

Wiltshire Council

Environment Select Committee

11 January 2024

Public Transport Review

Executive summary

This report provides an update on the outcomes of the public consultation that took place between October and November 2023 on the draft revised public transport policy. The consultation focused specifically on Wiltshire's bus policy and the supported bus network.

Local Transport Plan (4) is currently in development and once finalised, this policy will also be incorporated into the LTP4 Public Transport Strategy. As such, both the challenges and objectives being developed as part of the LTP4 are reflected in this policy document, particularly with regard to future-proofing transport, rurality, decarbonisation, economic growth and tackling social inequalities.

The current bus policy no longer reflects the travel patterns of passengers which have changed significantly over recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, there is a need to ensure that the bus policy is helping to support the decarbonisation agenda whilst also making sure that the bus market in Wiltshire is adapting to new transport technologies available.

The analysis of the consultation responses has shown that there is broad support for the policies and as such, it is felt there is no need to amend any of them. The next step is to therefore begin work, to develop implementation plans for the bus network, which reflect the new policy.

Proposal

That the Committee:

- (i) Notes the progress being made on the Bus Network review.

Reason for proposal

Information update report, as requested by the Committee.

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Purpose of report

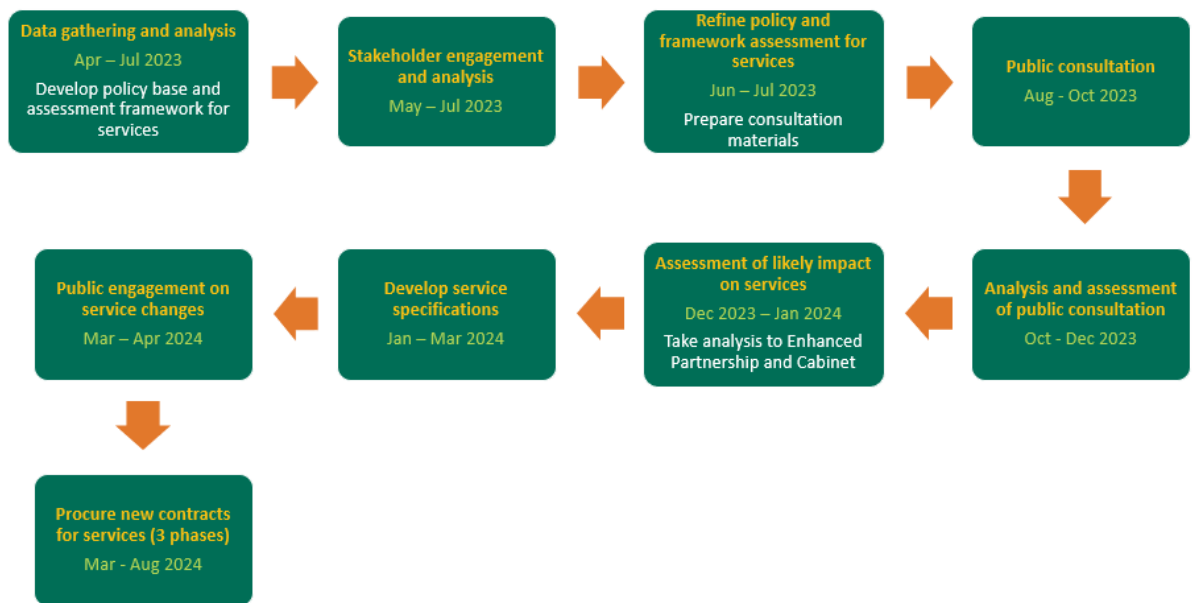
The report provides an update on the draft revised public transport policy following the public consultation that has recently been carried out.

Background

Public Transport Policy and Bus Network Review

1. Wiltshire Council are working in partnership with consultants Integrated Transport Planning (ITP) to undertake an evidence-based review of Wiltshire's bus policy and its supported bus network. The aim is to have a new policy and network for implementation from April 2024 and a framework within which evidence-led decisions can be made regarding investment in the bus network.
 - 1.1 The new policy will seek to ensure we are providing value for money to the public purse whilst delivering on our Business Plan priorities and working towards the objectives of the National Bus Strategy. It will also seek to achieve objectives set out in our Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme and Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) with the key aim being to increase bus patronage. The policy will also be incorporated into Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4) when that is produced.
 - 1.2 The current policy no longer fully represents the travelling habits of passengers. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how people travel, and we need to review our policy to ensure it is valid for the LTP4 period 2026 – 2038.
 - 1.3 Bus usage at both the national and local level has struggled to return to pre-covid levels and only in some limited areas of the country is bus patronage returning to levels seen before the pandemic.
 - 1.4 The Department for Transport have been supporting the bus market since the pandemic with initiatives such as the £2 single fare and more recently BSIP+ funding given to many Local Transport Authorities (LTAs), intended to restimulate the market by funding improvements in the provision of public transport.
 - 1.5 A nationwide shortage of bus drivers has been a contributing factor to declining bus availability and therefore usage, as many bus services have had to be cancelled over the past 2 to 3 years. This has caused considerable uncertainty for bus users and has further reduced passenger numbers.

- 1.6 Contract prices for supported local bus services have also increased significantly since 2021, as the costs of operation, have risen. This has been exacerbated by the national shortage of bus drivers with operators having to raise wages to attract more drivers to the bus sector. The reduction in the amount of travel by bus and associated loss of fare income has caused financial difficulties for bus operators, while the cost to the council for tendered services has increased significantly.
- 1.7 The review of the Public Transport Policy was conducted in a number of stages which are as follows and shown here as **Figure 1**:



- Data gathering – passenger usage, types of places served (employers, colleges, rail stations etc), population statistics (deprivation, car ownership etc) and subsidy cost.
- Creation of a model/assessment tool with the data above which helps to prioritise where to invest in supported bus services.
- Stakeholder engagement on a revised policy – we received 163 responses to our engagement survey in June 2023.
- Refinement of the policy and framework assessment for services to enable us to focus on questions for the public consultation
- Public consultation – ran for six weeks to 10 November. We received 1,565 responses, the majority online.
- Analysis and assessment of public consultation responses Oct – Dec 2023.

1.8 The outcome of the public consultation analysis and assessment is set out in the following section. In summary, this shows that there is broad support for the policies set out. As such, the next steps are:

- To assess the likely impact of the new policies on service provision throughout the county

- Take consultation analysis and our recommendations to Enhanced Partnership and Cabinet – Jan and Feb 2024
- Develop service specifications Jan – Mar 2024
- Public engagement on service changes Feb – April 2024
- Procure new contracts for services (3 phases) Mar – Aug 2024

Stakeholder Consultation Results

2. A stakeholder consultation was undertaken prior to the public consultation to help define the policies that should be taken forward. 163 responses were received from a wide range of stakeholders. The results showed that there was universal recognition of the importance of the bus (now and in 10 years) and 96% of respondents agreed that WC should continue support for buses. 69% also felt the levels of financial support should increase.
- 2.1 In terms of policy priorities for supported bus services, it was felt that providing travel opportunities for those with no alternative means of transport was crucial as well as being able to offer a sustainable mode of transport that is better for the environment. In terms of bus policy priorities overall, stakeholders felt that the key objectives of providing bus services should be to provide transport for those with no alternative available, to enable access to key services such as education, employment and healthcare services and to tackle congestion.

Public consultation results

3. **Figure 2** Represents a summary of the policies that the public were asked to consider.

Policies	
P01 The Council will encourage public transport operators to meet the access needs of the county on a commercial basis	P07 - The Council will work to improve interchange between transport modes (such as rail and bus) to increase travel by public transport
P02 The Council will encourage residents and visitors to use public transport whenever possible	P08 – The Council will encourage the use of low and zero emission vehicles on commercial public transport services (and move towards low emission vehicles on supported services) to improve air quality across the county

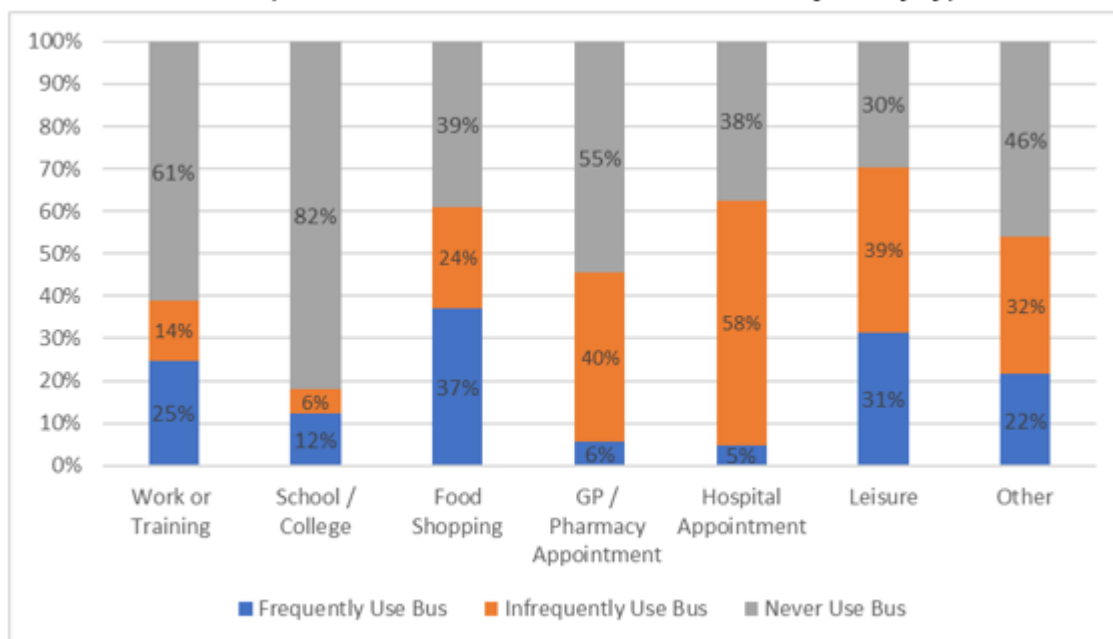
<p>P03 The Council will work to ensure that long-term, cost-effective access by public transport is planned in to new developments and financial contributions are secured from developers to support that provision</p>	<p>P09 The Council will promote concessionary travel to encourage elderly and disabled customers to access local facilities and services by bus</p> <p>P10 Where residents are not able to access public transport services, the Council will champion independent living among residents by encouraging use of community transport</p>
<p>P04 – The Council will consider the role of demand responsive transport services, financially supporting and promoting them as appropriate to complement mainline public transport services</p>	<p>P11 The Council will prioritise support for public transport which provides access to employment and training, education, essential shopping and healthcare</p>
<p>P05 –The Council will work with bus operators to ensure that public transport information is up to date, clear and accurate, and available via a wide range of printed and digital sources, including the Council’s sustainable travel website www.connectingwiltshire.co.uk</p>	<p>P12 The Council will ensure that the public transport it supports offers value for money for the county’s taxpayers</p>
<p>P06 – The Council will explore options for implementing high frequency, high quality bus services on key corridors in the county</p>	<p>P13 The Council will ensure that cross-boundary services form an important element of the county’s public transport network</p>

- 3.1 A public consultation survey ran for 6 weeks from September until the end of October 2023. 1565 responses were received; people mainly responded online although approximately 100 respondents returned a hard copy of the questionnaire.
- 3.2 87% of respondents were Wiltshire residents and included town/parish councillors whilst others were mainly visitors or. 64% of respondents were regular bus users while 36% used a bus less than once a week.
- 3.3 69% of respondents thought the Council should increase the amount spent on buses and 23% thought the amount should stay the same. Other key results included:
- 48% of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with bus services in Wiltshire whilst 33% gave a neutral response, with the remaining proportion providing a negative response.
 - Respondents were asked how easy they would find it to complete particular journeys if they did not have access to any bus services. The journeys which respondents would find ‘not at all easy’ to make were hospital appointments and school / college journeys. ‘Other’ journeys included a

combination of the journey types listed, as well as visiting friends and travelling to other towns.

- Respondents were asked how often they use a bus for a range of purposes (**Figure 3**). 37% of respondents frequently used the bus to go food shopping, while 31% frequently used the bus to make leisure journeys and 25% frequently used the bus to access work or training.

Figure 3: How often respondents use the bus for different journeys

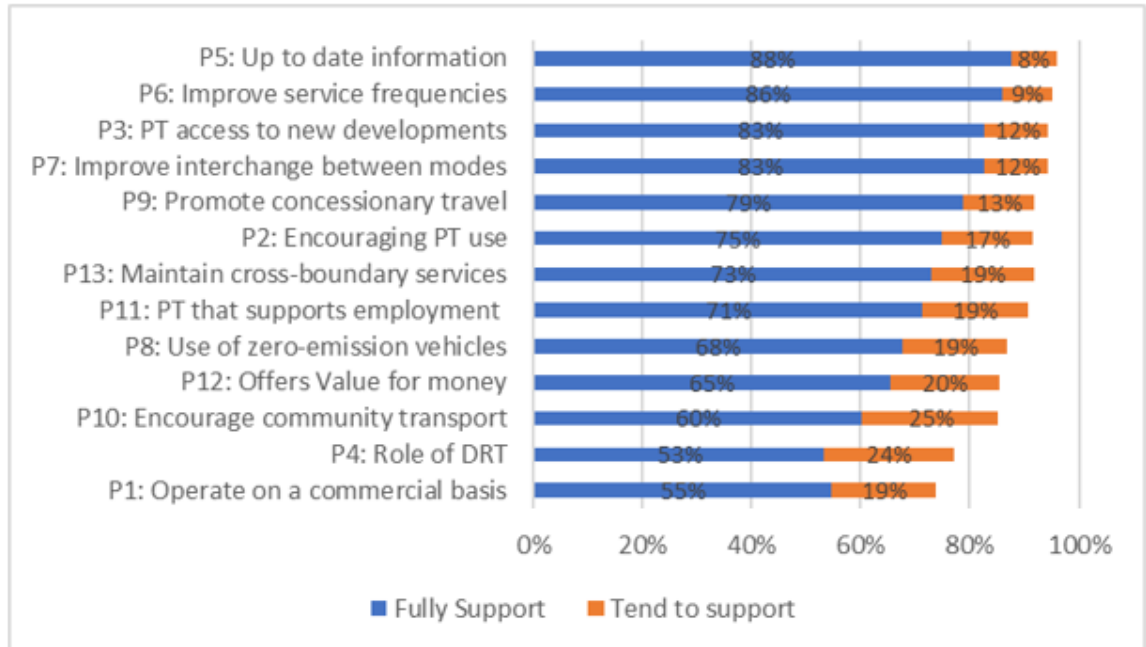


3.4 There was broad support for the majority of policies proposed, as shown in **Figure 2**. The policies are set out in full in **paragraph 6 of Appendix 1**. Respondents were asked to explain their reasoning for not supporting any particular policies. The policies with the least support were:

- Policy one - 'The Council will encourage public transport operators to meet the access needs of the county on a commercial basis' - respondents were concerned about the focus on commercial needs and value for money rather than necessity of service or any associated social benefits.
- Policy four – 'The Council will consider the role of demand responsive transport services*, financially supporting and promoting them as appropriate to complement mainline public transport services' - as they felt DRT offered poor value for money, had failed in other areas, and was not a viable alternative to car travel.
- Policy 10 – 'Where residents are not able to access public transport services the Council will champion independent living among residents by encouraging use of community transport'. It was felt that community

transport could not necessarily meet the needs of many residents, with a preference for regular, scheduled public transport services.

Figure 4: Policy support



- 3.5 Just over 50% of respondents agreed that the Public Transport Policy will provide an efficient bus network that meets user needs for **priority journeys**, although only 15% strongly agreed with this. ‘Priority journeys’ were defined as those for employment and training, education, essential shopping and healthcare. The most popular reasons amongst respondents who agreed were that public transport is essential to those without alternative means of travel; and that it is important to encourage public transport use as an alternative to car travel. Among those who disagreed, the most popular reasons were that they were not convinced the policy would be delivered/be successful based on the state of current bus services; they felt there was a need for a higher frequency of services, as well as better coverage across the whole county; and they felt services need to stop being terminated.
- 3.6 Almost half of respondents (48%) considered that young people should be eligible for cheaper travel up to the age of 18, while 17% of respondents considered travel should be cheaper up to the age of 16. With regard to the level of discount that should be applied to young people’s fares, the majority of respondents (60%) considered it should be half the adult fare.
- 3.7 Respondents were asked what else the Council could do to provide value for money public transport services. The most popular response was to improve service frequencies. There was also support for:
- continuing the current £2 single fare (42 respondents)
 - improving service coverage across the county (39 respondents)
 - improving service reliability (38 respondents)

- provision of real time information, at bus stops and/or through an app (29 respondents)
 - Availability of through tickets for different operators and modes (21 respondents)
 - Cheaper fares (20 respondents)
- 3.8 Respondents were asked if they had any other comments, including on other elements of the Public Transport Policy. 382 respondents answered this question. There was some duplication with responses to Question 12 (above) for example, the most common response was to increase bus frequencies, raised by 63 respondents. Other responses were:
- Increase rural service frequencies (32 respondents)
 - Improve overall service reliability (26 respondents)
 - Provide more frequent off-peak services (23 respondents)
- 3.9 As there was broad support for the policies, it is felt there is no need to amend them and that Wiltshire Council should now adopt these and begin to develop the strategy for implementation.
- 3.10 In accordance with the process set out in Figure 1, the next steps will involve assessing the likely impact of the new policies on bus services, then developing bus service specifications in line with these new policies.
- 3.11 In addition, it is useful to note that improving bus frequencies is continually cited as one of the most popular responses on many questions. As such, it needs to be a priority consideration how this can be incorporated into new or amended service specifications going forward.
- 3.12 Up to date public transport information was also the most fully supported policy, suggesting that much could still be done by Wiltshire Council and our Enhanced Partnership to improve transport information provided to the travelling public.

Environmental impact

4. Wiltshire Council has declared a climate emergency, and it is imperative that the new bus policy reflects the objectives of the Council's new climate strategy. Buses are an environmentally friendly way to travel. Effective public transport services are necessary to encourage a modal shift away from individuals traveling in cars and if achieved, can be better for the environment; a greater shift from journeys by private car to public transport is better for the environment. Increasing the number of passenger trips made by public transport will contribute significantly to the Council's overall pledge for Wiltshire Council's operations to be carbon neutral and in doing so will demonstrate how other large employers in Wiltshire could do the same to be carbon neutral as buses save millions of tonnes of carbon and pollutants and can help reduce traffic jams.

Equality and diversity impact

5. 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
- 5.1 The first six characteristics are likely to be most impacted 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. Adoption of the policies set out should provide better access to key services, therefore benefitting this group.
 - *Disability* - People with disabilities are less likely to drive and therefore could become marginalized from the wider community and more reliant upon 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. Some disabilities are also likely to need more trips to GPs and hospitals for regular medical appointments. Again, the policies should ensure better access to key services that are used by this group.
 - *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. The policy

looks to address value for money in relation to bus fares so there may be some benefits for lower income groups.

- *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. The policy looks at the alternatives available, such as DRT, to service rural communities.
- *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. The key policy priority is helping to provide services for those with no access to private transport.

Risk assessment

6. Not applicable.

Financial implications

7. Price inflation in public transport contracts is a major concern. Some retendering costs on like for like contracts have increased by c45%. Wiltshire was granted £2.1m BSIP + funding this year to improve and maintain bus services across Wiltshire, with a further £2.1m pledged for 2024/25. Some of this money will be used to support those inflation pressures, but this is not sustainable in the long term and reflects the need for a revised public transport policy to ensure funding targets, value for money.

Legal implications

8. Not applicable.

Options considered

9. Not applicable.

Conclusion

10. Members are invited to review this information report and note the findings made. The public consultation demonstrates that there is broad support for the policies and as such, it is felt there is no need to amend any of them. Wiltshire Council should now adopt the policy and begin to develop a strategy for implementation.

Background papers

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

None

Appendices

Appendix 1: Draft Wiltshire Council Public Transport Policy

Appendix 2: Public Consultation results summary