

Dear Saffi,

For the Economic Development and Planning Committee, Melksham Town Council, 20.6.2023

## **Bus Services - Management Overview - the national picture.**

\* The history of the last 20 years has a commercial route bias. It has meant that services have run where there is profit to be made by operators, often competing with each other and neglecting socially necessary services. Local Transport Authorities have "bought in" extras, constrained by budgets and a requirement not to compete with commercial services. This has resulted in a disjointed series of routes rather than a connected system, complex fares, and service gaps in a crevasse between commercial and supported services.

\* Bus use was decimated during Covid. Although the government provided a high level of support, it was all arranged in short term measures which didn't allow the commercial bus companies to plan their businesses more than hand to mouth. Furthermore, many drivers were lost to the industry, with many switching to being delivery drivers or leaving the UK.

\* A government scheme to encourage people back onto (remaining) buses at £2 a journey, and acceptance of senior bus passes before 09:30 in Wiltshire has led to something of an increase in use, but not much in revenue. The £2 scheme is extended (at £2.50) until November next year (2024) or perhaps until after a general election if it doesn't come until January 2025.

\* "Bus Back Better" is / was a great scheme to revitalise buses in many ways - however, funding is very patchy and only applies to new initiatives and not to support of existing services. Furthermore, it is all about "seed" funding and offers no long term continued support. In some places - the West of England Combined Authority is a good example - substantial funding was received (£108 million) and as it cannot be used to support existing rural services, WECA has scrapped most of those services and are now running a demand responsive minibus service instead, covering a far wider area than has been tried before. We hope it takes off to be useful, used and unsustainable when seed funding runs out.

## **In Wiltshire - Management Overview**

\* We have a remarkably skilled team at County Hall doing their best to juggle limited financial and bus / driver availability issues. We have around a dozen bus operators for them to work through, ranging from the "Big Boys" such as Stagecoach, GoAhead and First to local companies such as Faresaver, Coachstyle and FromeBus, and companies who's main business is not public service but they run a few, such as Beeline. Some (such as First) are no longer

the force they once were (First now operate a single route in the county), other have grown.

**Bus routes may be characterised as follows:**

1. There are good interurban services between many town, but some of them are significantly slowed by diversions off the natural driving route to serve other communities, and many of them do not run in the evenings and / or on Sundays.

2. There are other less frequent links with rural buses, characterised by operating over limited hours, often providing school journeys with other general journeys during the day only. Some of these services operate as infrequently as once a week.

3. Town buses also tend to run daytime weekday only, and as the journeys made are very short they tend to be a "distress purchase" used only by those who have no alternative, especially where services are infrequent

4. There are Park and Ride services in Salisbury which may share routes with town buses

5. There are commercial tourist services from Salisbury to Stonehenge

6. There is a "dial a ride" demand responsive service in Pewsey Vale.

\* Wiltshire received nothing (zero, nada!) under the initial "Bus Back Better" scheme in spite of an excellent submission; this in common with most of the surrounding 'rural' counties. They have, however, just now received £2 million - just a fiftieth of what WECA have, so no opportunity even if it was desirable for a radical restart.

\* The Bus Service Improvement Plan under Bus Back Better - the "bid for money" that failed looked forward in a number of areas. Although it failed, it was an excellent exercise in strategy and is being taken forward, as illustrated by the second tranche money just received. Amongst the elements in the BSIP plans are

1. Road schemes to provide better public transport priorities - e.g. bus lanes
2. Updating routes to cover emerging and unserved flows and populations
3. Whippet and main corridors
4. Evening, Sunday and also general frequency enhancement
5. Connectivity between public transport routes
6. Bus Quality including access for all, better stops and Passenger Charter
7. Information Systems and fare systems
8. Demand responsive in other areas

\* Interest across the county in alternative fuel buses - electric or hydrogen; Westbury, Bradford-on-Avon, here in Melksham and indeed in Bath and Frome too.

## **The current situation here in Melksham**

\* We are at the crossroads of Faresaver's Bath to Devizes (7 day, all day, routes 271/2/3) and Chippenham to Trowbridge and Frome (6 days a week, daytime only, route x34) services

\* Less frequent rural services operate to Corsham and Bradford-on-Avon (routes 68, 69, x69 and 555), and there's a daily service to Calne and Marlborough (route x76), and a weekly service to Seend (route SB2).

\* A single vehicle runs the Town Bus services known as routes 14 and 15, but with complex variants as it attempts to be all otherwise-missing things to all people. Until 2022, this was a 2 vehicle service but driver shortage at FromeBus led to a temporary, and now a permanent, reduced timetable. It runs, daytime, 6 days a week with some runs being dedicated school transport.

## **Looking forward - bus service improvements sought, outline cases**

### 1. x34 to run evenings and Sundays

Narrative: This is the main passenger flow which lost its Sunday and evening services a few years back - victim of the First v Faresaver battle for custom on the route.

Evening suggestion: A single vehicle every evening from Chippenham at 18:30 and 20:30 to Trowbridge and as far as Melksham at 22:30, returning from Trowbridge at 19:30 and 21:30 to Chippenham. Previous experience suggests that the first runs in the evening will be useful "get you home" journeys to complete round trips and that last runs will also be busy - substantial local traffic in both Chippenham and Trowbridge, with use also to and from Lacock, Semington and Hilperton. Service should call at Chippenham Railway Station and run to Trinity Church in Trowbridge.

Sunday suggestion: Two vehicles, so running every hour on the same route plan as the evening suggestion. Start times from Chippenham at 8 and 9 a.m., each vehicle making 5 round trips with a two hour gap in each in middle of the day (quieter time) for driver rest breaks.

Neither suggestion includes extension to Frome; weekday daytime services have relatively few through passengers at Trowbridge and support should be in association with Somerset. Worthy of a thought, but not a Melksham topic.

### 2. Routes 14, 15 or route 16 (electric) to include station.

The Town Bus was cut from 2 vehicles to one as an emergency measure. One of the routes was funded by developer funds ... time to look at what should be done better.

The remaining vehicle is essentially running "route 14" - school runs and the pensioner's bus during the day on an ASDA - Town - Forest - Queensway - Medical - Town - ASDA, with 2 sorties out to Skylark and Berryfield, and a couple each to Dunch Lane and to Portman Road / Avon Road. "Route 15" was not primarily a pensioner's bus. It was an attempt to bring bus services to the new housing areas, and it did not generate a great deal of traffic because it was infrequent, went a long way round, didn't go where people wanted and ceased mid afternoon.

Route 14 should be left broadly unchanged, though the sorties to Skylark and Berryfield can be usefully moved into a new "Route 16" - a development of the intent of route 15, leaving route 14 with a more regular pattern and perhaps an extra couple of runs.

Route 16 is what we demonstrated at ClimateFest 2022. Hourly from the Station to the Town Centre, Sandridge Road, Eastern Relief Road, Gate of Oakfields, Pathfinder Way, Bowerhill Business and Hampden Park West. Return probably a similar route. Station calls at about half past the hour, and with a layover there while the train calls. Provides connectivity from Melksham into the wider public transport infrastructure. Uses roads beside the estates not though them (for comfort and reasonable journey times), serves journeys to and from work, is at the Police Station on the hour so timing good to get shift workers across the area there just before the hour and then back just after. Initially diesel, but the new SEB fast chargers are an opportunity.

3. 271 health check, Sunday, and perhaps reverse the loop?

Routes 271, 272 and 273 work well for passengers on Monday to Saturday. In the evenings, the main flow is from Bath to Melksham (and Devizes) and there is a gap from 21:05 to 23:15. Whilst this is not ideal, I do not see an easy "fix" as this is a single vehicle service at that time of the evening. Faresaver may be able to offer an option interworking with x31, but I would not wish to see (for example) evening journeys trimmed on either end.

On Sundays, the service every 2 hours is too thin to be useful, and it should be stepped up to hourly at least from Bath to Melksham and probably to Devizes with an extra vehicle. Single driver shift; driver breaks in the middle of the day to meet requirements and extend into the early evening.

Route 271 (the alternate bus via Whitley) does not load as well as the 272, and in Melksham it duplicates route 14 from the Town via Melksham Forest and Queensway. Thought should be given to reversing the direction of this service, so that there are buses from the Town Centre to Melksham Forest,

Queensway, and the doctor's surgery AND BACK - and not just in the one direction. This should be a nil / near-zero cost change.

#### 4. 68 and 69 improvements

Bradford-on-Avon and Corsham areas have asked for improvements on these services high up their agendas, but I am not familiar with the details of the extras they want. At present, the last weekday buses to Melksham on these routes from Bradford-on-Avon and from Corsham are at lunch time, and the services are characterised as rural ones which meet specific needs and service villages, and are of little use to Melksham residents looking to make general journeys to either of these towns.

Additional later services into Melksham on both legs of route 69 would be useful, but not at the top of my list. But there are strong linkages between Melksham and Bradford-on-Avon, Corsham (and Calne too) and a business case could be made for a service at least every 90 minutes to and from all three towns. Corsham in particular is a strong case, and a third Melksham to Bath service in each hour (274?) via Corsham could make sense, with the service running direct as a "Whippet" from Corsham into Bath.

#### 5. Real time bus stops or QR codes

The real time information *\*should\** now be available from Wiltshire Council for each and every bus stop - just need to know where to find it. There may be some remaining inaccuracies but the information is getting better. We should encourage the placement of real time departure boards at key stops - Market Place(2) , Bear (2) , Lowborne (1 or 2 depending on 271 routing) and Station (if service 16 starts). Also scope for some in Melksham Without.

With the Real Time information systems, it should be possible to add QR code stickers to each bus stop so that people with smart phones (and I appreciate that is not everyone) can get real time tracking at every bus stop - and not just the few that mer

#### 6. Local publicity and passenger forum

#### 7. Flat fare / any bus after November 2024

#### 8. Plusbus / bus and train common fares

Up to date network timetables and passenger feedback needs to be improved. Long topic / lots of "soft" stuff around the topic. Things like being able to use any company's public transport on the same return ticket, and through fares for your total journey. "Plusbus" is the old fashioned way of doing some of this - not available in Melksham, and elsewhere there are problems such as you have to visit a station to collect your ticket which includes travel to the station.

These items (6 to 8) are not Melksham Specific; they tend to be things which should be quick wins across the county.

9. I am NOT suggesting any immediate street hardware changes as a priority at this stage. However

a. The northern legs of the route 14 could be made significantly more efficient by enabling the bus to use Dunch Lane, and by reopening the bus gate on Riverside Drive. That way, three out and back sections could be combined into a single run.

b. We need to be mindful of changes at the Cooper Tires site, in particular in providing a bus lane from the Chippenham and Bath Roads (A350 and A365) onto old Bath Road, removing the vehicle double-back for public transport services via the Farmer's Roundabout.

c. Should a proposed bypass of Melksham go ahead, consideration would need to be given to any changes to the public transport network that would be useful in conjunction with that.

## **Summary recommendation with a Melksham perspective**

Of Melksham area specific items that will "cost", I recommend in order

1. (Re)instatement of route 15 / as route 16 and NOT to old route
2. Improved Sunday services to Bath - frequency and longer day
3. Real Time departure boards at Town Centre stops (links elsewhere)
4. Evening buses from Chippenham to Trowbridge and back via Melksham
5. Sunday buses from Chippenham to Trowbridge and back via Melksham

Prepared by Graham Ellis – this draft document dated 13<sup>th</sup> June 2023