

Background to and Implications of the Report entitled  
**Concessionary Bus Travel Act 2007: Implications for North Wiltshire**  
to the Executive on 1 November 2007

**1. Statutory Travel Concessions**

- 1.1 Currently, people aged 60 and over or disabled have a statutory minimum entitlement to free bus travel all day at weekends and between 09.30 and 23.00 on weekdays, within their home District. This free travel area may be extended where neighbouring District Councils operate a joint scheme. The Council fulfils its obligation through a joint scheme with Kennet, Salisbury and West Wiltshire District Councils, Swindon Borough Council and the County Council. This is co-ordinated by the County Council and managed by transport consultants MCL. Thus North Wiltshire residents enjoy free travel throughout Wiltshire and Swindon and on unbroken cross boundary journeys to/from neighbouring Districts.
- 1.2 The Concessionary Bus Travel Act 2007 extends this entitlement to free bus travel throughout England, with effect from 1 April 2008. As a result, the method of funding will have to change: each District Council will fund free bus journeys commencing in its area instead of the free travel undertaken by its residents as now. The Government will fund the additional travel undertaken by non-residents but only the cost arising from the statutory minimum entitlement.

**2. Discretionary Travel Concessions**

- 2.1 Currently, the Council offers the following discretionary concessions:-  
Free travel for pass holders before 09.30 and after 23.00 on weekdays: This has the effect of making a pass valid for free bus travel all day every day throughout Wiltshire and Swindon. There are some exceptions before 09.30, when buses tend to be full already. For this reason, Swindon residents do not have free travel before 09.30, as the Borough Council does not fund it. All Wiltshire Districts fund it and their residents benefit from all day free travel in Swindon.  
Free travel for companions to severely disabled people: A disabled person who can show that they could not travel without assistance is issued with a pass that allow a companion to travel free with them. The other Wiltshire and Swindon Districts offer this too.  
Travel Tokens: The Council offers £18 worth of travel tokens, as an alternative to a bus pass. As well as being valid on most buses, tokens are also accepted on some taxis and trains. Eligible disabled people may receive the same amount for companions. The Council is now the only one in Wiltshire offering tokens, although West Wiltshire offers taxi vouchers.
- 2.2 The Concessionary Bus Travel Act 2007 permits such discretionary concessions to continue and this report recommends that they should be retained for residents. It is not suggested that such concessions should be extended to visitors to North Wiltshire, who will be entitled to the statutory minimum concession.

### **3. Options and Options Appraisal**

- 3.1 Option 1: Continue the existing discretionary concessions to resident pass holders, within the Wiltshire & Swindon area. This Option maintains the status quo for North Wiltshire residents.

Option 2: Statutory provision only. This would mean the withdrawal of three discretionary concessions as follows:-

Free travel for pass holders before 09.30 and after 23.00 on weekdays: A cost saving of between about £0.023 m and £0.029 m could be made in 2008/9. However, it can not be assumed that pass holders would be able to travel between these times. Away from the Key Bus Route Network, services tend to be infrequent. Often, the first bus of the day is scheduled to depart before 09.30 and the next, if there is one, several hours after, rendering the statutory entitlement to be of little benefit to the people affected. Also, there is a risk that the loss of the pre 09.30 concession would encourage pass holders who currently travel to/from work by bus to use cars instead, thereby adding to traffic congestion.

Free travel for companions to severely disabled people: A cost saving of between about £0.012 m and £0.016 m could be made. However, the disabled people who rely on a companion (currently 158) could be disadvantaged and some might not be able to travel as a result, in which case the saving could be up to twice as much.

Travel Tokens: The popularity of tokens has declined since the statutory concession for pass holders was increased from half to full fare in April 2006 (from nearly 10,700 sets in 2005/6 to 5,532 in 2007/8 to date). Whilst the advent of national free travel may accelerate this trend, there will probably always be some people for whom bus services are unsuitable but tokens, which are valid in some taxi and trains, offer a means for them to counter isolation. On paper, discontinuing tokens could offer a cost saving of some £0.080 m. However, this could be negated if fewer than half of the token users chose bus passes instead, as the latter cost about £40 more each. Also, people who cannot use bus services would be disadvantaged unless the Council could devise a suitable form of alternative assistance. To date, there have not been sufficient staff resources to investigate the potential for alternatives.

Option 3: Some other level of discretionary concessions that the Executive may decide on.

- 3.2 Officers of the partners of the Wiltshire & Swindon Concessionary Travel Scheme have discussed various options. Uniformity throughout the area is favoured, although Swindon officers have indicated that the extension of free travel to before 09.30 on weekdays within the Borough is unlikely. There is general agreement that, to avoid confusion among the public and bus drivers, there should be as little change as possible. Option 1 is the simplest to understand and is recommended.

### **4. Readiness for the National Scheme**

- 4.1 The Government requires that the new passes should be plastic smartcards and has issued a standard design that District Councils must follow. Under the Council's agreement with consultants MCL, that company is responsible for producing passes and has an arrangement with a smartcard firm, Euclid,

to produce the new national passes. This is considered to be the most cost-effective option for the Council.

- 4.2 Over recent months, the Government has been advising TCAs what to do in preparation for introducing the national scheme in April 2008. There are two main areas of work. First, TCAs must create a suitable electronic database, holding details of travel concessionaires, including photographs, and ensure that this is complete, accurate and ready when the pass manufacturer needs the information. Having had a suitable database already, the Council is now well prepared.
- 4.3 Secondly, the government has been asking TCAs for views on various aspects of its proposals and to provide local information to enable it to develop these. Advice has included considering joint scheme administration with neighbouring TCAs, to save cost. The existing Wiltshire & Swindon scheme achieves this and there is no current suggestion that it should be changed. Officers of the six partner authorities are in frequent contact with each other and MCL regarding preparation for the national scheme. Each District Council is required to make an early decision on which discretionary concessions to offer from April 2008 (See Options above).

## **5. Financial Implications**

- 5.1 See main report

## **6. Legal Implications**

- 6.1 The provision of a concessionary travel scheme is a mandatory obligation under the following Acts of Parliament:
- Transport Act 1985
  - Transport Act 2000
  - Travel Concessions (Eligibility) Act 2002
  - Concessionary Bus Travel Act 2007 [*from 1 April 2008*]
- 6.2 The Concessionary Bus Travel Act 2007 changes the Council's obligation to operate a concessionary travel scheme from one that gives a statutory minimum concession to North Wiltshire residents to one that gives the same concession to all eligible English pass holder within in North Wiltshire.

## **7. Community and Environment Implications**

- 7.1 Travel concessions help to encourage the use of bus services and, consequently, to reduce the use of private cars, thereby helping to reduce traffic congestion, reduce pollution and improve road safety.

## **8. Equality and Diversity Implications**

- 8.1 The travel concessions that the Council offers reduce the cost of travel for vulnerable older and disabled people and thereby help them to overcome isolation.

## **9. Risk Analysis**

- 9.1 The main risk of following the recommendations (Option 1) is that, as the cost of concessionary travel is very difficult to predict, the cost of discretionary concessions could turn out to be greater than estimated in this report.
- 9.2 Conversely, not following the recommendations, in order to achieve cost savings, runs the risk that those savings could turn out to be less than estimated.
- 9.3 Not following the recommendations would also hold social risks. It would be necessary to explain to pass holders why, on the one hand, their free bus concession had been extended to cover England but, on the other, had been reduced for local travel. This situation could confuse the public and bus drivers and conflict could result. As a way of countering that, some bus drivers might then permit free travel where no entitlement exists; the cost of that would fall to the Council and thereby reduce any savings. Not following the recommendation would have other cost and delay implications for the Council and its partners in the Wiltshire & Swindon Concessionary Travel scheme, who favour Option 1.
- 9.4 It is important that the Council sticks with the Option that the Executive adopts today, as a change later in the financial year would result in delay in issuing the new bus passes. That could involve additional expense, to cover the cost of re-coding passes that had been coded already and possibly of issuing temporary passes pending preparation of the delayed new ones. Any delay and associated cost would also affect the other four Wiltshire District Councils.