

Improving staff, patient and visitor access from North and West Wiltshire to the Royal United Hospital, Bath by public transport.

Management overview

* An hourly through bus service from:

1. Chippenham, Corsham, and Box
2. Melksham, Whitley, Atworth, Box and Batheaston
3. Warminster, Trowbridge, Bradford-on-Avon and Winsley

* Each running Monday through Saturday daytime, and with less frequent (every 2 hours) evening and Sunday service.

* Sharing the same vehicles / services as general public runs (routes 231, 265 and 272) which are already operated by low floor accessible vehicles.

Changes from the current public service bus system

* One extra vehicle (compared to current - February 2016) in each of the three routes (231, 265 and 272) those routes now continuing to Weston.

* Three vehicles less on Bath City route 14, which would still run every 10 minutes from Odd Down to the bus station as at present, with alternate buses continuing to the Royal United Hospital and Weston.

On capacity

Currently 15,000 journeys a year are made from the Wiltshire catchments of the 231 / 265 / 272 to the Royal United Hospital on the Connect 2 "Hopper" service, at a subsidy of around 10 pounds per journey. The service is an excellent one, but the funding is significant and vehicles are running on the public bus routes and on the hopper with capacity on most services. We can only guess at passenger numbers on the 231 / 265 / 272 as they're commercial services during the daytime Monday to Friday, but we do know that around 90,000 journeys are made on just the supported evening and Sunday services. That's perhaps a tenth of the journeys, so the hopper accounts for less than 2% of public transport journeys into Bath.

-> There should not be a capacity issue in transferring most hopper users to public services

-> Ironically, the numbers are so low that the bus operators may ask "is it worth our while?". However, we are proposing a solution with a zero additional cost base, and with significant development potential

-> Fares on the through service would be payable (in the initial proposal) to the bus operator; income without the need to provide additional capacity, but rather making use of existing capacity

On journey quality

Hopper in most towns picks up from people's homes, but in some towns (Devizes, Chippenham) from a central point. The bus routes chosen in this example idea tend to be the ones that weave around towns such as Melksham, but still some local transfers through community schemes such as already done in Chippenham would be helpful

Travelling via Bath Bus station (and with a minimum of 5 minutes there for timetable robustness and loading /unloading) would mean a slower journey than via Hopper, but a faster and much more comfortable journey (especially for people who were unwell) than a change of vehicle and potentially a long wait at the Bus Station.

Services are offered 7 days a week rather than 5, and no longer require prebooking. Services operate into the evening. It is noted that the hospital is a 7 day operation, indeed even some outpatients and day surgery departments are open at the weekend.

The issue of having to prebook your return is gone - no need to hand around for hours because you finished earlier than expected or to rebook because you've been held up. There's a service every hour for you. And indeed if you just miss a service and are reasonably well, for the Chippenham and Warminster routes you can still be home half an hour ahead of the next hourly service by changing in Bath.

On service promotion

It should be noted that an excellent, 7 day service will be offered and will be positively promotable to a wide market. We're looking very much at providing alternatives to individual passenger / passenger group vehicles and not just at replacing a past service.

For those visiting relatives, staff on their way to / from work, and indeed for fitter outpatients, the opportunity to make a through journey in one direction, but then to break their journey in the other direction to take advantage of the facilities of Bath City Centre will be an attractive option, and the fare system caters for this, even as a last-minute decision.

On finance

This is designed as a "zero cost" suggestion. There will be startup costs (leaflets, marketing, admin, route training perhaps) but no extra vehicles nor extra vehicle mileage.

Income will be generated by passengers transferring from the Hopper in the short term if this service starts directly after (or perhaps a day or two ahead) should that service end. Taking a medium time to come into play, new markets will be attracted from those who currently drive / taxi to the RUH due to the issues (change, and extra wait times) with the current system. Longer term, people will move / take up jobs that rely on the new service.

ENCTS passes will be accepted on the new services; there's an element of council cost there.

Operational matters and challenges

These services form a single natural grouping, so I have written this report based on a single operator with a zonal ticket scheme. This allows flexible transfers, breaks of journey etc without an extra layer of fare complexity, and also an encouragement to help that single operator develop a market.

Looking at the alternative / further options, the through bus from Melksham could have been selected as the x72 instead which would have provided a solution for Devizes and villages to the south, but would require interworking are fare sharing systems that have proved illusive in the past, and which I would hold out little hope for prior to 2017.

Bus routes 231 (twice an hour), 265 (twice an hour) and 272 (hourly) arrive into and leave from Bath bus station (daytime) at a spread through the hour which would allow an even (20 minute) service on to the RUH and Weston and back – one each of 231 and 265 turning round there from Wiltshire as at present. Rerouting of 272 through Batheaston gives them a new direct service to the RUH too.

Running time from Bath Bus Station to the RUH and on to Weston, and back, together with dwell times at Bath Bus station, is almost exactly 1 hour. For daytime services running "clockface" at least hourly, this means that vehicle use retains its current efficiency - 'works like magic'. For the Sunday and evening services some further attention and analysis is needed, but 231 and 265 may easily extend, and 271 has a significant Bath layover.

The reduction of through Odd down to RUH services from every 10 minutes to every 20 minutes may not be popular. There may be some concerns over robustness of timetables where road works in one part of the network knock on to other areas. Although buses don't need breaks during the day, drivers do, and we are not privvy to driver's schedules which would clearly need to be updated. Services 272 and 265 operate from Westbury, whereas services 14

and (?)231 from Bath. There is a need to crossover / reconfigure. It has been suggested that Westbury forms a business unit which could be spun off from First, and this networking / meshing of services may frustrate that business objective.

What about people who can't use a public bus?

Looking at a replacement for the Hopper - this proposal will provide a viable alternative for the majority of customers, and an alternative they'll find more acceptable than simply pulling off the hopper. However, there will be some for whom the proposed service will be unsuitable, and they'll need to fall back onto patient transport / private taxis / lifts if available. The suggestions above help reduce the size of that group, for whom individual journey costs will inevitably rise, whoever ends up with the bill for their journeys.

Where does this go in wider plans beyond 2016?

Forward to 2017, Wiltshire Council are requiring to save 2.6 million on bus support subsidy, and as the options they're consulting on stand, there's a significant risk of support being ended for all evening and Sunday services. However, there is activity looking far wider than just the options on the current consultation which were drawn up some time back. Of note is a council desire to find a wider solution than simply cutting services - variously describes as "Beeching Axe of Buses", "downward spiral" or "death by a thousand cuts". The 'total transport' agenda and the upcoming bus bill are pointers to what may come - and are very much in line with the suggestions in this note.

Prepared as a discussion document only – Graham Ellis – 7th Feb 2016
See wider picture at <http://option247.uk>
graham@wellho.net / 01225 708225