

Wiltshire Council

Environment Select Committee

19 September 2023

Public Transport Review and Passenger Transport Service Update and Future Developments

Executive summary

This report provides an update to the Environment Select Committee on progress with public transport projects, noting their positive impacts, highlighting risks and mitigating actions. It also details progress on the public transport network review reflecting passengers changing travel habits and increasing uncertainty in the market, including in relation to costs and driver availability.

Proposal

That the Committee:

- (i) Notes the update on public transport in Wiltshire including the progress being made on the review of the public transport policy.

Reason for proposal

Updated as requested by the Committee.

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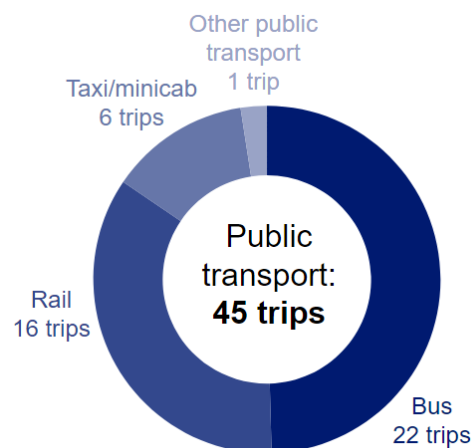
Purpose of report

This report provides an update on public transport and also, the public transport network review which is currently being progressed.

Background

1. The Current State of the Bus Market

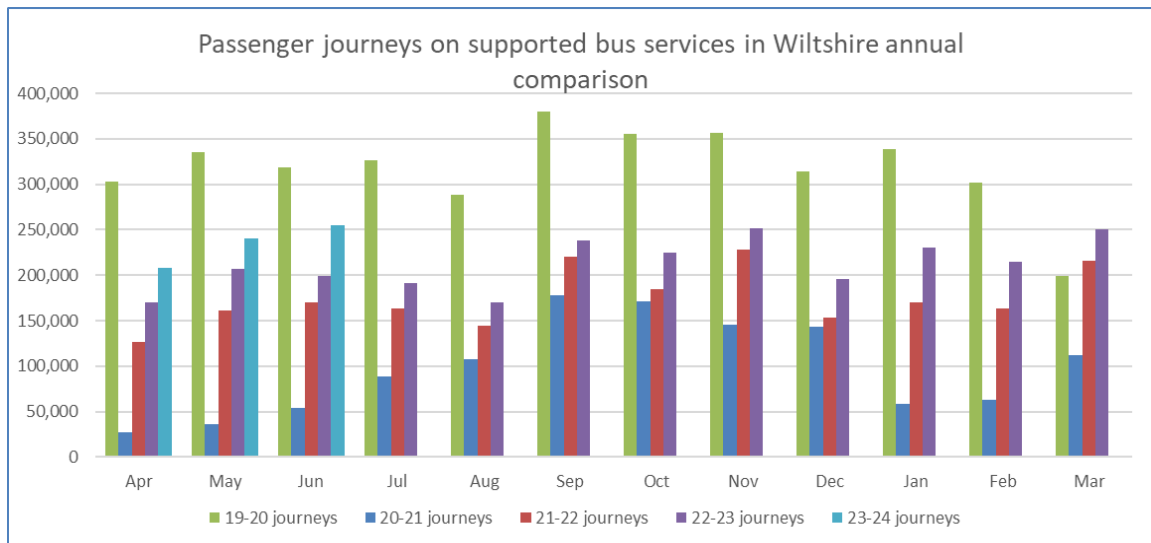
- 1.1 Buses play a significant role in public transport, with far more passenger trips taken by bus than rail, despite the large subsidies which rail receives.



Average number of trips made per person, England, 2020 [Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-statistics-great-britain-2021)

- 1.2 The UK Bus Market is still recovering from the effects of the pandemic, when passenger numbers and services were reduced to minimum levels through the various lockdowns.
- 1.3 Passenger confidence has returned, but people's reasons to travel have altered. The increase in homeworking has reduced the commuting market, and now means that parents are more often available to do the "school run" which may previously have been made by bus.
- 1.4 Similarly, the decline in the high street has reduced the attractiveness of it to shoppers. Whereas pre-Covid someone might travel to town twice a week to include shopping, banking, a library visit, and a visit to a coffee shop / café with fewer shops, banks and cafes open, one visit a week is now more common.

- 1.5 However, weekend leisure travel has seen positive growth and, on some routes, now exceeds pre-Covid levels. This is especially true when there are events and sports fixtures on, but numbers are also strong on other weekends.



- 1.6 Through a series of national and local initiatives the bus is gaining acceptance in a wider segment of the market than before. Whilst existing passengers haven't returned to their previous usage levels, the bus is attracting new passengers.

2. Market Risks

- 2.1 The bus industry continues to struggle for staff in a competitive employment market, although the situation is better than in recent years.
- 2.2 However, recruiting and retaining staff has increased costs as higher wage rates have had to be offered. This, coupled with higher fuel costs, increased prices for spare parts (and very long lead times for some items leading to vehicles being off the road) when set against reduced passenger income has caused our operators significant inflation costs and operating difficulties.
- 2.3 We have seen a number of contracts returned early as operational costs exceed income. These have then been re-procured, but at significantly higher rates, often as high as 45% Unlike many areas though our commercial network remains stable with no de-registrations.

Current Progress

3. Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)

- 3.1 Our Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) is still a live document, although the Department for Transport (DfT) have indicated that they don't require an annual update this autumn.
- 3.2 The DfT considered the BSIP to be our "shop window" when considering grant support should further funding come available.

4. Enhanced Partnership (EP)

- 4.1 Our EP, formed under our BSIP is meeting regularly with our bus operators and other stake holders such as Great Western Railway. These are useful meetings which inform us of the bigger picture and allow operators to share views with us and each other.
- 4.2 The EP Board is also meeting regularly and having good discussions leading to important decisions, such as SuperBus (see section below).
- 4.3 It seems that we are one of the few non-BSIP funded local authorities to already have an EP and EP Board, both of which DfT are making a condition of further grant funding.

5. Bus Recovery Grant

- 5.1 The Government extended the Bus Recovery Grant from 20 February 2023 for a further 3 months at a cost of up to £80 million to continue supporting bus services until 30 June 2023.

6. Bus £2 Fare Cap

As part of the wider “Help for Household” policy the Government has extended the £2 fare cap for single fares through to 31 October 2023, with a higher cap of £2.50 cap from then until 30 November 2024. All bus companies which operate in Wiltshire are participating in the scheme. As well as helping passengers, this scheme is also helping bus operators maintain income in the post-Covid market to allow them to keep bus services running.

7. BSIP+ Funding

- 7.1 As well as extending the Bus Fare Cap funding, the Government has instigated a two-year BSIP+ grant to help protect and enhance bus services. Wiltshire has been granted £2.2m for the current and 24/25 financial year.
- 7.2 Despite financial pressures (fuel, wages, spare parts) on our local bus companies, and reduced patronage compared to pre-Covid levels, bus services in Wiltshire are recovering much better than in many areas. The terms of the BSIP+ grant allow it to be used to retain services which would otherwise be lost, or to innovate and expand services. Through the hard work of our operators, we are in a position where we expect to use the funding to build the overall bus market and improve the long-term financial sustainability of the network.
- 7.3 We are currently working with our bus operators to finalise how this money will be spent.
- 7.4 One of the conditions of BSIP+ funding is that the funding will only be made available if the local authority continues to maintain its current spending on public transport for the current and following financial year.

8. Pewsey Vale Rural Mobility Fund Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) Project

8.1 The first phase of the project went live on 31 July with a formal launch on 3 August. Ridership so far has been good with over 1,600 downloads of the booking app and just over 1,700 passenger trips carried out in the first month of service (August 23). Two further phases will see the network expand progressively into the Marlborough & Great Bedwyn area on 4 September and 30 October.

9. UKSPF Grant Funding

9.1 Wiltshire Council bid to the UKSPF funding (Levelling up – UK Shared Prosperity Fund) and were allocated £1.084m by DEFRA to improve rural mobility in Wiltshire and support people to access services, employment and education opportunities by improving personal transport options. Most of the funding is capital with a small amount of revenue.

9.2 The business case to spend this grant allocation is being drawn up, with its likely intention being to procure low-floor, accessible minibuses to expand DDRT, including conversion of timetabled fixed route buses where they no longer meet the needs of the market in the most effective way.

10. Promoting Bus Travel

10.1 Working closely with our Communications Team we have developed a marketing plan to raise awareness of bus travel and encouraging local people to use the bus to support not only local bus routes, but also the Wiltshire economy.

10.2 The style of advert initially developed to promote the £2 Fare Cap has been broadened, to more general awareness of the bus. These graphics have been used on social media and the weekly resident's newsletter.

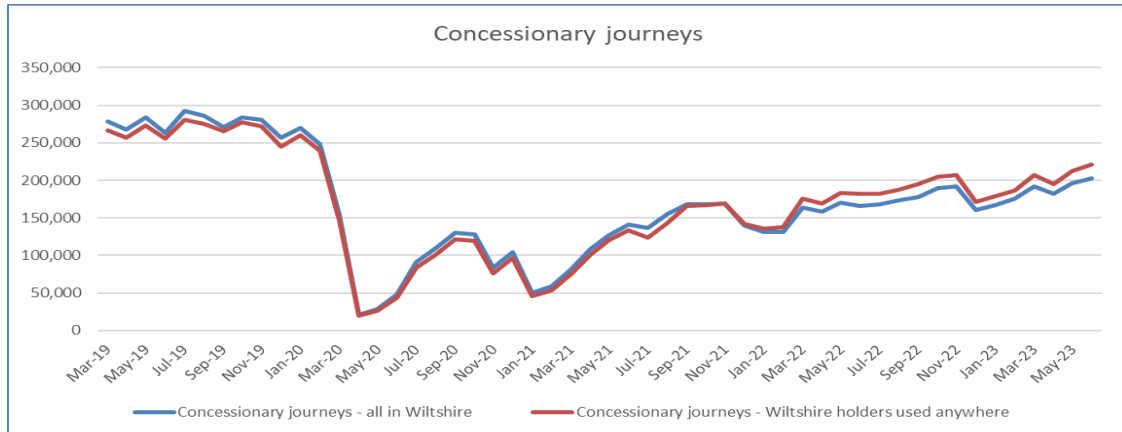


A very similar style of graphic has since been devised by the Government to promote concessionary bus pass use. (see below).

11. English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS)

11.1 The usage of English National Concessionary Travel Scheme passes remains significantly below pre-Covid levels. Between 1st April 2023 and 30th June 2023

we lifted the time restrictions on Concessionary Pass use in an attempt to stimulate the market.



11.2 A report by Transport Focus [Getting free pass holders back on buses](#) reviewed the level of ENCTS usage and considered reasons why pass holders have not returned to using buses. There was no main reason, but numerous causes which, combined, have led to the fall in Wiltshire to around 80% of pre-Covid levels. However, some services have seen usage figures surpass pre covid levels.

11.3 Government has introduced a publicity campaign to encourage pass holders to return to using the bus, and we have worked with our Communications Team to add local branding to the nationally produced resources to promote the use of the ENCTS scheme through our social media channels and the weekly residents' newsletter.



Sample of HM Government / Wiltshire ENCTS promotion

11.4 The income generated by acceptance of ENCTS passes is important to our bus operators, and with the continued reduced levels of usage we will use some of our BSIP+ funding to increase our reimbursement levels to 90% of pre covid levels, or actual, where this is exceeded.

12. Partnership Working With Great Western Railway

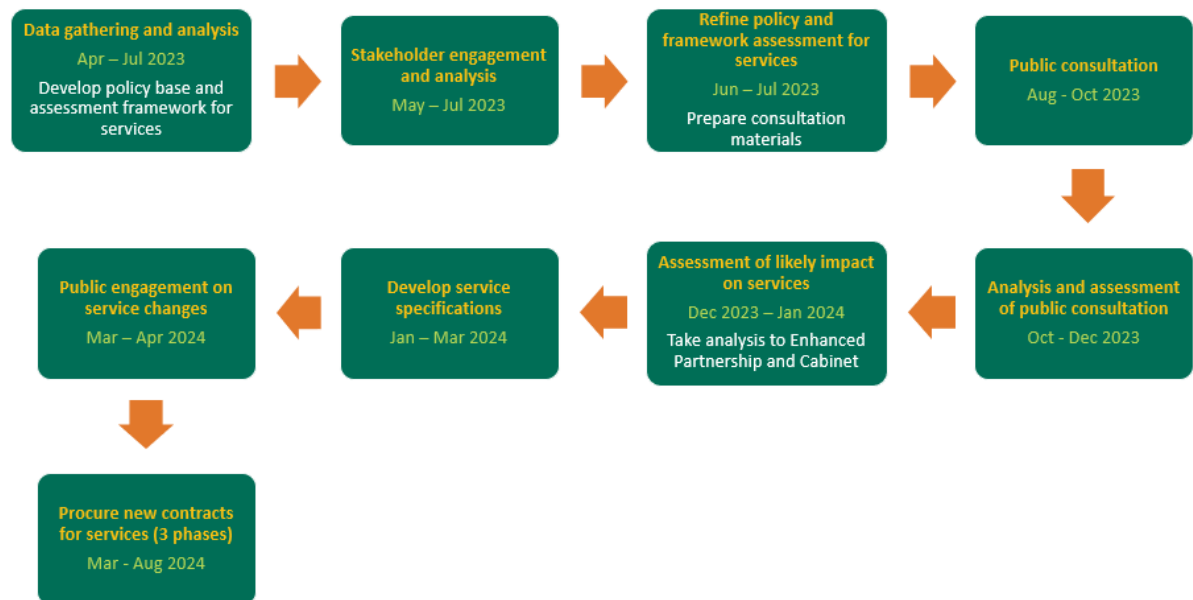
12.1 We have built a strong productive partnership with Great Western Railway (GWR), who have sponsored a number of initiatives.

12.2 We have projects to improve way-finding signage between the station and the bus stops in Bradford-on-Avon, Pewsey, Melksham, Westbury and Warminster, and installed a new bus shelter near Melksham station.

- 12.3 The GWR funded design study for improvements to bus facilities at Bedwyn station last year has been followed up by a successful application to this year's Customer and Community Improvement Fund where we were awarded £44,000 to enable the works. This will complement the new Wiltshire Connect Digital Demand Responsive Transport service serving the Bedwyn area.
- 12.4 Jointly, we have applied Railink branding to the Faresaver bus which operates the Chippenham to Castle Combe service (including a full rear pictorial advertisement) and included Railink branding on our new Wiltshire Connect buses. We are looking for further opportunities to promote bus / rail links.
13. SuperBus Network
- 13.1 As outlined in our Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) we are developing a network of higher quality, higher frequency, bus routes incrementally across Wiltshire.
- 13.2 Using Government capacity we have engaged Atkins to advise on what SuperBus could look like and build on experience elsewhere. This capital bid also allows us to carry out detailed design work on the initial SuperBus route.
- 13.3 Atkins considered all the proposed SuperBus Routes listed in the BSIP, and weighted them against a number of criteria, to produce a short-list of routes. The EP Board then selected the first route for development, which is service 55 from Chippenham to Swindon via Calne, Lyneham and Royal Wootton Bassett. Operated by Stagecoach West, this route has seen significant growth over the past 15 years, and all parties feel that there is potential for further development.
- 13.4 Once the infrastructure scheme for the 55 has been developed a capital bid will be submitted in order to implement the recommendations.
14. Local Transport Plan 4
- 14.1 As work begins on Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4) we will be ensuring that it reflects the evolving and developing role of the bus, along with the new legislative environment.
- 14.2 The revised Public Transport Policy will form an Appendix to LTP4
15. Rural Zero Emission Bus Taskforce
Wiltshire Council is represented on this taskforce, which is organised by the Confederation of Passenger Transport, as rural bus operation poses specific problems for the transition to zero emission buses. The taskforce includes prominent bus industry figures from a number of progressive companies. Wiltshire is the only local authority represented, but the group very much welcomes the insight we can bring to the taskforce's work.

Public Transport Policy and Bus Network Review

16. We are undertaking a major piece of work to review our Public Transport Policy which in turn will inform a Bus Network Review. We are being assisted in this work by specialist consultants ITP.
- 16.1 The current Policy is part of the current Local Transport Plan and no longer represents fully the travelling habits of the passenger. The bus market has been evolving for decades as people's travel habits have changed. Wiltshire has maintained its bus network, both commercial and supported with some routes now running at the highest frequency they ever have.
- 16.2 The Pandemic sped up many of the changes which were gradually happening in the local travel market, and we need to review our policy to ensure it's validity for now and the future.. The supply side of the bus network has also changed considerably with the decline of the small independent company and the growth of the national groups. Against that however a significant independent supplier has matured in the north of the county having won long term competitive battels on several major inter-urban routes.
- 16.3 There are a number of stages to the process:
- Data gathering – our current supported network, and that of the commercial operators measured in terms of passenger usage, types of places served (employers, colleges, rail stations etc), population statistics (deprivation, car ownership etc) and subsidy cost.
 - Create a model which, based on current policy, produces a result which replicates our current supported level of service.
 - Stake Holder Engagement – we received 163 responses to our engagement questionnaire with local businesses, education establishments and similar stake holders.
 - Refine policy and framework assessment for services to enable us to focus on questions for the public consultation
 - Public consultation – this is currently open and runs until mid-October 2023
- 16.4 We will then proceed to:
- Analysis and assessment of public consultation responses Oct – Dec 2023
 - Assessment of likely impact on services Take analysis to Enhanced Partnership and Cabinet Dec 2023 – Jan 2024
 - Develop service specifications Jan – Mar 2024
 - Public engagement on service changes Jan – Mar 2024
 - Procure new contracts for services (3 phases) Mar – Aug 2024



Environmental impact

17. Wiltshire Council has declared a climate emergency and it will be imperative for the bus service to reflect the objectives of the Council's new climate strategy. Public transport, along with cycling and walking, plays a pivotal role in the reduction of carbon emissions through reduced car use and in turn improved air quality.

Equality and diversity impact

18. The following protected characteristics have been identified in an Equality Evidence Analysis:
- Age
 - Disability
 - Low Incomes
 - Rurality
 - People with no access to private transport
 - Military status
 - Pregnancy and Maternity
 - Race
 - Religion and Belief
 - Sex
 - Shift / Part-time workers
 - Carers
19. The first six characteristics are likely to be impacted greater than the rest and the following is a short summary for each of these six protected characteristics:
- **Age** - Younger and older people are more reliant on bus services and less likely to have access to a car. Also, fewer young people now hold driving licences and we live in an increasingly 'ageing society'. Younger people need affordable bus services to enable them to take up opportunities in education and work, and to increase their independence. Research has shown that many older people place particular value on 'local' and 'daytime' travel and

predominantly travel for shopping, to access key services (notably healthcare) or to visit family and friends. Both groups also benefit from the health benefits of using public transport through encouraging outside activity and mobility.

- *Disability* - People with disabilities are less likely to drive and therefore could become marginalized from the wider community and more reliant on support services without independent travel options, such as supported bus services to provide them access to employment opportunities and essential services or, to visit friends and family. Disabled people are also likely to need more trips to GPs and hospitals for regular medical appointments.
- *Low incomes* - People on low incomes are particularly reliant upon local public transport services and a lack of available and adequate services can be a significant barrier to accessing employment opportunities and essential services. Public transport can also provide health benefits (as people walk more and drive less) which can be particularly beneficial for people from socio-economically deprived areas which typically have lower levels of health.
- *Rurality* - In rural areas, settlements are dispersed, and homes, jobs and services are scattered – access to everyday opportunities and services can therefore be challenging. Rural bus services can help combat social exclusion by enabling non-drivers to access shops, education, training, and essential services. They are also important for the local economy; small businesses in rural areas need good accessibility for their employees and rural buses can encourage visitors and tourists.
- *People with no access to private transport* - are particularly reliant upon local public transport services and a lack of available and adequate bus services can be a significant barrier to accessing employment opportunities and essential services.
- *Military Status* - Military personnel and their families are often located in camps in (semi) rural locations. Therefore, withdrawn or reduced supported bus services will reduce travel options to access essential services or visit friends and family. There is also an increased risk of social isolation.

Risk assessment

20. Not applicable.

Financial implications

21. Inflation against public transport contracts continues to be a factor. Some retender costs on like for like contracts have been around 45% higher. We are able to use BSIP + funding to cover the increase in inflationary costs, but this is of course not sustainable in the long term and reflects the need for a revised public transport policy to ensure funding is provided in the right areas for the right service.

Legal implications

22. Not applicable.

Options considered

23. Not applicable.

Conclusion

24. Members are invited to review this information report and note the findings made.

Background papers

The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

None

Appendices

None

