

Sent by email to Wiltshire Councillors and members of Wiltshire's Public Transport Review board on Friday, 3rd June 2016 to update them on early reading of the Bus Services Bill, and the opportunities it offers in a Wiltshire context



Dear Wiltshire Councillor / member of the Public Transport Review Board

The Bus Services Bill, introduced into Parliament last month, provides a new framework for bus franchising and for enhanced partnerships to Mayoral regions and other transport authorities with the capability, public support and logical economic area to move their public transport network forward.

There's a saying "if it ain't bust, don't fix it" but Wiltshire Council already considers the current setup to be bust, as witnessed by the public consultation on supported bus services which ran from January to early April and didn't even include the status quo as a possible option outcome.

The Bus Services Bill is also an acknowledgement of shortcomings of the current system and provides the new mechanisms for bus operators, transport authorities and public accountability to move forward to systems that are stable, economically sound and provide a strong base for commercial operators to invest and for us all to work together for a network solution. "Bus Bill" options were absent from the Wiltshire consultation (as it wasn't fully clear what would be on offer), but the "Option 24/7" team, with guidance from contacts, put forward proposals during the consultation based on the anticipated direction (although not the detail) of the Bill. We got considerable support in a huge response, and have followed up with several meetings with the Cabinet member for transport (Philip Whitehead), officers, and the Review Board; an action was placed on us to do pilot work looking at an area of north and west Wiltshire to see how our franchising proposal could work.

Our work concluded, and a technical meeting were set up to look at these as the next step. The meeting on 5th May was postponed due to the Police Commissioner elections that day. The meeting on 12th May was postponed; the reason we were given was staff sickness of key council officer(s) who had to be present. Eventually the meeting was fixed for 31st May and took place that day. We were somewhat taken aback to find that the meeting agenda was set purely to look at the Bus Services Bill. Even before we started, the whiteboard had two sheets labelled "enhanced partnerships" and "franchises" and section headings "risks" and "clarifications". And the meeting comprised officers going through the DfT guidance and highlighting areas where things aren't yet clear, or where things could go wrong. All very sensible things to look at, but there was no "what can this do for us", there was a pervading assumption that "if something could go wrong, it will", and it seemed there had been little preliminary work done to either consider likely rather than worst case outcomes, to look at the possible ways to work through aspects in a positive approach, or to balance in the good (and the intent) of the Bill which is very, very clearly to offer a better system and to go out of its way to consider the bus operators, bus users, budgets, cross boundary issues and much more.

We were shocked - having agreed (at a previous minuted meeting) with the Cabinet member to draw up pilot area plans for the next meeting, to have those not even looked at during the meeting. A request to leave a segment of time at the end to discuss them was made, but the time was not left. Rather it was indicated that such plans were six months too early and there wouldn't be a chance to look at them until later in the year. It was also indicated that the Cabinet will be making a decision in the autumn - that's rather less than six months. It's almost as if we were asked to do the work to kick us into the long grass; we would like an assurance that's not the case, and a clarification of what appears to be a different agenda between the council officers and elected members with transport briefs. I understand that following the meeting, the head of Passenger Transport is writing to all members; we requested sight of that document, but no definitive answer was given and I don't know what you'll be told - it certainly won't be agreed minutes.

Wiltshire Council, though, has a decision to make. We can see eight plausible options (and we did learn that there's nothing else we're not aware of from public input being considered) and every one of them has some tough elements to it. It comes down to the relative importance of meeting immediate budgets, providing a system that will work into the future, minimising risks, meeting user's needs, economic benefits, etc. Based on my own relevant experience, if I had to make such a decision, I would be putting numbers against how well I thought each option would perform on each of the criteria, and then applying weights to whichever criteria I felt were most important - if (for example) I considered that setting up a system that's at one with government policy is more important than having a system that works well for service users, I would apply a bigger weight to the government policy figures.

To put myself in your team's shoes, I've drawn up such a guidance sheet - it's online at <http://option247.uk/choice.php>

and you can very quickly weight the criteria to see different results. Over the next 10 days, I'll be adding a capability to change internal factors, and pages of explanation of the technical detail. I will also be following up this message with a further technical look at the Bus Services Bill and how that moves us forward.

The Bus Services Bill has provided a confirmation from the government that new options are needed, and those options are designed to help larger authorities such as Wiltshire, bus operators who are looking for a stable future, and people who want or need to use the bus with a far better way forward than has previously been available. Yes, there are details to be fixed and resolved, but we feel that the Bill offers Wiltshire a wonderful opportunity to make forward looking and popular decisions; we should be embracing those decisions, and not running scared while we let the current system spiral out of control on cost and crumble around us.

Please promote further detailed work on evaluating the Bus Services Bill opportunities prior to making irreversible decisions on cuts. The council and councillors could appear in a very poor light were they to slash services just prior to the new model becoming the gold standard elsewhere in the UK. If it's not your decision directly, please tell those who's it is. And if you're reading this letter in the public domain, please try the application and write to your MP and councillor to tell them what outcome you got.

Graham

Graham Ellis - Supporting Option 24/7 for a positive bus future in Wiltshire
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P.S.

* The pilot project work is available online at http://option247.uk/pilot_01.pdf . It includes a management summary as well as possible future route details as a start point for tuning.

* An update presentation - "The Bus Bill and what it means for Wiltshire" is at <http://option247.uk/bbu.pdf> .

* The guidance sheet / application to balance priorities mentioned above is at <http://option247.uk/choice.php> and links to a support document which explains methodology

* There are links to the Bus Services Bill overview, full text and other documentation at <http://option247.uk/links.html>

* Our MP, Michelle Donelan, wrote about the bill in the current Chippenham Gazette – link at http://option247.uk/md_20160602.jpg which will be updated as and when it appears on their web site.

* Our keynote presentation for 14th April is at <http://option247.uk/O247proposal.pdf> . There's much more backing data in there including an introduction to the team, costings, explanantions, consumer reports and more

Finally – a HUGE thank you to the team – the past fortnight has had our team of technical volunteers lead by Lee and Natacha literally burning the midnight oil (or 2 a.m. and 5 a.m. oil as I have noted from emails!) - Graham