

DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR HIGHWAYS, STREETSCENE AND BROADBAND – CLLR JOHN THOMSON

HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORT SERVICE

OFFICER CONTACT: Ian White 01225 713322 email: ian.white@wiltshire.gov.uk

REFERENCE: HSB-011-13

**PROPOSAL FOR CHANGES TO THE CONNECT 2 WILTSHIRE TAXIBUZZ SERVICES
in the Amesbury and Mere areas**

Purpose of Report

1. To seek Cabinet Member approval for proposed changes to the Connect2 Wiltshire Taxibuzz services in the Amesbury and Mere areas, 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 changes to the Connect2 Wiltshire Taxibuzz services is among a number that are being progressed to meet this target.

Rationale for the consultation proposals

3. The rationale for the proposals was set out in the letters and information sheets sent to consultees (**Appendix 2**).
4. The Amesbury area service currently costs the Council £81,000 per annum but carries only around 5,600 passenger journeys a year (plus another 5,000 by pupils and students who are entitled to free or assisted school transport). It provides the only public transport service from Shrewton to Amesbury, is the only public transport serving the Countess Road, Strangways and Steel Houses areas of Durrington / Larkhill, and provides the main public transport for the villages in the Woodford Valley. It also currently provides a daily link from the villages in the Bourne Valley to Amesbury. The proposal seeks to significantly reduce the cost of operating these services by reducing their frequency of operation and linking them in such a way that all three can be operated by a single vehicle and driver.
5. The Mere area service currently costs £66,000 per annum and carries around 6,000 passenger journeys a year (plus another 1,500 by pupils and students who are entitled to free or assisted school transport). On Mondays to Fridays it provides a service (by advance booking) between any two points in the Mere area, and is mainly used by people travelling into Mere itself from the surrounding area, and for travel from the Mere area to Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Warminster. On Saturdays it provides a service of three journeys in each direction into Warminster and Shaftesbury. The proposal seeks to reduce the cost of operation by reducing the hours of operation of the Monday – Friday service to 0900 - 1500 (including withdrawing advertised connections to morning and evening trains at Gillingham) and withdrawing the Saturday service.

Changes made to the proposals as a result of the consultation

6. The responses to the consultation are summarised in **Appendices 3 and 4**. Following detailed consideration of these, some changes have been made to the proposed timetable for the Amesbury area service, as mentioned below. These retain the principle of using only one vehicle to run all of the services, but within the constraints that this obviously imposes, seek to meet some of the concerns raised by users by re-timing some journeys and providing additional departures:
- The most significant concerns were expressed by respondents from the Countess Road area, where the proposed reduction in service was the greatest. It is proposed in response to provide two additional round trip journeys in the afternoon (from Amesbury to the Countess Road area and back), which should go some way towards meeting the concern about the overall reduction in travel opportunities and more specifically, the lack of transport in the afternoons.
 - An additional return journey to the Woodford valley from Amesbury is being provided in the afternoons (4.35 pm), to provide the opportunity to visit the town in the afternoon as well as the morning.
 - There are a number of minor re-timings to other journeys, both to accommodate the additional journeys above, and to seek to provide journey times that it is hoped will better meet the needs of the majority of users. Unfortunately, with only one vehicle being used, the timetable will be a compromise and not all requests were able to be met.
7. Other issues that were raised, but that it was not possible to resolve, include a request from parishes in the Bourne valley for the retention of their daily service to Amesbury, on the grounds that if it were better publicised, it would be well used. Unfortunately, to continue to provide this service would incur additional cost and this would be very unlikely to be recouped from the income from fares. As all of the villages concerned have an alternative regular bus service to Salisbury, it is not proposed to reinstate the link to Amesbury. Lack of local publicity for the Connect2 Wiltshire service as a whole was also mentioned in several of the other responses. The Council does not have the resources to carry out extensive local publicity, but would welcome the assistance of parish councils and other local groups and organisations in making people aware of the services that are available in their area.
8. In the Mere area a higher proportion of respondents said that the proposed service would still meet their needs, and it is proposed to implement the original proposals without change. The main concerns were about the loss of the Saturday service, which was regretted by several users, and the withdrawal of the morning and afternoon journeys to / from Gillingham at work times. These are used by one regular passenger from Bourton, Unfortunately, to provide any service either on Saturdays or for the work time journeys would require an extra vehicle to be used, and would significantly reduce the savings that need to be made, so it is not proposed that they should be reinstated.
9. A copy of the final proposals for both areas is attached as **Appendix 6** – note that this may be subject to change, and that although it is intended that the final timetable will accord with the principles of the decision made here, the detail will need to be confirmed after award of the new contracts for which tenders are currently being invited.

Main Considerations for the Council

10. 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 the Connect2 Wiltshire services. 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

11. No significant issues identified.

Public Health Implications

12. 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. A very high proportion of the users of both services (70 – 80%) were elderly, and a number commented that they rely on the services as their only means of transport. The revised proposal seeks to reduce some the potential adverse impacts on users that were identified by the consultation, although any reduction in the availability of public transport services is bound to reduce the opportunities open to those without their own transport.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

13. No significant issue identified. Although public transport can often have positive environmental impacts by providing an alternative to the private car, the Connect2 Wiltshire Taxibuzz services are used by relatively small numbers of people and the net environmental benefit is therefore small. If the proposals have the desired effect of concentrating the majority of the current usage onto fewer journeys, there may be a slight net environmental benefit.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

14. Equalities impacts have been considered as an integral part of the development and assessment of the proposals, and this report incorporates a summary of the assessment of these impacts and the actions that are proposed as a result.
15. 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 service will have a particular impact on older people; in both the Amesbury and Mere areas between 70 - 80% of respondents to the user questionnaire were aged 65 or over. A high proportion (around 85% in both areas) were women, and there were also significant proportions in both areas who answered 'yes' to the question 'do you consider yourself disabled' (42% in Amesbury area, 51% in the Mere area). 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.
16. The revised proposals seek to reduce to some extent the potential adverse impacts on users that were identified by the consultation, although any reduction in the availability of public transport services is bound to reduce the opportunities open to those without their own transport.

Risk Assessment

17. The cost of the revised services will not be known until tendering has been completed, and there is a risk that the expected savings will not be achieved if underlying increases in operating costs offset the savings from the reduced level of service (see paragraph 18 below). If this is the case there would be a need to identify higher levels of savings from future service reviews.

Financial Implications

18. The introduction of the revised proposals is together expected to yield a financial saving of around £45,000 in a full year compared to the cost of retendering the current level of service. However, the actual saving achieved will depend on the outcome of the current tendering exercise. Any savings that are made that will contribute towards the overall reduction in spending needed to meet the budget allocation set in the Financial Plan.

Legal Implications

19. There is no statutory duty to subsidise a particular level of public transport 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

20. The services in both areas are expensive to provide and used by relatively small numbers of people, and as a result the cost per passenger of both services is considerably higher than the Council's guideline upper threshold of £3.50 subsidy per passenger trip. While drawing up the proposals, the option was therefore considered of discontinuing both services. However, there are no alternative public transport services available for some of the needs that the services are designed to meet (this was subsequently confirmed by the responses to the consultation).
21. Discussions were also held about the possibility of replacing them with community or voluntary transport, and while this could perhaps be a longer term option, it did not appear to be feasible in the shorter term.
22. Rather than complete withdrawal, proposals were therefore drawn up which are designed to achieve significant economies in the operation of both services while continuing as far as possible to meet the needs of existing users. The purpose of the consultation was to identify the impacts of the proposed changes on the existing users, and whether there are significant needs that would not be met. Whilst it is not possible in a situation where resources are limited to cater for the needs of everyone (even the existing services are far from being able to achieve this), changes have been made to the proposals in response to some of the main issues raised in the consultation.

Reason for Proposal

23. It is considered that the revised proposals offer the most acceptable balance between meeting the needs of users and ongoing affordability for the Council.

Proposal

24. That the original proposals that formed the basis for the consultation are amended to incorporate the changes referred to in paragraph 6 of this report, and that, subject to the outcome of the tendering exercise that is currently in progress, are adopted as the basis for the changes to the service that will be introduced in January 2014

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

Full responses to consultation