

Councillors Briefing Note

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Service:

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Consultation on proposed changes to the Connect2 Wiltshire Hopper service to the Royal United Hospital

Purpose of this briefing note

To inform members about a consultation concerning the future of the Connect2 Wiltshire Hopper bus service to the Royal United Hospital in Bath.

We are issuing this members briefing so that we can go out to consultation on the service without creating unnecessary fear or upset for those who rely on the Hopper service.

The Hopper currently provides a service to and from the hospital every hour on Monday to Fridays between 0720 and 1730, from a wide area of western Wiltshire including Warminster, Westbury, Trowbridge, Melksham, Corsham and Bradford on Avon. It will pick up passengers on request from anywhere within the defined operating area, with bookings required to be made by at least 10am the day before travel.

Why are changes being proposed?

Wiltshire Council recognises that the Hopper plays an important role in helping people to get to outpatients appointments, to work, and for hospital visiting. The service was set up by the council in 2001 jointly funded by Wiltshire Council, the NHS and the government. When funding from the government and the NHS ceased a few years later, Wiltshire Council continued to fund the service.

Although the Hopper service is popular, it is also very expensive to provide and the council spends around £150,000 a year supporting it. With nearly 15,000 passenger journeys a year being made, the support per passenger trip works out at over £10. This is much higher than the £3.50 per trip that is the council's usual maximum, and which is published in the guidelines for supported bus service funding in the Local Transport Plan.

Earlier this year the council proposed that it would enter into discussions with the Clinical Care Group (CCG), the RUH and GWH, to discuss financial support to maintain the service. As a result of these discussions, money from the Better Care Fund has been set aside to provide a service until the end of the current financial

year (31 March 2016), and a case is being prepared to seek further funding to keep the service running beyond this date. This may well require a reduction in the annual subsidy to make it more affordable and we have to consult on this reduced service, and the ceasing of the service should our current talks about next year's funding fail.

What is being proposed?

We are therefore consulting on two scenarios;

1. Changes to the service that would reduce the subsidy required, to be implemented early in 2016. These would include a reduced frequency of service and an increase in the fares charged.
2. Complete withdrawal of the service, which may be a possible outcome if funding cannot be secured to keep the service running beyond March 2016.

Further details of both of these scenarios are as follows;

Scenario 1 – changes to the service to reduce the subsidy required.

In order to make the service more affordable, it is proposed that;

- a) There would be fewer journeys to and from the hospital each day. The proposed timetable would be as follows (running daily Monday to Friday);
Arrivals at RUH; 0720, 0820, 0920, 1020, 1220, 1320, 1520, 1720
Departs from RUH; 0830, 0930, 1030, 1230, 1330, 1530, 1630, 1730
There would be no change in the area covered by the service or to the arrangements for booking a journey.
- b) All fares would be increased by around 50%. For example, the new fare from Trowbridge, Bradford or Melksham would be £12.60 single / £16.20 return, and the flat fare for holders of a Wiltshire concessionary bus pass would be £9.75 single / £12.00 return.

It is anticipated that the combined effect of these proposed changes would be to reduce the annual subsidy required from around £150,000 to around £90,000. The changes would be introduced in February 2016.

Scenario 2 – complete withdrawal of the service.

If funding cannot be secured for the 2016/17 financial year and beyond, the service could be completely withdrawn. Due to the need to give notice, this would not be before May 2016. Alternative means of transport are available to the hospital;

- There are frequent bus services from Bath city centre, and there is also a Park & Ride service to RUH from Odd Down.
- Some people who have a medical need for transport may be eligible for the NHS-funded non-emergency Patient Transport Service (ambulance or smaller vehicles);
- People who are not eligible for non-emergency patient transport and cannot make the journey by public transport can ask their local Link or community transport scheme for help
- For patients on low income who qualify for it, the Healthcare Travel Costs scheme will refund the costs of travel to and from hospital

Further details of the transport that is available to the hospital can be found on the following web page; http://www.ruh.nhs.uk/finding/index.asp?menu_id=1

The consultation

The consultation document is available on the council's website (www.wiltshire.gov.uk/wiltshire-hopper-survey) and consists of an information sheet, a questionnaire for organisations to complete, and a separate questionnaire for individuals (users or potential users of the service). Copies of this questionnaire will also be handed out on the bus. In the consultation, we are asking people to tell us their views about both of the scenarios described above, and what impact they would have on their journey to hospital, or on their organisation's activities or the people they represent. The consultation will close on 27 November. No decision will be made until the responses to the consultation have been considered, the impacts assessed and options investigated.