



Please reply to:

STATEMENT TO FULL COUNCIL

18 May 2010

Night TaxiBuzz Petition: "Efficiency savings, not bus cuts"

Members of Kennet Passengers have gathered signatures at very short notice to petition Wiltshire Council to object to the decision to cut the Night TaxiBuzz which links Devizes to Pewsey station and 20 villages in between in the evening.

There is a great deal of frustration and upset which spilled out onto the pavements of Bus Island in Devizes on 26th April. People were bemused that they had not been consulted and that implications were only now being considered after the decision was made. They had been led to believe that their 2.5% tax increase was a matter of inflation and maintaining services.

The withdrawal is not a review, nor is it about efficiency savings, nor is it a reduction of services. It is a 100% axing of an essential service for people of all ages from 12 to 70 for whom there are few realistic alternatives.

The Night TaxiBuzz is not a declining service - the usual target for bus cuts. It is growing week on week despite its near invisibility and absence of proper marketing. Usage has steadily increased with 4,000 trips last year, and early indications suggest 4,500 with more potential to grow.

The Night TaxiBuzz is fulfilling a long standing need and the consequences are serious. Social isolation for all age groups can be more devastating in rural areas and needs special consideration by Wiltshire Councillors:

- Bus pass holders would not be able to use their passes on replacement taxis.
- Fare paying passengers would not be able to afford the taxi fares.
- Particularly hard hit are those returning from college, school leavers and low paid workers returning from work after 5.30, those working later shifts at the supermarket, those going to youth club, those who would otherwise suffer rural isolation, and those with physical or learning difficulties to attend the Gateway social club in Woodborough - journeys not readily transferred affordably.

Wiltshire has referred to this service as an experiment. Even if this were an experiment we would have to hail it as a social success. It has reached its policy targets.

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The fact is that Night TaxiBuzz replaced the well established Wigglybus Night Service with some extra rounds inserted to link with trains arriving at Pewsey between 18.41 and 21.38. These taxibus journeys reduce parking congestion in and around Pewsey Station, but like many other users of the evening services, these are return journeys for those making the outward journey in the morning. Consequently there will be an inevitable impact on the day time services and the risk now is a vicious cycle of decline.

The Council have told us that in order to meet a £187,000 cut in the public transport unit budget the service has to go and that it is too expensive. Various calculations have been bandied about starting at over £10 per passenger, but more recently Wiltshire has quoted £4.50, frequently recycling Kennet Passengers' own calculations to suit the argument.

The crucial points to make about unit costs are that:

1. The potential market still hasn't been reached
2. Wiltshire's criteria of £3.50 per passenger is achievable soon
3. Devizes Taxis have offered to halve their contract costs
4. Taxibuzz uses a low tech switchboard instead of a hi tech call centre
5. Fares could be increased
6. One of the rounds could be cut

The most bizarre aspect of Wiltshire's decision was that before the announcement was made to parish councils, Wiltshire commissioned the Association of Kennet Passengers to make proposals on how cuts and improvements could be made in local services. We showed that real savings could be made without major cuts to front-line services by reducing costly overheads and pushing hard at contract costs. But before the ink was dry on the final report Taxibuzz was arbitrarily closed.

We are under no illusion that cuts will have to be made to public services but this cut is an easy quick fix target. Unless the Council demonstrates more business sense and professionalism banner waving on Bus Island is bound to accompany threats to valued services. People want to see that proper procedures and user engagement have been observed and that wasteful overheads have been removed. If Wiltshire is managing decline then we need to debate the best way forward. If Wiltshire, a new unitary authority which has staked its reputation on community engagement, cannot demonstrate a fairer and more rational approach the Council will not be able to carry the people with them through these challenging times.

For this reason our petition asks Wiltshire Council: please revisit your decision with an open mind and give the service a chance to prove itself.

Unusually, consideration of making savings and alternative options to service closure will be against the background of an expert case study report that Wiltshire commissioned to inform itself. This alone is reason enough to reconsider this case.