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HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORT SERVICE

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PROPOSAL FOR CHANGES TO EVENING JOURNEYS ON BUS SERVICE X3 (Salisbury – Downton – Ringwood – Bournemouth)

Purpose of Report

1. To seek Cabinet Member approval for the withdrawal of funding provided by the Council for evening journeys on bus service X3, in order to achieve financial savings as agreed by the Council in its financial plan for 2013/14.

Background

2. The Council's financial plan, approved in February 2013, requires savings of £180,000 to be made from continued challenge and review of support for bus services. The proposal for the withdrawal of funding of evening journeys on service X3 is one of a number that are being progressed to meet this target.

Rationale for the consultation proposals

3. X3 is an important inter-urban service, and a part of the Council's strategic bus network. The daytime service is operated as a commercial venture by the Wilts & Dorset bus company with no funding from the local authorities along the route (Wiltshire, Hampshire, Dorset and Bournemouth). Wilts & Dorset also operate an evening service on Friday and Saturday without local authority funding. However, it has previously indicated that the evening service on other days of the week (Monday to Thursday, and Sundays) is not commercially viable, and currently receives local authority support of £37,500 per annum to allow it to operate. Of this, Bournemouth Council pays £7,500 and Wiltshire £30,000. Dorset has only a very small section of the route, while Hampshire County Council has withdrawn its funding for budget reasons.
4. The reasons why Wiltshire Council has also consulted on withdrawing its funding are that the amount of funding provided was considered high in relation to the number of Wiltshire passengers carried; there are concerns that Wiltshire residents are being asked to bear a disproportionate share of the cost of supporting the service; and evening services (even on strategic network routes) are considered in the Council's published guidelines for funding of supported bus services (see **Appendix 5**) to be generally of lower priority than maintaining services during weekday daytimes.

Issues raised by the consultation

5. The key issues raised by respondees to the consultation include:
 - Written responses were received from all of the main town/parish councils on the route, making strong arguments in favour of retaining the evening service on all days of the week on the grounds of it being well used, important for work, college, visiting, social activities and evenings out, important for young people and older residents, and an important strategic link connecting several large towns and villages with each other and with the national rail network.

- Around a third of the respondents are young (in the 17-25 age group) and over a third of all respondents say they use the service for work. Just over half of respondents use the service for visiting friends and relatives, and a similar proportion for evenings out.
- 70% of respondents say they would not be able to travel instead on Fridays or Saturdays if the Sunday – Thursday journeys were withdrawn. This includes 24 people who say they would not be able to make a work related trip.
- Surveys carried out in July indicated that the evening buses were well used on all days of the week, especially the earlier journeys, with average loads of around 25-30 a day on the 2000 Bournemouth – Salisbury (even more on a sunny summer Sunday), and 20-25 on the 2140 Salisbury – Bournemouth.
- All sections of the route were equally well used, with passengers travelling from Salisbury and Bournemouth to the intermediate towns and villages, and also a considerable amount of end to end traffic. Over half of the passengers either boarded or alighted within Wiltshire, although this includes a large proportion (who it is assumed are mainly Hampshire residents) travelling from Salisbury back to Fordingbridge and Ringwood.
- The later evening journeys were less well used, with an average of 9-10 passengers a day using the 2300 Bournemouth – Salisbury and 0-2 using the 0010 Salisbury – Ringwood.

Revised proposal

6. The results of the consultation demonstrate a higher number of passengers than expected using the service, for a range of journey purposes, including travel to/from work and education as well as leisure. Consideration has therefore been given to finding ways in which a service can continue to be provided that meets the needs of as many of the current users as possible while reducing the cost to Wiltshire Council to an acceptable level. Options that have been considered are described in paragraph 18 below. As a result, Wilts & Dorset has agreed to operate an evening service on a commercial basis on Mondays to Saturdays until around 11.30 pm. The Sunday evening service will however still cease at around 8.30 pm. The last buses will now be:

Mondays to Saturdays

2140 Salisbury – Bournemouth
 2000 Bournemouth – Salisbury
 2300 Bournemouth – Ringwood

Sundays and Public Holidays

1840 Salisbury – Bournemouth
 1940 Salisbury – Ringwood
 1805 Bournemouth – Salisbury

The company intends to implement these changes with effect from 15 September 2013.

7. Wilts & Dorset's decision to operate commercially as above will mean that the best used evening journeys will continue to run, although the later journeys (2300 Bournemouth – Salisbury and 0010 Salisbury – Ringwood) will be lost and the Sunday service will finish earlier.
8. It will also mean that the Council will be able to withdraw its funding. However, Wilts & Dorset have indicated that its decision has been taken on a "use it or lose it" basis and that it is likely to review its position again in the not too distant future. The Councils may therefore need to reconsider their support for the service again at that time.

Main considerations for the Council

9. Financial savings are required by the Council's financial plan, and a proportion of these are intended to be made from the proposals relating to service X3. The decision made should accord with the Council's Guidelines for funding of supported bus services (as published in the Local Transport Plan and reproduced as **Appendix 5**), and will need to balance an analysis of the impacts of the proposals and the responses to the consultation with the availability of funding.

Safeguarding Considerations

10. No significant issues identified.

Public Health Implications

11. Good public transport is important to health and wellbeing by providing access to health services for rural residents, encouraging physical activity through reduced dependence on car travel, providing access to nature, and to cultural activities, improving the ability of vulnerable adults to live independent lives and to continue living at home, and reducing the incidence of mental health problems through improved social connectedness. The revised proposal will minimise the adverse impacts that would have resulted from withdrawal of the evening service.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

12. Any reductions in the availability of bus services will make public transport a less convenient and attractive alternative to the private car, and will have a negative environmental impact through encouraging greater car use (offset to a degree by marginal reductions in emissions from reduced bus mileage). The revised proposal will minimise the adverse impacts that would have resulted from withdrawal of the evening service.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

13. Groups with a potential interest, from an 'equalities' perspective, were included in the consultation, and equalities impacts have been considered as an integral part of the consideration of alternatives above. The consultation confirmed the initial expectations that reductions in the frequency of the bus service will have a particular impact on older people, young people, people from low income families, and women, who are more likely to rely on public transport; and on people living in the more rural settlements, where there are fewer facilities and opportunities available within close proximity and alternative transport is less likely to be available. The impacts include greater difficulty in accessing important services, facilities or other opportunities, including work, education/training, shopping, personal business, health services, leisure, recreational or cultural opportunities and social visits.
14. The revised proposal will minimise the adverse impacts that would have resulted from withdrawal of the evening service.

Risk Assessment

15. Wilts & Dorset has indicated that its commercial operation of the evening journeys will be on a "use it or lose it" basis. The Council therefore needs to be ready to respond to possible future service changes initiated by the bus company.

Financial Implications

16. Wilts & Dorset's decision to operate commercially will result in a financial saving to the Council of £30,000 per annum (£16,000 in the current financial year), which will contribute towards the overall reduction in spending needed to meet the budget allocation set in the Financial Plan. However, this saving may need to be reviewed if the services are subsequently decided not to be fully commercial, as indicated above.

Legal Implications

17. There is no statutory duty to subsidise a particular level of bus service, and the process of consultation and equalities assessment that has been followed has been designed to ensure that the Council's legal obligations in these regards have been met.

Options Considered

18. The results of the consultation demonstrate a higher number of passengers than expected using the service, for a range of journey purposes including travel to/from work and education as well as leisure. Consideration has therefore been given to finding ways in which a service can continue to be provided that meets the needs of as many of the current users as possible while reducing the cost to Wiltshire Council to an acceptable level. Options that have been considered (these are not mutually exclusive) include:
- (i) Funding a reduced level of service that can be secured at a lower cost but that still provides the journeys that have been identified by the consultation as being the best used and most important to those who responded to the consultation (in particular the 2000 Bournemouth – Salisbury and the 2140 departure from Salisbury).
 - (ii) Asking the bus company to review the commercial viability of the evening service and its ability to operate all or part of it at a reduced cost to the local authorities.
 - (iii) Asking the other local authorities (in particular Hampshire) to reconsider the funding they provide in view of the benefits that the evening service brings to their residents and communities.

Reason for Proposal

19. Wilts & Dorset's decision to operate a service on a commercial basis meets the majority of the needs identified by the responses to the consultation, and allows the Council to achieve a financial saving. However, the situation may need to be reviewed again if there are future changes to the service that is provided commercially.

Proposal

20. That:
- (i) In view of Wilts & Dorset's decision to operate a commercial evening service that continues to provide journeys at 2000 Bournemouth – Salisbury and 2140 Salisbury – Ringwood on Mondays to Saturdays, the funding that is paid to maintain the current Sunday – Thursday evening service be withdrawn.
 - (ii) The situation be reviewed again, using the evidence gained in this consultation, if the commercial service provision is reviewed at a future date.

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

Full responses to consultation

