



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Cllr Jane Scott OBE
Wiltshire Council
County Hall
Bythesea Road
Trowbridge
Wiltshire
BA14 8JN

8th September 2015

Dear Jane,

As we discussed at our recent meeting, there has been considerable concern from my constituents, especially those living in Pewsham, about the recent changes to the local bus service.

I would like to confirm that Wiltshire Council is open to investigating whether another private firm might be interested in running a bus service to include the 'Pewsham' element of the route, perhaps with additional links to other parts of Chippenham which are currently less well served by public transport.

On the wider issue of Wiltshire's bus service, I do not believe that it should be a function of Local Authorities to subsidise uneconomical local bus services at huge cost to the tax payer. As you know there is no obligation on a council to subsidise the service and it is absolutely right that these subsidised services are regularly reviewed to ensure value for taxpayer funds. Alternatively commercial services will not in themselves provide many rural bus services that many of Wiltshire's residents rely on.

I have looked at how other areas have reconciled this and have spoken with local transport experts and colleagues from other areas of the country and believe that Wiltshire should consider adopting a Quality Bus Contract to serve the county.

By way of further explanation, I enclose a copy of an article I have written on this and I would welcome your thoughts on this matter.

Best wishes,

Michelle

Michelle Donelan – Member of Parliament
c.c. Councillor Philip Whitehead, Wiltshire Council Cabinet Member for Transport
Councillor Teresa Hutton, Town Councillor for Pewsham
Transwilt Community Rail Partnership

Quality Bus Contracts

An MP's mailbag is always varied and interesting and can often be an indication of the strength of feeling on local or national issues. One of the subjects that has dominated the correspondence I have received recently has been local bus services, where there have been changes to some local routes.

You have heard me talk about jobs and support for businesses. Rural Transportation plays a big part in Economic Growth. Most jobs are created outside residential areas; they are important sources of income for those who would otherwise have limited opportunities as lack of transportation is a definite barrier to work for many families. For some it is the only feasible means of meeting medical and other professional appointments, taking up employment, attending job interviews, dropping off at school or nursery, and going to college.

Many local people believe that some of the changes to bus services are to the detriment of public service provision, could lead to less people using the bus, more traffic and congestion, but most significantly, reducing the potential for older and disabled residents' to maintain their independence in accessing town centres and shops.

There are currently two ways of running bus services, commercially and by subsidy. Both have flaws. Subsidised services are used when it is not economically viable for a commercial operator to run a local service that Wiltshire Council believe is needed. There is no obligation on a council to subsidise the service and it is absolutely right that these subsidised services are regularly reviewed to ensure value for taxpayer funds – some of these services are run at huge cost.

In commercial services a bus operator can charge what they like, run when they like and taxpayer funding is limited to paying for those with a concessionary pass. Free market capitalism, yes, but it will not in itself provide many rural bus services that some rely on. There are bus routes that generate millions of pounds of profit and others that don't and never will. It is quite understandable that a company's focus is on those profitable routes and not investment in running less profitable services. If a service starts to fall below the company's profit benchmark there is an almost instant gap in the service and local residents are left without a bus service.

So, what would I suggest as an alternative? I have been speaking with local transport experts and colleagues from other areas of the country and believe we need a radical re-think: Quality Bus Contracts work very well in London and Cornwall are coming to Manchester soon. Could this be the answer for us? I believe so.

In a Quality Bus Contract the services are still operated by private companies but the contracts are to run specific services as set out by a Local Transport Board, which could bring together the councils, residents associations and industry experts. Under this scheme, buses are still run by commercial operators but they are expected to run services to the specifications laid down by the Local Transport Board. Fares are set in the contract as are the routes they will run for the duration of the contract. The hugely profitable elements of the service simply subsidise the less profitable routes. The commercial company will still be able to make a profit, but it would mean that local people would have more of a say in local bus routes.

I believe that a Quality Bus Contract is a win/win. It reduces the need for bus subsidy (big tick from the local authority), it means a more thought through service, involves the community and has simple, affordable prices (big tick from those who use the buses) and helps encourage the use of public transport. I have more meetings and discussions planned soon and I intend to explore this in

more detail. I believe it's a 'no brainer' but hope to encourage others to agree. What do you think?
Let me know on michelle.donelan.mp@parliament.uk or write to me at 61 New Road, Chippenham,
SN15 1ES.