

Agenda item 4

For decision: Support for bus services from Frome to Bath

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Summary

This report sets out the current position relating to the threatened 267 evening bus services operated by First Bus that connects Frome and surrounding villages with Bath. It examines the benefits and costs associated with FTC supporting these services.

It is the Monday – Thursday evening services that are currently under threat following the decision by Bath & North East Somerset Council (B&NES) to reduce their subsidy from May 2017. Without other Councils filling the funding gap the services will cease to operate. Pledges have been made by Somerset County Council (SCC), Norton St Philip and Rode Parish Council (in principle) with a view to supporting the services from April to September 2017 and FTC now needs to decide whether to contribute.

The options are:

- a) To match the pledge from SCC i.e. £365.67 which represents one sixth of the balance of funding required to keep the service going April to September. This is on the same proviso specified by SCC that each of the other Councils i.e. Mendip District Council, Rode, Beckington and Norton St. Philip do the same and work with FTC to come up with a more sustainable solution beyond September.
- b) To offer 50% of the remaining balance i.e. £914.17 on the basis that other councils involved match it. Again, a partnership with all relevant Councils would be sought to develop a more sustainable way forward beyond September
- c) To offer no subsidy for these services and plough the Council's funding into other sustainable transport initiatives that will primarily benefit Frome. The report highlights what £366 and £914 would buy us

Background

Frome Town Council aims to reduce energy and carbon in transport, and works with the community to deliver transport solutions such as:

- Village shopper community bus for Frome's Wednesday market
- Volunteer drivers' scheme to support vulnerable people
- Community car club
- Working with train operators to get better train services for Frome and improvements at Frome Station
- Facilitation of FAVBUG (Frome & Villages Bus User Group)

To date, FTC has not subsidised commercial bus services but we and other councils are being asked to do so in the light of the threat to the 267 evening services operated between Frome and Bath by First Bus from Monday to Thursday. This was highlighted by FAVBUG in

September 2016 and is due to Bath & North East Somerset (B&NES) Council reducing its subsidy from May 2017. The services affected are 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.

Following a meeting on 19 January attended by representatives of First, FAVBUG, FTC, SCC, county, district and parish councillors from Frome, Norton St Philip, Beckington, Tellisford and Rode, First Bus made a proposal that these services are funded for a further 4 months (30 April to 1 September) to allow time to see how to save them in the long term. The funding gap for this period is £4194. First Bus have offered to contribute £2000 towards this leaving the sum of £2194 for local councils to find.

Since 2011, Somerset County Council has not contributed to any evening bus services. There have also been significant reductions in the funding provided to local bus services affecting weekday, Saturday and Sunday services across the county. In his letter to Cllr Linda Oliver dated 6 February, Cllr David Fothergill, Cabinet member for Highways & Transport said that SCC cannot justify long term support for an evening bus service when residents on the route will continue to enjoy an hourly daytime service Monday to Saturday, a Sunday service and evenings on Friday and Saturday. However, in the light of the offer made by First Bus and the interest shown by local councils, he has offered to contribute an equal share of the £2194 required (£365.67) on the proviso that each of the other 5 councils i.e. MDC, FTC, Rode, Norton St. Philip and Beckington contribute an equal share. This is to allow more time for an in-depth consultation and survey to take place and a 'use it or lose it' campaign to be run over a six-month period with the aim of increasing patronage to a commercial level so that no further funding is required.

To date, Rode Parish Council have indicated that they will contribute but the sum is to be confirmed. Norton St. Philip have offered £200-£250.

The beneficiaries of the evening bus services

How many passengers are involved?

Based on data supplied by First, the average number of passengers on the Bath to Frome route between 19:00 and Midnight is 23 per evening – Mon – Thurs. Passengers board/alight at all the stops from Frome to Bath and on the return journey.

In terms of the number of passengers travelling from Frome, a daily average of 4 per evening use the services Monday to Thursday. The average number increases to 5 per evening for those on the return trip.

On this basis, it is understandable that First are reviewing their Monday to Thursday evening services.

What is the purpose of the journeys?

A survey was undertaken by FAVBUG to understand why people use these evening services. The survey showed that the service is used primarily by students studying in Bath and people who work in the city.

What are the alternatives currently open to these passengers?

There is a bus service operated by Frome Minibuses (424/173) that connects with Bath via a change at Radstock. But the 173 service stops early in the evening at 18:30 and so may not be suitable for workers on later shifts or students that have evening classes.

Trains operate between Bath and Frome in the evening. Those services depart Bath Spa at 19:10, 20:07, 21:07 and 23:10. The drawback is that the rail service doesn't serve the villages and so it is unlikely to be convenient for most passengers.

The options open to FTC

a) Matching the pledge by SCC

One approach would be for FTC to match the pledge by SCC i.e. £365.67 using the agreed Resilience budget for 2017/18. This sum represents one sixth of the balance of funding required to keep the service going April to September. This would be on the proviso that each of the other Councils i.e. Mendip District Council, Rode, Beckington, Norton St. Philip do the same and work with FTC to come up with a more sustainable solution beyond September.

What are the advantages?

On the assumption that other councils follow suit, the bus service is continued until more in depth research can be completed on viable alternatives for the future. In the short term, there would be benefits to those students and workers who currently use the service. The period would coincide with a time when students would be studying for and taking exams. The process of developing a more sustainable viable alternative would help to build the working relationship with other councils that would have longer term benefits in terms of delivering our work programme.

In the period leading up to September, we would wish to explore the following:

- Whether more people can be encouraged to use the First 267 service
- Whether other operators could run it more viably
- Whether it is possible to develop a service that better serves shift workers in both Bath and Frome – we already know that there is interest from employers at Commerce Park in running a bus service from the site.
- At the same time a more environmentally sustainable alternative to diesel fuelled buses could be explored

What are the disadvantages?

A potential flaw in this option is that it seems unlikely that the local councils will be prepared to make an equal contribution. There is also the general point that the number of passengers from Frome that use this service is small. So, a question emerges around value for money for FTC. There is also a risk that a precedent is set for the future; people may expect FTC to step in should other bus services become unviable in the future and so bus subsidies may become an increasing draw on our budget in the future.

b) To provide 50% of the remaining balance of funds required

To offer 50% of the remaining balance i.e. £914.17 on the basis that the other local Councils taken together match this sum. Again, a partnership with all relevant Councils would be sought to develop a more sustainable way forward beyond September.

What are the advantages?

As above. But the value in this option is that it seems more likely that this formula would work in terms of raising the funding needed to continue the service.

What are the disadvantages?

This option would be even less value for money given the number of passengers using the service.

c) Offer no subsidy to the 267 and plough the Council's funding into other sustainable transport initiatives that will primarily benefit Frome

What are the advantages?

Put simply better value for *Frome* in terms of what the sums involved would buy us.

£366 would buy us:

- 6 months of supporting the current village bus service which serves the local villages and Frome but is primarily about enabling people to shop and enjoy the other benefits of travelling into the town. It costs £624 to run the service for a year and is already being supported by 3 of the local villages and Frome. The benefit of supporting the village bus scheme is that it is working towards being self-sustaining so long term funding won't be necessary.

£914 would buy us:

- 83 return tickets or 96 single train tickets on the evening train service out of Bath. This has relevance in terms of the current initiative to support those on low incomes to travel by train and which is currently funded by GWR. This would enable a continuation of this initiative should the pilot prove successful.
- Lifetime membership of the Frome Co-Wheels car club for 36 people.

What are the disadvantages?

With the exception of the village bus service, these initiatives would not involve partnership working with the other councils and the benefits that partnership working would deliver in the future. The Co-Wheels proposal would only be suitable for up to five people sharing with one driver and they would all need to leave and arrive back in Frome at the same time. Not supporting the 267 would put those travelling to Bath for work or education purposes at an immediate disadvantage.

Recommendations

Cllrs are requested to consider the following 3 options and decide which one to support:

- a) To match the pledge from SCC i.e. £365.67 which represents one sixth of the balance of funding required to keep the service going April to September. This is on the proviso that each of the other Councils i.e. Mendip District Council, Rode, Beckington and Norton St. Philip do the same and work with FTC to come up with a more sustainable solution beyond September
- b) To offer 50% of the remaining balance i.e. £914.17 on the basis that other councils involved match it. Again, a partnership with all relevant Councils would be sought to develop a more sustainable way forward beyond September
- c) To offer no subsidy for these services and plough the Council's funding into other sustainable transport initiatives that will primarily benefit Frome.