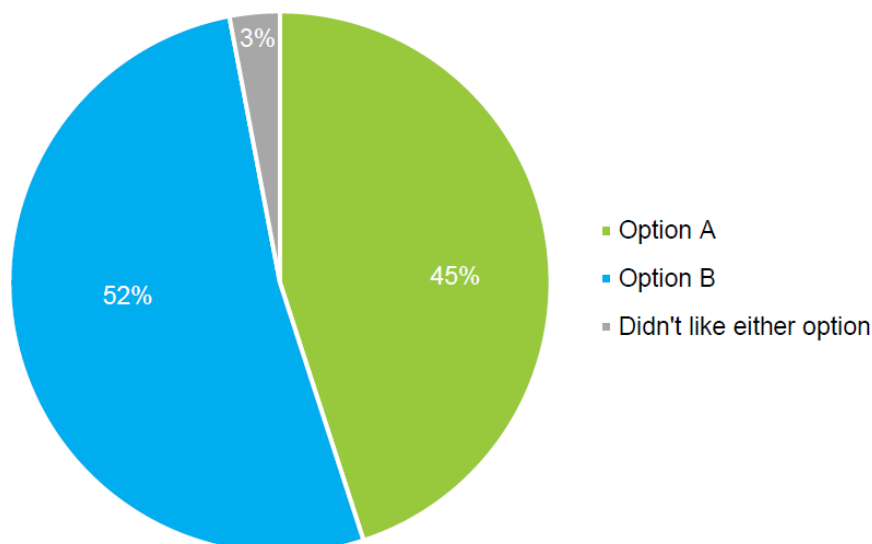


Figure 2 – Respondents' preferred option

AT acknowledges that either by choice, budget or health reasons, those aged 65 years and older are more likely to be reliant on public transport. A clear majority (65%) of respondents in this older age group preferred Option A.

Reasons for preference

The most common reason for preferring Option A was that respondents felt it was the best use of ratepayers' money (22% of respondents). Other common reasons included that respondents felt the bus services were accessible to everyone (14%), and respondents needed regular, timetabled public transport throughout the day (11%).

Reason	# of respondents
Best use of ratepayers' money	62
Best option / this meets my needs – no further detail provided	40
Accessible for all incl. elderly, children, disabled, occasional users and visitors	39
Like the proposed improvements – frequency, serving more areas, better ferry connections	38
Need regular, timetabled, direct bus services throughout the day	32
Smartphone, app, technological requirement is a barrier	15
Buses have more capacity and can accommodate long term growth	11
Don't want to use AT Local	10
This option / the bus system is easy to understand	10
Respondent didn't realise AT Local fares would be integrated	5
Better for congestion and / or the environment	5
AT Local trial didn't achieve its objectives	4
Other	8
N/A	9

Table 1 – Respondents' reasons for preferring Option A

The most common reason for preferring Option B was that respondents felt it was the best option or that they wanted AT Local to continue operating, without providing further information (19% of respondents). 15% said the buses were too big. 11% said AT Local was more flexible than traditional bus services. 11% said AT Local gave more people access to public transport.

Reason	# of respondents
This is the best option / want AT Local – no further detail provided	66
Buses are too big for the number of people using them	50
AT Local is more flexible than bus services	39
AT Local gives more people access to public transport / minimal walk to access AT Local (includes references to Ngataringa Rd area)	36
AT Local is easy, reliable, efficient, convenient, direct and faster than bus services	27
Offers the best ferry connections	24
As long as AT Local still serves Bayswater, Belmont, Narrow Neck	16
Good mix of capacity at peak times and flexibility off-peak	15
AT Local is helpful and accessible to disabled, elderly and children	11
Don't / won't use 806 and 807 (incl. those not living in the 806 / 807 catchment areas)	9
Good use of ratepayers' money	6
Better for the environment / congestion	6
AT Local provides greater personal safety, esp. at night	4
AT Local at off-peak times is good as don't want to wait for infrequent bus services	2
AT Local is helpful when travelling with luggage / shopping	2
AT Local fares to be integrated	2
Other	14
N/A	13

Table 2 – Respondents’ reasons for preferring Option B

How could Option A and Option B be improved?

All respondents were asked how both options could be improved, regardless of their preference. The most common way respondents felt both options could be improved was operating hours.

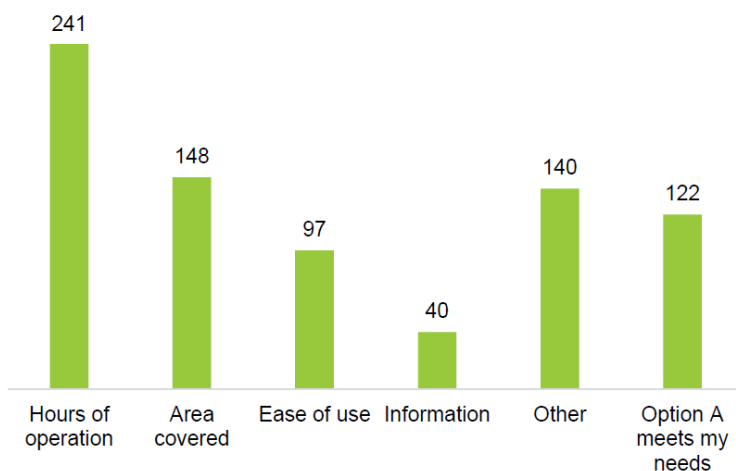


Figure 3 – How could we improve Option A?

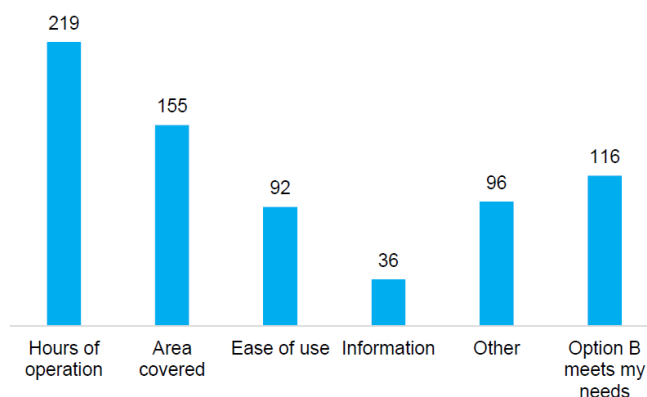


Figure 4 – How could we improve Option B?

There was also an open text option for this question. By far the most common write-in suggestion for improving Option A was for AT to improve the bus-ferry connections (15% of respondents).

Suggested improvement	# of respondents
Better ferry connections	61
Smaller and / or electric buses	30
Serve William Sanders Retirement Village / Ngataranga Road area	29
More frequency	28
Extended hours (same as ferry)	26
Wait for ferries	17
Extended hours (non-specific)	14
Extended hours (run later)	10
Serve Lake Road	7
Serve Seacliffe Avenue area	4
Reverse direction of 807	3
Better bus stops	2
Other	53
N/A	113

Table 3 – Respondents' suggestions for improving Option A

The most common write-in suggestions for improving Option B were for AT Local to operate at peak-times (14%) and for AT Local to have a larger Service Zone than that proposed (14%). Local bus services under Option B could be improved by covering those areas not currently served (4%) and running at off-peak times including weekends (4%).

Buses	AT Local		
Run between Bayswater, Lake Rd, Ngataranga Rd and Devonport	14	Extended hours including peak times	52
Extended hours including off-peak and weekends	14	Serve an area significantly outside proposed area	51
Don't run them	12	Don't change existing service	23
Better ferry connections	7	Make booking easier or unnecessary	21
More frequency	6	Don't run it	20
Use smaller buses	6	Minor extension to hours	5
Don't change existing services	4	Charge commercial fares	1
Wait for ferry	4	Make more reliably available	1
Minor extension to hours	3		
Reverse direction of 807	2		
Not mode specific			
Increase capacity in wet weather			1
Offer integrated fares, AT HOP fares and payment			6
Other			20
N/A			88

Table 4 – Respondents' suggestions for improving Option B

Feedback themes

While most of the consultation feedback related to a small number of themes, respondents frequently disagreed with each other. For example, accessibility was important to many respondents, but they were divided on what was and wasn't accessible, as detailed below. This illustrates the diverse needs and preferences that communities would like public transport to meet, even in a relatively small geographic area like the Devonport.

It was clear from the feedback that the existing, fixed-route, fixed-timetable bus services were not working for some respondents, even for some of those respondents who wanted Option A (where

Devonport would be served by bus services only).

- Bus-ferry connections at the Devonport Ferry Terminal were a particular concern – because routes 806 and 807 were operated using one bus, there was no “wiggle room” in the timetable, so drivers were unable to wait for late-running ferries without impacting on any subsequent trips.
- Ngataringa Rd area residents (including William Sanders Retirement Village residents) did not feel they were well served by the existing bus services as their nearest bus stop was up to 16-minutes’ walk away.
- The traditional buses used to operate these services were large (capacity for approximately 50 people), prompting some respondents to query their safety and whether they were appropriate for otherwise quiet and relatively narrow streets. Respondents were also concerned about the environmental impact of diesel buses.

Other respondents reported that traditional, fixed-route, fixed-timetable bus services had benefits:

- These specific services reliably ran to their published timetables, so customers always knew when the bus was coming and how long their wait would be.
- They liked knowing, or at least being able to find out ahead of time, the route their bus was going to take – this was particularly comforting for occasional bus users and parents of children taking the bus.
- The only piece of technology a customer needed to own before they could use one of these bus services was an AT HOP card.
- The traditional buses used to operate these services could transport approximately 50 people at the same time and could therefore be an efficient way of reducing congestion.
- Fixed-route, fixed-timetable bus services operate all over Auckland, so many visitors to Devonport already knew how to use them.

AT Local was considered by some respondents to be more flexible than traditional bus services:

- AT Local ran when a customer booked it (within its operating hours and subject to availability). Customers didn’t have to organise themselves around a timetable.
- The largest vehicle used to operate the service was a 10-seater van which was small enough to access even the narrowest street in Devonport.

Other respondents said there were aspects of the service that made AT Local difficult to use:

- The need to book made AT Local more complicated than traditional public transport, and customers had to plan ahead, instead of just heading to the bus stop.
- Because AT Local was an on-demand service, wait times and journey times could be longer if other customers wanted to use the service at the same time, resulting in the service being unpredictable.

Accessibility was an important consideration for respondents:

- Some considered AT Local to be more accessible than bus services because they didn’t have to walk as far to access the service. On average, customers only had to walk 150 metres to and from their AT Local pick-up and drop-off points. Some respondents said AT Local picked them up at home and dropped them directly outside their destination.
- Others said the bus services were more accessible. The walk to the bus stop might be longer, but it was always the same bus stop, and they were familiar with the route. Some bus stops had shelters and seats.
- Some respondents found booking AT Local to be complicated and time consuming, especially older people less confident with technology and people with learning disabilities.

The fairness of using public money to subsidise bus services and AT Local was questioned by different respondents:

- The need to have a smartphone, the AT Local app and a credit card to use AT Local was enough of a barrier (perceived or real) to make some respondents feel that AT Local was an

exclusive service designed for the younger, more wealthy members of the community. They therefore felt it was inappropriate for AT to subsidise the service using public money.

- Other respondents reported that it was unfair that their rates should be used to subsidise bus services that (they at least felt) did not serve their area. They wanted their rates to go towards the running of AT Local, as that service did serve their area.

Some respondents asked AT to spend public money in inefficient ways:

- Continue to run AT Local and the bus services at the same times so that people can choose how to travel. This degree of duplication is not an efficient use of ratepayers' money in the long term and outside of a trial.
- Implement Option B but continue to include Bayswater and Narrow Neck in the AT Local Service Zone. As explained above, in addition to being an inefficient use of ratepayers' money, this could result in inequities.

While some respondents reported that having to pay for AT Local using a credit card, and having to book the service using a smartphone, these were not major considerations for AT when deciding which option to implement. This is because at the time of consultation, AT had already identified alternatives (i.e. facilitate AT HOP card payments and call centre bookings) and was prepared to implement these changes if Option B was adopted.

Decision

Having taken all factors into account, including feedback from the public, AT decided to implement Option A. There five were main factors that contributed to this decision.

- 1) Addressing network deficiencies. Option A allowed AT to use an additional bus on routes 806 and 807 at peak times, enabling these services to meet every ferry sailing to and from Downtown. The peak ferry timetable has a sailing every 20 minutes. Option B would have only allowed these buses to meet every second ferry. Being able to operate an additional bus on these routes also allowed for "wriggle room" in the timetable further improving the reliability of bus – ferry connections.

Option A also allowed the introduction of an off-peak service, route 805, to serve the Ngataringa Rd area, including William Sanders Retirement Village. The Village had approximately 75 residents at the time of consultation; this will grow to around 740.

- 2) Stanley Bay. The Stanley Bay Ferry was to cease operations in December 2020. Option A would have given Stanley Bay an 806 bus every 20 minutes at peak and a connection with every Devonport Ferry.
- 3) Consistency and simplicity. Option A is a simpler arrangement; users of the 806 or 807 routes would have had different travel options depending on the time of day or day of the week if Option B had been adopted.

Some respondents said they needed regular, scheduled bus services throughout the day. Others said Option A was easier to understand. This is particularly important for new or occasional users, including visitors. People unaware of AT Local may find themselves waiting at bus stops for bus services that weren't operating at that time.

- 4) Capacity and cost. To work within the available budget, AT Local would have operated with two 10-seater vans. At busy times, this may have been insufficient to meet demand, leaving people with a longer wait time, potentially leading to missed ferry connections. The buses operating in Option A have a total capacity of over 50.

This project aimed to provide better public transport for the people of Devonport, and in turn result in increased use. Option A has capacity for patronage growth without the need for

additional buses and drivers. If Option B had been adopted, significant growth in patronage would have required additional vans and drivers, but it is not guaranteed that ongoing funding for this would have been available.

Option A is expected to require a lower per-passenger subsidy, at least for the next three years.

- 5) AT cannot improve Option B as requested. In table 4 it shows 52 respondents saying that AT Local should have extended operating hours and a further 51 asking for an operating area significantly larger than that proposed. Neither of these were possible given the budget and resources available without potentially increasing wait and journey times.

The responses received illustrated the complexity of designing public transport to meet the varied needs and preferences of increasingly diverse communities. On balance, taking into account the feedback from respondents, operational considerations and budget restraints, Option A would better meet the needs of the community as a whole.

Post-implementation

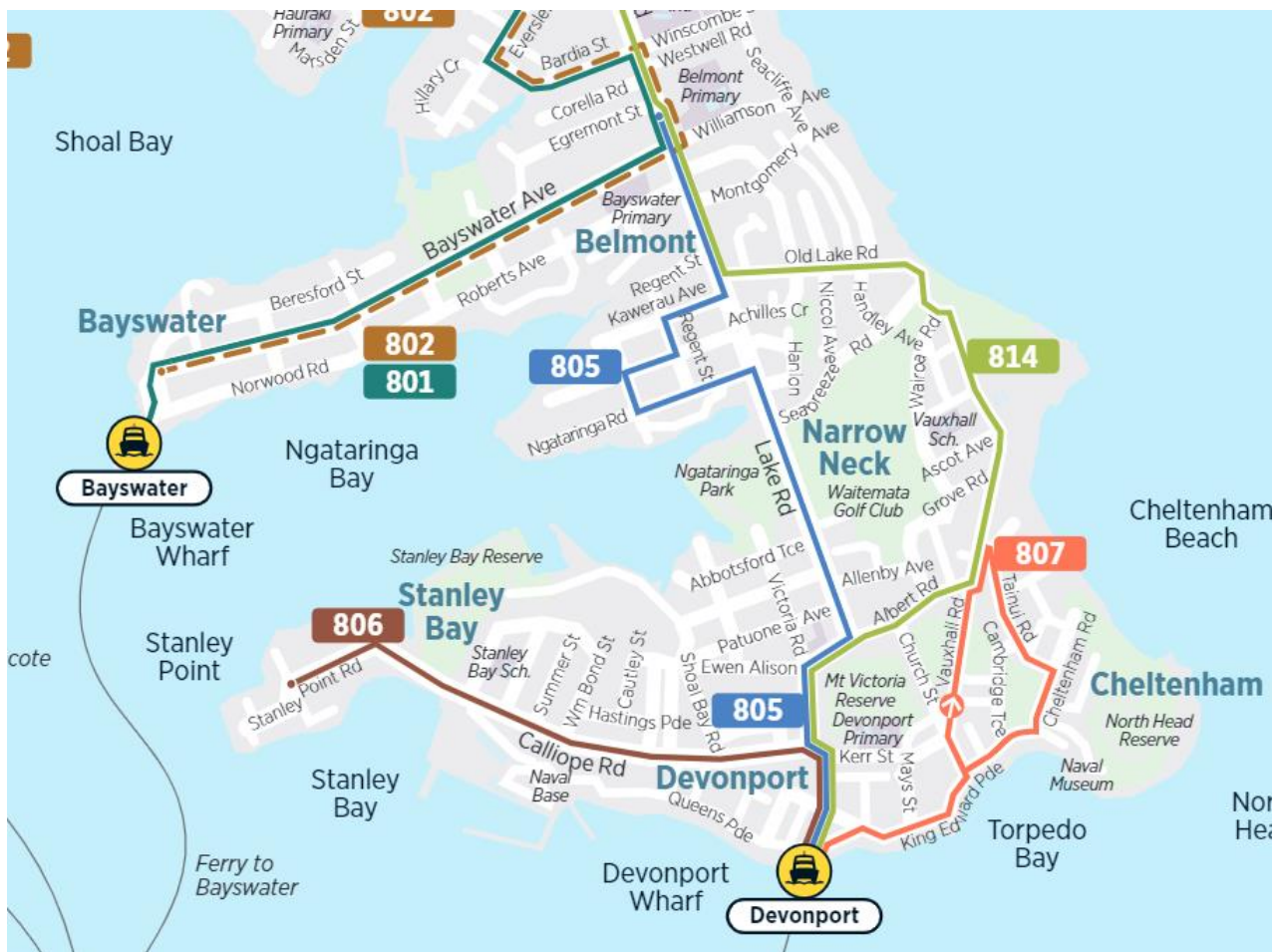


Figure 5 - Devonport Peninsula bus services as of March 2021

The changes for Devonport went live on 28 February 2021.

The new 805 route has been showing steady use and some growth since its implementation. There has been some public criticism that this route is only for the benefit of the William Sanders Retirement Village. However, customers have been boarding and alighting the service along the route.

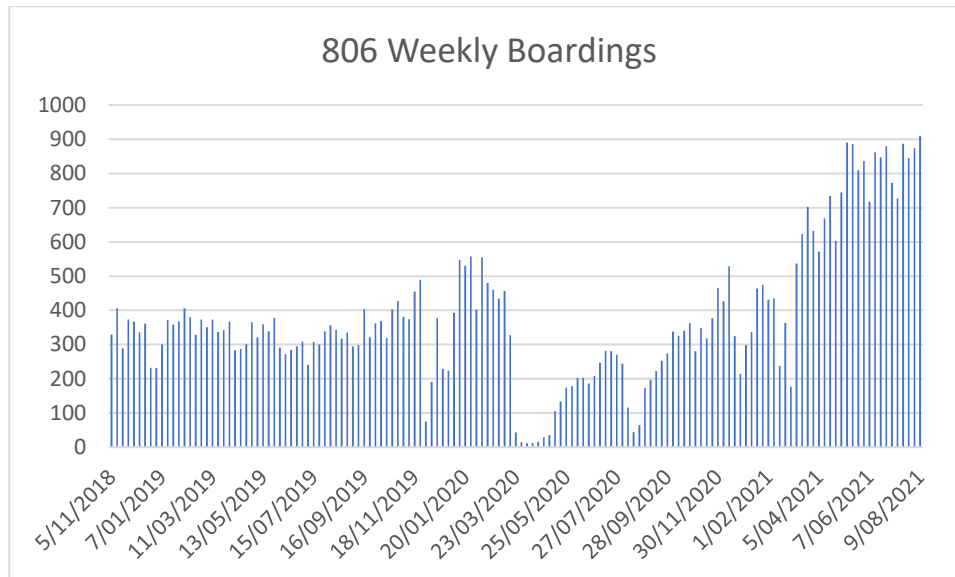


Figure 6 - Weekly boardings route 806 (5 November 2018 to 13 August 2021)

Route 806 has shown significant growth, exceeding pre-pandemic patronage levels. (Although increased patronage was expected with the termination of the Stanley Bay Ferry.)

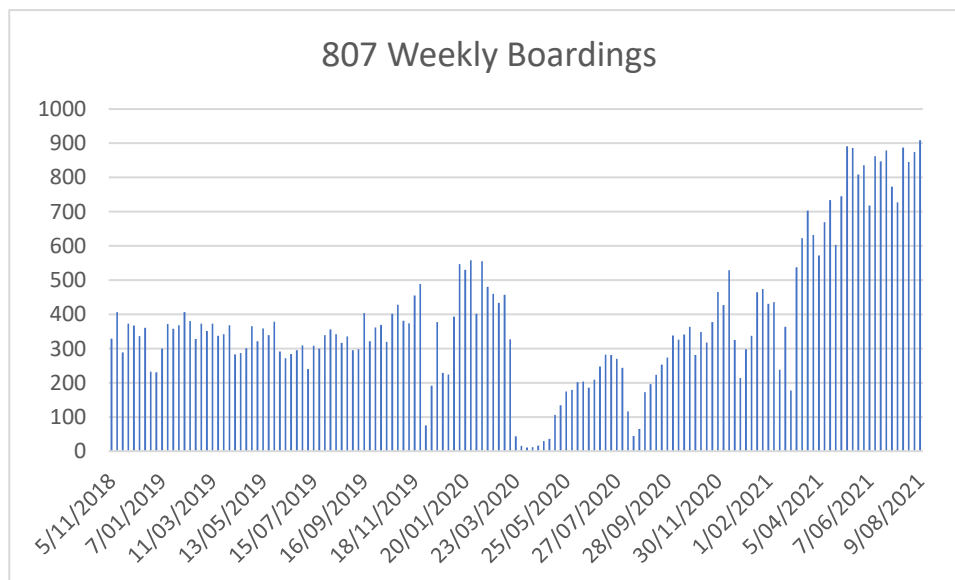


Figure 7 - Weekly boardings route 807 (5 November 2018 to 13 August 2021)

Unlike the 806 benefitting from the removal of the Stanley Bay Ferry, there are no such factors influencing 807 patronage; any increase will be largely due to the increased peak frequency, better ferry connections, later operating hours and the withdrawal of AT Local.

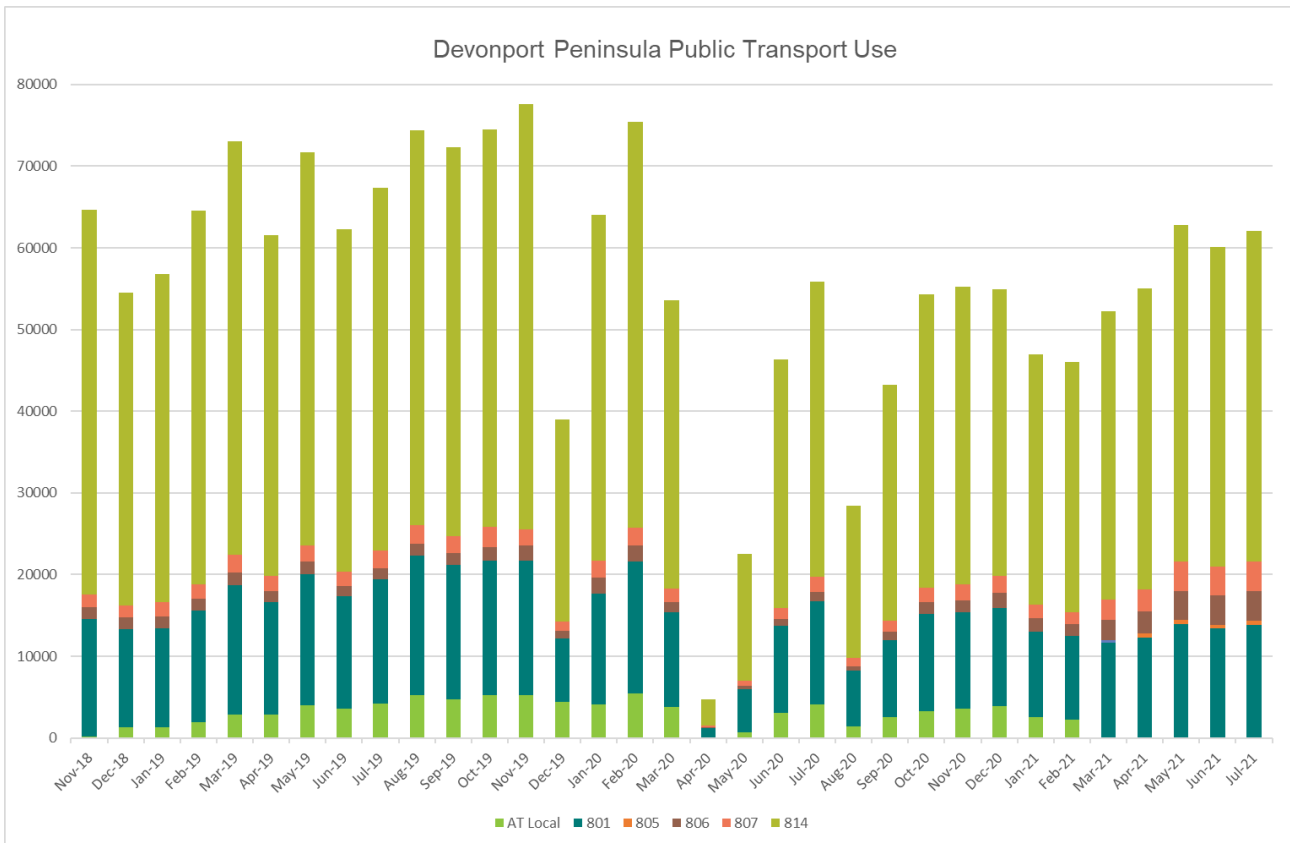


Figure 8 - Devonport Peninsula monthly public transport use (excl. ferry) November 2018 to July 2021

Although public transport use on the Devonport Peninsula is lower than before the pandemic, July 2021 was at about 92% of the July 2019 patronage. This is favourable compared with Auckland as a whole, which was sitting at around 75%.

Conclusion

Offering two very different options for public consultation was complex. Respondents generally had a preference, however many wanted AT’s options to be amended. In particular if AT had implemented Option B, many Option B supporters would have been unhappy with their public transport services.

AT had to take a number of factors into account when choosing an option to implement, however public feedback strongly influenced the final decision. Listening to the people, allowed the project team to gain an understanding of how people travelled, what their preferences were, what barriers they faced and how they thought their public transport options could be improved. We feel we have delivered the option which best suits the community as a whole. Although we don’t have information on any change in mode share, public transport patronage to date would suggest that the implementation of Option A has fulfilled its purpose – it meets the varied needs and preferences of an increasingly diverse community.