

CABINET

24 NOVEMBER 2009

**CONCESSIONARY TRAVEL –PROPOSALS FOR HARMONISATION
OF ALTERNATIVE CONCESSIONS**

Executive Summary

Whilst the Wiltshire Bus Pass is available to all older and disabled people throughout Wiltshire, there are alternative concessions with tokens and vouchers that are only available in north and west Wiltshire for historical reasons. If this situation were allowed to persist, there is a risk that the Council could be challenged on the grounds of inequality of provision between different parts of Wiltshire.

A consultation was carried out on a proposal to withdraw the alternative concessions and it showed there was widespread concern that measures should be put in place to help the minority of people who are unable to use the Wiltshire Bus Pass.

It is proposed to introduce a mileage payment for Link Schemes (where volunteers transport people in their own cars) so that they can help people who do not live near a bus service or have limited mobility. However, regular cars are not accessible to people who are obliged to use a wheelchair so an alternative concession to help meet the cost of a wheelchair-accessible taxi is required.

Options for extending each of the alternative concessions to cover the whole county were costed and the benefits compared. The comparison pointed clearly to a taxi voucher scheme as the most cost-effective alternative. It is therefore proposed to introduce a taxi voucher scheme throughout the county but to restrict it to wheelchair users and to provide a higher value of vouchers than under the existing scheme.

It is estimated that the cost of the existing alternative concessions is £126,500, the proposed mileage payment will cost £30,000 and the proposed Taxi Voucher Scheme £38,000. Therefore, this more focussed approach will release £58,500 that can be used to support other transport initiatives.

Proposal

- (a) That no changes be made to the Bus Pass Scheme.
- (b) To discontinue the existing alternative concession schemes at the end of the 2009-10 period of availability. These are limited to north and west Wiltshire.

- (c) To introduce a mileage support for Link and similar schemes at the rate of 5 pence per mile as a pilot scheme for two years with the intention of continuing it permanently if it is shown to be effective by growth in use of Link Schemes.
- (d) To introduce a new scheme of taxi vouchers covering the whole county but with eligibility restricted to wheelchair users.
- (e) To increase the value of taxi vouchers to £40 for 2010-11 and to review this after two years.

Reason for Proposal

For most people the bus pass, with discretionary extensions available throughout Wiltshire, already meets the Council's objectives of improving access to services and encouraging modal shift. Even where people have difficulty using the bus on their own, many are able to benefit from the "+ companion" pass, which allows a helper to travel with them for free on local journeys. The number of buses in use that have low floors to allow easy access for wheelchair users is increasing and now stands at 33% of services (as measured by Key Performance Indicator ESD055 for 2008-9) and the Council's "Connect2Wiltshire" services, which provide wheelchair-accessible door to door journeys in many parts of Wiltshire, all offer free or discounted travel to bus pass holders.

Applicants would have to certify that they need to use a wheelchair to undertake most of their day-to-day activities and that the condition is permanent (or expected to last more than one year). However, people in residential care homes funded by the Council would be excluded, as their funding package already includes provision for transport. (This would not affect their eligibility for a bus pass as it is a statutory entitlement). The scheme would also apply to a very small group of people, already in receipt of other services from the Council, who are unable to use public transport because of special considerations advised by our social care teams (this is only 50–100 people).

There is legitimate concern that some people may not be able utilise a bus pass due to mobility difficulties or because there are no services in their area. It is therefore important to encourage the growth of community transport, which can help in circumstances where bus services are not a practical solution. This is the reason for the proposed mileage assistance to the most common community transport schemes, Link Schemes.

Link schemes have expanded in recent years and now cover most of Wiltshire, including 98% of the rural population. They exist to provide 'good neighbour' support to those in need in the community they serve, including transport where necessary, and have proved to be an effective way of providing a 'safety net' for people who would be unable to make import journeys.

However, Link Schemes use volunteers' private cars which are not wheelchair-accessible, so wheelchair users have little choice but to use wheelchair-accessible taxis. The proposed Taxi Voucher Scheme would be tightly focused on such users, to assist them with the cost of using such transport to meet their needs. It is considered that an increased voucher value, compared with the existing scheme in west Wiltshire, is appropriate as transport costs have increased faster than general inflation, but the vouchers have not been increased at a commensurate rate.

It is proposed that the new arrangements run for two years before they are reviewed. Experience from the introduction of the national bus pass arrangements shows that it takes more than a year for changes to be fully adopted by all those who would benefit.

ALAN FEIST

Service Director, Sustainable Transport
Department for Transport, Environment and Leisure

CABINET
24 NOVEMBER 2009

**CONCESSIONARY TRAVEL –PROPOSALS FOR HARMONISATION
OF ALTERNATIVE CONCESSIONS**

Purpose of Report

1. To present proposals for the harmonisation of the various discretionary travel concessions that are currently offered to older and disabled residents as an alternative to the free bus pass.

Background

2. National legislation requires that Travel Concession Authorities, such as Wiltshire Council, offer a free bus pass to residents of their area who are aged 60 or disabled. This allows free travel on bus services anywhere in England between 0930 hours and 2300 hours on weekdays and at any time on weekends and bank holidays.
3. Authorities are also empowered to offer discretionary extensions to the national scheme, which are funded from their own resources. In common with many other rural authorities, Wiltshire Council allows holders of its bus pass to travel free at any time of day, except for a few services where buses are very full in the morning peak. The reason for this is that in areas where bus services are relatively infrequent, and where spare seats are available before 0930 hours, there is less reason to impose a restriction and the costs of allowing unrestricted use of the pass are likely to be outweighed by the benefits to users. Wiltshire Council also offers a “+companion” pass in certain cases, which allows people who cannot use the bus unaided to take a companion with them for free in Wiltshire. Again, the extra cost of this is small because the eligible users are less than 2% of the total.
4. Some authorities also offer alternative concessions to eligible residents as an alternative to a free bus pass. In Wiltshire, the former District Councils adopted different approaches, as set out in the table below. These alternative concessions have been continued for 2009-10 in order to provide continuity of service during the transition to unitary status and to allow the new Council to decide what approach it wishes to take in the future.

District	Alternative provided	Eligible groups
North Wiltshire	National Travel Tokens to the value of £18 per annum	Anyone eligible for a concessionary bus pass
West Wiltshire	Personalised travel vouchers to the value of £30 per annum	Those unable to use the bus due to age, disability or living in an area with no bus service
West Wiltshire	Voucher that can be exchanged for a Senior Citizens Railcard or a Disabled Persons Railcard	Anyone eligible for a concessionary bus pass
Kennet	None	
Salisbury	None	

Main Considerations for the Council

5. There is clearly a need to consider new arrangements for alternative concessions to apply throughout the area of Wiltshire Council on the grounds of equity for all residents and to standardise administrative arrangements for the sake of economy. New arrangements should become available on the expiry of the current alternative concessions, which for most users falls during April and May 2010. In order to achieve this timescale, a decision must be made well before Christmas, allowing time to set up the new arrangements and give all the affected users adequate notice.
6. In order to obtain the views of interested parties and gather information about possible hardship arising from any changes, a consultation exercise was carried out over the summer, closing on 30 October. The consultation was circulated to Town and Parish Councils in north and west Wiltshire, community and voluntary transport providers and groups promoting the interests of users. Some organisations undertook to circulate the consultation to individuals who they felt would want to make an individual response and it was also placed on the Wiltshire Council website so that anyone could download it and respond.
7. A summary of the consultation responses is attached as **Appendix 1**. The main conclusions drawn from the consultation are reported in the "Conclusions" section below.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

8. It is an objective of the Council to encourage modal shift from car use to more environmentally friendly modes of transport, such as the bus, and the proposal is aligned with this objective.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

9. It is an objective of the Council to improve access to services for older people and disabled people and the proposal provides an alternative provision

throughout Wiltshire for those who are not able to benefit from a bus pass, whereas currently there is no such provision in south or east Wiltshire.

Risk Assessment

10. If no action is taken to harmonise the availability of alternative concessions, there is a risk of challenge on the grounds of inequality of provision across the county.

Financial Implications

11. The current annual cost of the alternative concessions is around £143,000 made up of £125,000 to reimburse operators and £18,000 to issue them. This breaks down as £52,000 for tokens in north Wiltshire, £57,000 for rail vouchers and £34,000 for taxi vouchers in west Wiltshire. There are also hidden costs that are difficult to measure, such as financial processing through SAP and dealing with enquiries.
12. Discontinuing all the alternative concessions would result in some additional national bus passes being taken up where users felt they could make use of them and this would reduce the savings that could be made. The cost of this is estimated at £16,500. Thus the net saving from discontinuing the existing alternative concessions would be £126,500.
13. The option of operating any one of the current schemes throughout the County is dealt with in detail under “Options” below. In summary, the cost of operating each scheme countywide would be as follows:

Taxi Voucher Scheme	£106,500
Travel Token Scheme	£182,000
Railcard Voucher Scheme	£203,500

14. The estimated cost of the proposed 5 pence per mile contribution to Link Schemes would be £30,000.
15. The estimated cost of a countywide Taxi Voucher Scheme with vouchers increased to £40 and eligibility limited to users of wheelchairs, as proposed, would be £38,000. This assumes that the proportion of voucher users will be 30% of those using the existing west Wiltshire scheme. It is not known how many people in Wiltshire are permanent wheelchair users but, of the existing voucher users in west Wiltshire, 30% are recorded due to disability with the remainder recorded as due to age and disability and it is considered reasonable to take this as a best estimate.

Legal Implications

16. The proposals fulfil the Council’s statutory obligations and go further in providing alternatives and enhancements using the discretionary provisions of

the relevant legislation. The provision of the national bus pass is a statutory requirement, but the provision of alternatives is discretionary, hence users of alternatives who opt to change to a pass must be supplied with one.

Options Considered

17. It is not considered necessary to propose any changes to the bus passes available as the existing arrangements are consistent throughout Wiltshire and the extensions offered beyond the national scheme are justified by local circumstances. The pass encourages modal shift to public transport and the existing “+ companion” pass contributes further to accessibility and exclusion objectives. The current budget for the Wiltshire Bus Pass Scheme is £4,552,800, including £217,800 administration costs (2009-10 budget).
18. The cost of a token scheme like that of north Wiltshire, but covering the whole of Wiltshire, is estimated to be £182,000. The scheme does not target individuals in particular need as tokens are available to anyone with appropriate age or disability. This means it is not as cost-effective as it could be in respect of meeting exclusion and accessibility objectives. It is also less effective than the bus pass in encouraging public transport use.
19. The cost of a Railcard Voucher Scheme like that in west Wiltshire, but covering the whole of Wiltshire, is estimated at £203,500. Again, these vouchers are available to anyone with appropriate age and disability so they are not targeted on individuals in particular need. It is not likely that these vouchers contribute much to exclusion and accessibility objectives and their effect on encouraging public transport use would be for longer distance journeys rather than local transport.
20. The cost of a Taxi Voucher Scheme like that in west Wiltshire, but covering the whole of Wiltshire, is estimated at £106,500. These vouchers are only available to those with mobility difficulties or living in parishes deemed not to have a bus service. Because they are targeted they are more cost-effective in contributing to accessibility and exclusion objectives, and do not discourage the take-up of bus passes and use of public transport by those able to do so. Also the cash value to individual users is higher than the current token and Rail Voucher Schemes. However, it is considered that a more tightly focused scheme would deliver a greater benefit for users and that is proposed.

21. A further option proposed, as a result of the consultation, by Wiltshire Community First is that Wiltshire Council could make a concessionary contribution to Link Schemes in addition to the existing grants. In Link Schemes, volunteers in the community help others by, for example, using their own cars to take them on essential journeys. Link Schemes currently pay mileage expenses to their volunteer drivers and users are asked to make a donation. A mileage subsidy of 5 pence per mile from the Council would cost approximately £41,000 per annum. £11,000 of this could be met from the existing grant fund and contingency fund, leaving £30,000 per annum to be funded using the savings from the discontinuation of the current alternative concessions. This extra funding could be provided as a pilot for two years, with the intention of continuing it permanently if it is shown to be effective by growth in use of Link Schemes. The administration of this scheme will be carried out by Community First under one existing contract to develop Link Schemes.
22. Under the existing alternative concession schemes, applicants are required to provide documentary evidence of their eligibility. This usually takes the form of photocopies of passports, benefit statements and utility bills. This approach will continue for bus pass applications as it is a requirement of the national scheme. However, as the alternative concessions are provided under discretionary powers, it is open to the Council to simplify administration and reduce costs by asking users to self certify that they are wheelchair users and this approach is proposed. It is already used for many blue badge applications under the new lean procedures introduced there and has been very successful, with little abuse. As the vouchers are issued annually, it would be easy to withdraw the benefit if abuse took place.

Conclusion

23. The following themes concerning the discontinuation of tokens and vouchers emerged from the consultation exercise:
- There is widespread concern that it will impact on people who are already disadvantaged, such as those with severe mobility difficulties.
 - The view taken by many people and organisations will depend on what alternative provision is made for those unable to use a bus pass.
 - It will adversely affect the finances of a few community and voluntary transport schemes.
 - The users of alternative concessions see possible hardship arising from their mobility difficulties, the absence of a bus service near their homes or the loss of a financial benefit.
24. Looking at the costs of the various options, it can be seen that the savings from discontinuing the existing alternative concessions in the north and west would be sufficient to fund a Taxi Voucher Scheme covering the whole county, and this would be a cost-effective way to help those who cannot use buses. Introducing travel tokens or railcard vouchers throughout the county would be more expensive and they would not be cost-effective in pursuing the Council's objectives and helping those who cannot use buses.

25. People throughout the county who live in areas not served by buses can in many cases benefit from community and voluntary transport and there is a widespread network of Link Schemes throughout Wiltshire. Wiltshire Council could make a concessionary contribution to Link Schemes in addition to the existing grants which would effectively reduce the contribution needed from clients as well as increasing the proportion of income which Link Schemes obtained from predictable sources. This would encourage the development of Link Schemes in furtherance of the Council's accessibility and exclusion objectives and provide an alternative for those who are unable to use bus services as well as possibly helping the finances of users. It is therefore proposed that such a scheme be introduced throughout the county, also funded from savings.
26. The Taxi Voucher Scheme, as currently operated in west Wiltshire, is focused on people who cannot use buses but it is still open to many who could use alternatives such as community transport. However, the benefit from the vouchers, at £30, is not as much as that received by the average bus pass user, which is estimated at £75. It is therefore proposed that the eligibility for such vouchers should be focused on people who are obliged to use a wheelchair in order to offer a higher cash value of £40.
27. There is scope to simplify the administrative arrangements for issuing the proposed taxi vouchers by asking applicants to self certify that they are wheelchair users. This is beneficial to both the Council and the users. Experience with blue badge issue has shown this approach to be successful with little abuse.

ALAN FEIST

Service Director, Sustainable Transport
Department for Transport, Environment and Leisure

Eric Egar

Policy Development Principal Assistant
Passenger Transport Unit
(01225) 713368
4 November 2009

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

Responses to consultation
Calculation of extra passes due to discontinuing concessions

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Summary of responses