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PROPOSAL FOR CHANGES TO THE CORSHAM TOWN BUS SERVICE

Purpose of Report

1. To seek Cabinet Member approval for proposed changes to the Corsham Town bus service, in order to achieve financial savings as agreed by the Council in its financial plan for 2013/14 and as a result of the ending of developer funding that had been used to expand the service.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

2. The Corsham Town bus service makes a strong contribution to all three of the priorities that underpin the Business Plan:
 - To protect those that are most vulnerable – the bus service provides a vital link allowing those who do not have their own transport, including many older and less mobile residents, to access services and facilities and to lead full and independent lives.
 - To boost the local economy – by allowing people to access jobs, training and education, and by bringing people into the town to support local businesses.
 - To support and empower communities to do more for themselves – by allowing people to play a part in society even if they do not have access to private transport.

The proposed changes to the service are needed to make financial savings that are required by the Financial Plan that underpins the Business Plan.

Main Considerations for the Council

3. Financial savings are required by the Council's financial plan, and these would have required a review of the town bus service in any case. However, the main consideration is the ending of the funding from the Basil Hill development. This has been used over the last three years to run an increased frequency of service, and to extend the routes to serve Basil Hill MoD, as part of the obligations placed on the developer to encourage the use of sustainable transport. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the MoD and developer, the use made of the extended service has not been enough to make it financially sustainable. As the Council's bus service support budget is already fully committed, and savings are having to be made in other areas, any increase in the amount the Council has to pay for the Corsham Town service would have to be found from reductions to services elsewhere.
4. 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.

Background

5. 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 during 2013/14. The proposal for changes to the Corsham Town bus service is one of a number that are being progressed to meet this target.
6. In the case of the Corsham Town service there are two additional reasons why the service has to be reviewed at this time:
 - For the last three years the service has been partly funded from external sources. This funding comes to an end during 2013 and, as a result, the cost to the Council of supporting the current level of service would rise by £80,000 if no changes are made. As the bus service support budget is already fully committed and has to find savings, this would not be affordable.
 - The current operator of the service has given notice to terminate his contract with effect from January 2014, and this is expected to lead to a further increase in cost if the current timetable is retained.

Rationale for the consultation proposals

7. The rationale for the proposals was set out in the information sheet sent to consultees (**Appendix 2**).
8. The town bus service currently costs £200,000 per annum, of which a quarter is recovered from passenger fares, £80,000 from the developers of the MoD Basil Hill site, and around £80,000 from Wiltshire Council. When the developer funding ends, the Council will have to pay at least £160,000 per annum, and more if the cost of providing the service increases when retendered. The service carries around 80,000 passenger journeys a year which, when spread over the number of bus journeys operated, equates to on average only seven passengers per trip. The number of passengers does not therefore justify the current level of service, which requires two buses and three drivers to operate.
9. The proposed changes were designed to reduce the cost of operation by using only one bus, while continuing to provide an attractive service for the majority of users. This was proposed to be achieved by operating a single half hourly 'loop' service covering most of the stops served by the current two routes, with the exception of the Rudloe estate which has frequent alternative services into the town centre (four buses an hour) from stops on the nearby main roads, and a section of Valley Road which is also served by alternative services to the town centre.

Changes made to the proposals as a result of the consultation

10. The responses to the consultation are summarised in **Appendices 3 and 4**. The surveys demonstrated a very high level of satisfaction among current users, with around 97% saying the current service met their needs. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the proposals, opinion on the proposed timetable was sharply divided. In most areas of the town, 70 - 85% of respondents still said the proposed timetable would meet their needs, but in the areas from which the route is proposed to be withdrawn (Rudloe estate and the Valley Road area) over 90% said that it would not.
11. The main issues raised in the consultation responses are summarised briefly below. Following detailed consideration of these, a number of changes have been made to the proposals, as follows, although regrettably there are some issues which it has not been possible to address:

- Withdrawal of the service to Rudloe estate. Particular concern was expressed about the loss of the service through the estate at school times, when it is used by schoolchildren who would otherwise have to cross the busy B3109 road to catch alternative services. During the day the service is also used by many elderly residents, many of whom said they would find it difficult and potentially dangerous to walk from the estate to the main road bus stops, and to cross the B3109. The alternative services also charge higher fares, and their pick up and set down points in Corsham are less convenient.

Changes made to proposal:

- (a) A service will be provided through the Rudloe estate to and from the Corsham School by diverting another existing school bus;
 - (b) Faresaver has agreed to divert some journeys on its existing service X31 to run through Rudloe estate to provide a limited service for those who would find it difficult to walk to and cross the main road;
 - (c) Consideration will be given to siting a new bus stop on Pickwick Road near the junction with Beechfield Road to reduce the walk to the Medical Centre and new campus from the nearest stop (this would also benefit other users of the Faresaver services who want to access these facilities).
- Loss of the service along Valley Road. There are a significant number of elderly users in the area (e.g. Spackman Road) who would find it difficult to walk to the nearest point on the proposed new route at Freestone Way. The alternative buses that run along Valley Road would provide a service to the town centre, but not to the Beechfield Road area for the surgery (which is regularly used by many) and the new campus.
Change made to proposal: some journeys will, before serving Katherine Park, divert into Spackman Road where they will reverse before rejoining the standard route.
 - The proposal to run the service as a one way loop would mean long journey times (in one direction only) for people living near either end of the route. This was raised by a number of residents in Katherine Park and also around Beechfield Road. It would also mean a long journey for people wishing to use the town service to travel from the town centre to the new campus, and to the Beechfield Road surgery. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to address this issue without adversely affecting other aspects of the service.
 - There were several requests for a service running later into Saturday afternoons. Although this would benefit users, there is no Saturday afternoon service operating currently, and to provide one would increase costs.

12. A copy of the revised proposal is attached as **Appendix 6**.

Safeguarding Considerations

13. No significant issues identified.

Public Health Implications

14. 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 seeks to reduce the potential adverse impacts on users that were identified by the consultation, while maintaining a frequent service for most areas of the town.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

15. 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 proposal maintains a similar level of service to that currently operating for most parts of the town.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

16. 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.
17. 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 identified potential impacts in those areas which would no longer be served by the town bus (Rudloe estate and the Valley Road area), particularly for older people, young people, people from low income families, and women, who are more likely to rely on public transport; and for older, younger and less able people who might have difficulty in accessing alternative services.
18. The revised proposal seeks to reduce 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

19. The consultation identified potential safety risks for users of the current service (particularly schoolchildren and the elderly) who would under the initial proposals have had to cross the B3109 to access the main road bus stops by the Rudloe estate. The revised proposals will result in a school bus and a limited number of daytime journeys continuing to operate through the estate for those who would find it difficult to cross the road safely.

Financial Implications

20. The revised proposal will yield a financial saving of £80,000, which is sufficient to offset the ending of the funding from the Basil Hill development.

Legal Implications

21. 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

22. The consultation was designed to identify any significant impacts on the travel and access needs of current users of the service that would result from the proposed changes. Whilst it is not possible in a situation where resources are limited to cater for the needs of everyone, every effort has been made to look for affordable ways of revising the proposals to address the main issues raised:
 - (i) A number of changes have been made to the proposals, as identified above, to meet some of the main needs that respondents said would not be met under the original proposals.

- (ii) Prior to the consultation, a variety of ways of achieving the required saving were considered. This included in particular the option of retaining the two current routes (10A and 10E), but running at a reduced frequency of hourly on each route. The options were discussed with representatives of Corsham Town Council, Corsham Community Area Network, and MoD Basil Hill and it was agreed to consult on the basis of the 'single loop' proposal as this would continue to provide a frequent and attractive service for the majority of users that would encourage greater overall use of the service.
- (iii) Following the consultation, the option of retaining the two current routes on a reduced frequency, which was suggested as an alternative by several consultees, was again given serious consideration. It was, however, rejected as it is considered that the main issues identified by the consultation can be addressed by the changes proposed in (i) above, and to reduce the frequency of the service to hourly would have an adverse impact on use of the service as a whole
- (iv) Several other suggestions were made by respondees to the consultation, and responses to these are given in **Appendix 3**

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 be amended to incorporate the changes referred to in paragraph 11 and **Appendix 6** of this report, and 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