

Wiltshire Council

Annual Council

12 May 2015

Notice of Motion No. 20

From Councillors Jeff Osborn and Helen Osborn

Briefing note in response to motion

The RUH Hopper was introduced as an experimental service in 2001 following a successful bid to the government's Rural Bus Challenge fund. It provides hourly arrivals and departures from RUH between 0720 and 1730, Mondays to Fridays from a large area of western Wiltshire including Trowbridge, Warminster, Westbury, Bradford, Melksham, Corsham, Devizes and Chippenham. The service carries approx 15,000 single passenger journeys a year, of whom approx 75% are outpatients, 22% workers, and 3% hospital visitors. Around 65% (i.e. over 80% of non-work users) hold an OAP or disabled persons' bus pass. The gross annual operating cost is around £205,000 (depending on miles operated); less income from fares of approx £50,000 per annum; so the net subsidy required is approx £155,000 per annum. Although the original experiment was funded partly by central government, this funding came to an end in around 2007, as did a contribution paid by the NHS which was withdrawn at around the same time as a result of financial pressures in the health sector, leaving the council to carry the full cost.

The NHS, not Wiltshire Council, has a duty to transport patients to hospital who have a medical need for transport, and fulfils this duty through a contract with Arriva which operates the non-emergency patient transport service on their behalf. This service would not cover all those who currently use the Hopper, as not all would meet the defined eligibility criteria for medical need.

The Council recognises that the service has performed an important function over the years, and is very popular with those who have used it. However, at a time when reductions in public spending are causing massive pressures on local authority budgets, all discretionary spending is having to be reviewed. The cost of supporting the Hopper equates to a subsidy of around £10 per passenger trip, which is well in excess of the council's guidelines for bus service support of £3.50 per trip, and in the circumstances it is considered that the council can no longer continue to fund the service alone and at this level.

Accordingly the budget report approved by full council in February 2015 included under the heading 'strategic savings' a proposal to achieve a saving of £130,000 by "(removing) subsidy from the Royal United and Great Western Hospital Hopper bus

services; alternative provision will be discussed with the hospitals and CCG around better use of existing patient transport / bus services”.

The cabinet member for transport wrote to the hospitals and the CCG on 2 February 2015 informing them of the proposal and inviting them to engage with the council in investigating alternative means of transport to the hospitals. A meeting was convened as a result of this, and a further meeting has now been arranged. It is hoped that this will result in a revised proposal, although this will depend on being able to identify and agree a way of reducing the size of the council’s contribution to supporting the service.

Although the decision to remove funding from the budget has been taken, any decision to withdraw or curtail the service will require a full consultation and equalities assessment, including with users, the Link schemes, Healthwatch and other interested parties. This consultation will take place following the conclusion of the current discussions with the hospitals and CCG and will be based on their outcome.

Parvis Khansari
Associate Director, Highways and Transport