

Agenda item 5

For information & decision – Supporting village bus route and alternatives to First 267 bus service

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Summary

FTC has been supporting the trial of a weekly bus service via Mendip Community Transport linking local villages to Frome following removal of the weekly service. It is recommended that FTC continues to support the scheme. The cost to FTC over the next 9 months would be £567 for 500 journeys and would be funded using the agreed Resilience budget. Total costs are shared with four other parishes. Usage data will be presented at the meeting.

This report also follows the earlier decision in February 2017 to award a one-off payment of £1200 to enable the Monday to Thursday evening First 267 bus services to continue running for another 6 months. At the time, councillors resolved that other transport options be explored with a report to be brought back. A further request was then received in July for an additional £2000. It was confirmed at the last Council meeting that FTC regarded the earlier payment as a one-off. This report outlines what the Council has done to promote the First 267 service since the decision in February and the results of the exploration of other transport options. This report and any discussion at the meeting will help to inform an emerging Sustainable Transport Strategy for Frome.

Village bus service

Following the removal of the weekly bus service from Witham Friary and Trudoxhill to Frome, we were approached by Michael Gay to support a trial of a weekly minibus which would replace the service. The trial is now in its tenth month and has provided almost 600 journeys. FTC now needs to consider whether it wants to continue to support the service. This would cost a maximum of £567 for nine months (Sept 2017 – May 2018) and provide around 500 passenger journeys. Usage data will be provided at the meeting.

Alternatives to the 267 – Background

At the Town Matters Committee meeting in February, councillors considered a report on the threat to First 267 evening bus services, specifically those operating from 20:00 between Frome and Bath Monday to Thursday. They agreed to a one-off payment of £1200 to help keep the service running from April to September. They also wanted to see alternatives explored – see below for the results. A further request was then received in July for an additional £2000. It was confirmed at the last Council meeting that FTC regarded the earlier payment as a one-off.

In addition to the work to investigate alternatives and to encourage the take up of bus and other sustainable transport opportunities, a transport leaflet was compiled for Frome with links to community transport information and rail and bus timetables which was delivered to all households. Copies of the First 267 bus service timetables were also delivered to all households at the Council's expense to encourage greater take up of the service.

Options

Our approach to investigating alternatives to the First 267 service included:

- Contact with other bus operators and potential sponsors
- A survey of businesses on Commerce Park to explore the demand for a bus service serving the Park
- An assessment of rail travel options
- Alternative transport modes

Contact with other bus operators and potential sponsors

Given the fact that in the past, Libra Travel and Frome Minibuses have been prepared to take on former First services notably between Frome and Shepton Mallet/Radstock, these operators were contacted. Libra Travel have shown no interest. Frome Minibuses said that they would need to see consistent baseline passenger numbers for the business case to take on a route but also indicated that it would need to be subsidised from the start. Mendip Community Transport are potentially interested and are preparing an outline of potential costs and services. We also spoke to the finance director of Bath City College about co-funding the service. However, they are not able to provide support.

Commerce Park transport survey

In May, businesses on Commerce Park were contacted to find out about current travel to work patterns and to explore whether investment in public transport services and other infrastructure including cycle paths would encourage people to switch from car use. At the time, it was thought that a positive response may encourage First or other operators to consider introducing new bus services or possibly help to improve the viability of existing services such as the 267.

Details of the questions that were asked can be viewed at:

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/CommerceParkTransport>

To date, the survey has received 61 responses:

- 21 said that travelling to work via public transport is difficult; 32 said that it was impossible.
- 50 said that they currently travel by car with only 5 commuting by bicycle.

- 19 said that they would take the bus if one stopped at Commerce Park with 21 saying that they would if it stopped at times appropriate for their work patterns (generally between 07:30 and 18:00).
- 47 said they would switch to public transport if it was more cost effective than driving.
- Only 32 knew of the cycle path.
- Specific improvements suggested included better path surfacing (19), improved lighting (20), better signage (30), better facilities on site e.g. showers, cycle parking (22).

With reference to the issue in this report i.e. the viability of the weekday evening bus services between Frome and Bath, the crucial point is that most respondents would be interested in a bus service during the normal working day not in the evenings. However, it is understood that First are now taking an interest in Commerce Park as a potential bus destination on the strength of the interest being shown by respondents to the survey. Other operators might also be interested in providing this service. The survey has also generated some useful information to guide our work to develop and promote cycling in Frome.

Rail travel options

Whilst getting to Frome station remains a challenge for those living in the villages, rail services remain an option for Frome based residents. For those travelling back to Frome from workplaces, college and for other reasons during weekday evenings, trains depart Bath Spa at 19:10, 20:07, 21:07 and 23:10. For students, those aged over 60 and others a rail card should make that mode of travel affordable.

Alternative transport modes

In terms of other alternative means of getting from Frome to Bath and other destinations around Frome, the following ideas have emerged through our investigations and will be discussed further at the meeting:

Car share – the development of a car share app

Taxi – a possible ‘hail and ride’ scheme (‘Fruber’)

Community cars – we have already set up a Community Car Scheme to enable people to get around Frome and to get to hospital appointments and the like – a similar scheme could be set up to support students and workers to get to Bath

E cars – it is already possible to hire electric cars utilising the E-Car Club – this could be developed and promoted as a means of getting from Frome to Bath

Mendip Community Transport – an adaptation of the current service operated by Mendip Community Transport between Frome and the villages around the town.

A presentation on these and other ideas will be made at the meeting. The debate will assist with the development of a Sustainable Transport Strategy for Frome.

Recommendations

1. FTC works with Michael Gay to increase usage and financial sustainability of the village bus service and continues to support the scheme for the next 9 months utilising the agreed Resilience budget, reviewing usage data and costs monthly
2. FTC continues to explore the option of supporting an evening bus service between Frome, surrounding villages and Bath via Mendip Community Transport if the 267 service is removed and works to enable the service to become financially self-sustaining
3. FTC continues to develop a Sustainable Transport Strategy for Frome