

Agenda item 4

For discussion and decision: Supporting Evening Bus Services Between Bath and Frome

Authors: Anna Francis, Resilience Officer and Cllr Tricia Golinski

Summary

Bath and Northeast Somerset Council is proposing to remove the subsidy they currently provide to the evening 267 bus service from Frome to Bath and back. The Town Clerk has written to BANES urging them not to cut the subsidy and Cllrs are asked to note this. In addition, and if BANES decides to cut the subsidy, Cllrs are asked to consider whether to provide a subsidy instead.

Background

Frome and Villages Bus User Group (FAVBUG) has highlighted that the evening 267 bus service (Frome to Bath) is again under threat, as B&NES Council has been consulting parishes about withdrawing its subsidy from May 2017. This is the two evening services from Frome to Bath at 20.00 and 22.00 and the two from Bath to Frome at 21.10 and 23.10. Somerset County Council has not subsidised this service since 2011. BANES has been providing a subsidy of £19,000 per year, despite the fact that only 16% of the passengers are BANES residents, with the majority being resident in Frome, and a few in the villages en-route.

FAVBUG asked all towns and parishes affected to write to B&NES making the case for retaining the service by including the following points:

- Bus users coming to Bath they support Bath's economy
- Bus users, who are employed in Bath, contribute to business rates
- Public transport is more environmentally sustainable than travelling by car
- Much of the new housing in Frome depends on travel plans which include using current bus services
- The train service only serves Frome, not the villages covered by the current bus service and is less safe for vulnerable users
- It is the more vulnerable in society who would suffer: the young, elderly, poor and disabled.

A decision was taken by the Town Clerk to respond on behalf of the Council to this end.

If BANES decides to withdraw its subsidy, the services may cease as they would not be economically viable for First Bus. Annual usage figures for these four evening services provided by BANES are below:

Contract Net Cost 2016/17 (annual cost of subsidy)	£19,076
Passenger revenue (retained by the operator First Bus)	£14,832
Patronage (annual total of users of these 4 services)	10,084
Concession journeys %	21%
Cost per passenger journey	£1.89

The 2016 statistics reveal that 70% were doing the journey for 'entertainment/leisure', and about 20% were going to or from work. 40% were doing the journey 'almost every day', and 23% 'at least once a week'.

The issues

There is strong feeling amongst some community members that FTC should agree to support the service if B&NES do remove subsidies. However, this potential reduction in support for local transport services is not an isolated incident. Increasing budget constraints at county, district and city council levels mean that other bus services will most likely be under threat again in the next few months and years. By subsidising one service, there may be an expectation for FTC to support other threatened services too. Continuity is also important, if FTC did decide to subsidise the service this would need a commitment for several years and would face opposition if / when the support was withdrawn.

For discussion

The options for discussion below explore how to secure a continuation of the bus service as well as whether there are alternatives to a public bus service.

1. Lobby B&NES to continue to subsidise the 267 service
2. Co-subsidise if the BANES subsidy is removed: The town and parish councils affected could co-fund the subsidy. Split proportionally according to the bus user numbers from each town/parish, this would mean approximately 73% of it being paid by Frome. This amounts to approximately £14,000 from May 2017.
3. Is there a way to increase passenger numbers to reduce the need for subsidy?
4. Consider using participatory budgeting to test public support for FTC to provide a subsidy.
5. Could the service be crowd-funded?
6. Explore alternatives to a bus service: Trains are available at these times but are significantly more expensive, miss out villages and the station is not easily available to many areas of Frome. Even so, could FTC explore providing discounted train tickets for example for young people?

7. Could we encourage lift-share instead of the evening bus service?
8. Could a bespoke alternative to the bus service be developed – e.g. a bookable minibus?
9. Could the volunteer driver scheme be expanded to include a bookable service to Bath?
10. Could businesses contribute towards the service?

Recommendations

1. Note that a response from the Town Clerk to BANES urging them to continue to subsidise the 267 bus service between Bath and Frome
2. Consider whether to provide the subsidy of £19,076 to continue the evening service if BANES decides to cut it