

Review of Marlborough – Bedwyn – Hungerford Bus Service

Purpose of report

1. To inform the Area Board of the consultation about proposed changes to the Marlborough – Bedwyn – Hungerford bus service, and;
2. To ask for their help in identifying the impacts of the proposals, and in suggesting affordable alternative ways of meeting any local transport needs that can no longer be provided in a cost-effective way by the bus service.

Reason for the review

3. The review of the Marlborough – Bedwyn – Hungerford service is the first of a series of reviews of poorly-used bus services that will take place during 2012/13. These reviews are part of an ongoing process to challenge and review services that require a relatively high level of Council funding in relation to the number of people using them. They are being carried out in the context of the current pressures on public spending, and a target in the 2012/13 Financial Plan to make savings of £260,000 across the county from this process. The background to the reviews is set out in a decision made by the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport on 20 April 2012 (ref. HT-017-12, Review of Support for Poorly Used Bus Services).
4. Although there is a need to make financial savings, the reviews are also a part of an ongoing review of the bus network in the county, which aims to identify the most cost-effective means of meeting local access needs in a way that can be financially sustainable in the longer term. The help of the Area Boards and Community Area Partnerships is sought in identifying local needs and priorities, and possible ways of meeting these in an affordable way. This could include local initiatives to develop community and voluntary transport, or car sharing.
5. In this context, Wiltshire Council has recently been allocated over £400,000 of one-off funding by central government to assist with expanding and setting up community transport schemes. Part of this is being used to set up a 'Development Fund', to which groups will be able to bid for help with setting up or expanding alternative transport schemes to meet local needs. The fund will be launched at an event in Devizes on 9 June, to which town and parish councils, and existing community and voluntary transport groups, will be invited.

Consultation

6. A consultation letter about the Marlborough – Bedwyn – Hungerford service proposals is being sent to Town and Parish Councils and their transport

representatives; local members; user and community groups; and transport operators (including community transport). Questionnaires will also be made available on the bus so that users are able to comment on the proposals. Both the consultation letter and user questionnaire will be available on the Council's website.

7. The involvement of the Area Boards is also an important part of the process, and due to the timing of the Area Board meetings this report has been circulated before the consultation letters and on-bus questionnaires have been distributed.
8. The consultation will run until 30th June 2012, and the responses will be taken into account in the final proposals that will be put forward for Cabinet Member approval. It is intended to introduce the revised service in December 2012, to coincide with the introduction of the Winter rail timetable.
9. As mentioned above, this is the first of a number of reviews that will be carried out across the county during 2012/13. Details of these will be circulated to consultees in the areas concerned as they become available.

Proposals

10. Details of the current service and the proposed changes are circulated as a separate sheet. To summarise;
11. The proposals affect bus services 20 and 22, which currently run between Marlborough, Great Bedwyn and Hungerford serving the communities of Cadley, Burbage, East and West Grafton, Wilton, Savernake, Little Bedwyn, Froxfield, Shalbourne and Ham. As well as providing the main bus service for these villages, linking them to work, education, shopping, personal business, social and health opportunities in Marlborough and Hungerford, they also provide a 'rail link' service from Marlborough to the rail station at Bedwyn.
12. The whole service is funded by Wiltshire Council (with a small contribution from West Berkshire Council) and costs £188,000 per annum. Surveys suggest that although some journeys are reasonably well used (particularly the school journeys, and some buses to and from Marlborough on Wednesdays when it is market day), many others are poorly used, sometimes carrying just one or two people. Very few passengers use the service to connect with trains at Bedwyn station. Overall, the subsidy paid by the Council per passenger exceeds £3.50 per passenger trip, which is the maximum subsidy guideline set out in the Council's Public Transport Strategy.
13. The cost of the service is high because it requires the use of two buses and three drivers per day, and the number of passengers carried no longer justifies the use of two vehicles to operate it. It is therefore proposed to re-organise the timetable so that it can be operated by fewer buses and drivers. Two options are included in the consultation, both of which would significantly reduce the cost of operation while continuing to provide a service to Marlborough and Hungerford from most villages at times when they are most needed.

14. The proposed service would continue to provide connections to and from some trains at Bedwyn station between 9.30am and 5.50pm (weekdays). However, earlier morning and later evening connecting journeys would be withdrawn. This is because they are not well used, and to continue to provide them would require the use of an extra bus and driver and would significantly increase the cost of operation. The Council is aware that the existing rail link service already struggles to adequately meet the needs of rail users, as the timetable has to seek a compromise between the needs of rail passengers and other users, and because it serves other passengers, the buses cannot wait for late running trains. We are therefore keen to work with local groups to see whether they can develop an alternative and more effective way of providing a rail link service, providing this can be done at an affordable cost.

Questions for the Area Board

15. The Area Board is invited to consider;
- How far the proposed options meet the reasonable transport and access needs of local communities, and whether, if implemented, they would lead to significant hardship for local residents. If so, it would be helpful to know what specific needs would no longer be met, and how many people would be affected.
 - Whether the Board or its members could assist in identifying or providing alternative affordable solutions to meet needs that would no longer be satisfied, for example through community or voluntary transport, or lift sharing. This includes (but is not limited to) investigating alternative and affordable ways of providing a rail link service.
16. Parish and Town Councils and other groups are also encouraged to respond individually to the consultation, which will close on **30 June 2012**. Responses can be sent by post to the Passenger Transport Unit, Wiltshire Council, County Hall, Trowbridge BA14 8JN (attention of Ian White); or by email to buses@wiltshire.gov.uk

Contact; Ian White, Wiltshire Council Head of Service Passenger Transport