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PROPOSAL FOR CHANGES TO BUS SERVICES IN NORTH-WEST WILTSHIRE

Purpose of Report

1. To seek Cabinet Member approval for proposed changes to bus services in north-west Wiltshire, in order to achieve financial savings.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

2. The bus services that have been reviewed make 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 towns 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 services 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 a proportion of these are intended to be made from the review of services in north-west Wiltshire. 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

4. The Council's financial plan requires savings to be made from continued challenge and review of support for bus services during 2013/14, and further savings will be required in future years. The review of services in north-west Wiltshire is one of a number that are being progressed to meet these requirements.

Rationale for the consultation proposals

5. The rationale for the proposals for each of the services affected was set out in the information sheets sent to consultees (included as **Appendix 2B**).

6. The supported public bus services in north-west Wiltshire service currently cost the Council £700,000 per annum and between them carry around 355,000 single passenger trips a year. Some services are relatively well used, whereas others provide an important service for their local communities but are expensive to provide in relation to the numbers of passengers carried. The rationale behind the proposals as a whole has been to maintain the strategic links that exist between the towns, while seeking to reduce costs so as to make the bus network as a whole more sustainable and affordable for the future. Some of the rural services are poorly used and the proposals reduce the level of service to reflect the use made of them, while continuing to provide a service that will meet essential access needs.

Changes made to the proposals as a result of the consultation

7. The responses to the consultation are summarised in **Appendices 3 and 4**. Following detailed consideration of these responses, changes have been made to the proposed timetables. Copies of the revised proposed timetables are attached as **Appendix 6** – note that there may still be minor changes to these as timetables are finalised with the new operators of the contracts.
8. Some of the main issues raised in the consultation, and the changes to the original proposals that have been made as a result, include:
- Service 30 (Malmesbury town bus) – reduction in service to Orchard Court. The revised proposals revert to a similar route and timetable to the current service, which will address the issues raised.
 - Service 31 (Malmesbury – Swindon) – withdrawal of diversion via Lea and Milbourne. Alternate journeys will now continue to make the diversion, but some will omit Little Somerford as a result. Journeys that divert via Lea and Milbourne on their way into Malmesbury will continue to Swindon via Cowbridge (and vice versa), and passengers will therefore also be able to travel from these villages to Swindon via Malmesbury on alternate hours when there is no direct journey from Lea and Milbourne.
 - Service 41 (Malmesbury – Yate) – withdrawal of first morning bus to and from Yate. The service will run as proposed, but South Gloucestershire Council is considering making alternative arrangements for passengers using the early journey from Tormarton and Acton Turville into Yate.
 - Service 50/52 (Ashton Keynes / Minety to Swindon and Cirencester) – withdrawal of school bus from Leigh to Kingshill School and Cirencester College. The revised proposals will reinstate the morning bus from Leigh, and in the afternoon provide transport to Leigh from Cirencester for school and college students only.
 - Service 91 (Chippenham – Dauntsey Vale – Malmesbury)
 - (i) Withdrawal of service between the Dauntsey Vale villages and Malmesbury – the revised proposal includes a daily service of one bus in each direction to Malmesbury from Dauntsey, Great Somerford, Seagry, Startley and Rodbourne (new service 97).
 - (ii) Poor connections with service 31 to Swindon and Royal Wootton Bassett – the revised proposal includes improved connections on some journeys at key times. There will also be a direct shoppers' service to Swindon and Royal Wootton Bassett on Fridays by extending service 60 to serve Sutton Benger, Upper Seagry, Startley, Great Somerford and Dauntsey.
 - (iii) Issues with timings of buses to Chippenham – the revised proposals reinstate journeys leaving Chippenham at 0835 and 1430 to Kington Langley, Sutton Benger, Christian Malford and Dauntsey; reinstate a journey from those villages arriving in Chippenham at 0924; and extend the 0817 arrival in Chippenham to also serve Seagry.

- Service 92 (Malmesbury – Chippenham) – loss of hourly service to Hullavington and Stanton St Quintin villages. The revised proposals reinstate hourly diversions to both villages, and to Kington St Michael, at the expense of a longer end to end journey time.
 - Service 93 (Malmesbury – Cirencester)
 - (i) Issues with revised timings of buses – unfortunately, it has not been possible to amend the timings of the buses without using additional vehicles, which would incur significant additional cost.
 - (ii) Diversion of service away from Tetbury Hill in Malmesbury – some journeys have been re-routed via Tetbury Hill to provide the opportunity for residents of the area to travel to Cirencester.
 - (iii) Requests for a service to Kemble station – unfortunately, it is not affordable at present to provide a service that would be attractive to rail users as well as continuing to serve the needs of the villages.
 - Service 99 (Monkton Park – Chippenham) – reduction in service to Monkton Park estate, especially loss of the first bus in the day and the afternoon service. An improved service of five buses in each direction between 0850 and 1350 will be provided.
9. For the following services the consultation did not include a specific proposal but invited views on the main needs that should be catered for, and suggestions for alternative ways of providing a cost-effective service. Based on the responses to the consultation, and information on the use being made of the services, it is proposed to introduce revised services as follows:
- Service 36 (Castle Combe – Colerne – Chippenham) – the service will continue to operate on Fridays, reduced to one journey in each direction but will be withdrawn on Tuesdays.
 - Service 75 (shoppers' bus to Chippenham from Sherston, Luckington and West Kington area) – existing regular passengers will be catered for by extending service 36 back to Sherston, Luckington, Acton Turville and Badminton, providing a Friday only service to Chippenham via Colerne.
 - Service 76/76A (shoppers' bus to Bath from villages north-west of Chippenham) - existing passengers will be catered for by combining the existing service 76 and 76A routes into a new route 37 which will omit places from which there are currently no regular passengers.
 - Service 44A (Saturday service) - a Saturday service to Redlands and Pipsmore Road estate will be provided four times a day by diverting service 35.
10. Many of the responses also raised more general concerns about the reduction in opportunities to travel and participate in a whole range of activities that will result from reducing the overall frequency of the bus service, and the impact that this would have on the ability of people without their own transport to lead full and independent lives. While these concerns are recognised, they are more difficult to address without the ability to fund higher overall levels of service, and given the relatively low level of use made of some of the current services.

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. The revised proposals seek 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.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

13. 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 proposals seek to maintain a similar level of service on the parts of the network that are better used, while reducing provision on those where fewer people travel.

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 and its appendices incorporate 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 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.
16. The revised proposals seek 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

17. All of the services in the review have been tendered, in accordance with procurement regulations and the Council's procurement rules, as the previous contracts had reached the end of their contract term. This has resulted in many contracts being awarded to different operators, with the associated risk that operating performance might be affected. New operators are being carefully briefed on the requirements of the contract and are being asked to confirm the measures they will take to ensure a smooth transition. Operational performance will be monitored on an ongoing basis.

Financial Implications

18. The introduction of the revised proposal is expected to yield a financial saving of around £115,000 in a full year. This will contribute towards the overall reduction in spending needed to meet the budget allocations set in the Financial Plan.

Legal Implications

19. 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

20. The original proposals that were put out for consultation were developed with the intention of achieving financial savings by reducing the costs of operation, while maintaining a reasonable level of service that will continue to meet the needs of the majority of existing users of the services. An alternative approach would have been to seek to increase fares income by expanding the use made of the services, through a combination of service improvements and promotional activity. However, experience suggests that this approach is only likely to be successful on services that are already relatively frequent and where there are a sufficient number of potential users to generate significant volumes of extra traffic, and that regrettably cost reduction was the only option that would generate the required level of financial saving.
21. Community transport was considered as an alternative way of providing some services where the use made of the existing service was low but there appeared to be a continuing need for some sort of transport to be provided. Community transport operators in the area were approached, with the assistance of Community First, to establish whether they had the capacity or the desire to play a greater role in meeting the public transport needs of their areas, and the consultation documents also invited groups to come forward with alternative proposals to meet local needs. However, as in other areas previously reviewed, this generated a very limited response. These discussions will, however, continue, and any appropriate and affordable opportunities to meet needs that are not otherwise being met will be pursued.
22. The consultation itself was designed to identify any significant impacts on the travel and access needs of current users of the services 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 (even the existing services are far from being able to achieve this), every effort has been made to look for affordable ways of revising the proposals to address the main issues raised. A number of significant changes have been made to the proposed timetables, as identified in the main report, to meet some of the main needs that respondents said would not be met under the original proposals.

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 paragraphs 8-9 of this report, and be adopted as the basis for the changes to the service that will be introduced on Monday 31 March 2014.

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

Full responses to consultation