
January 2014

**Bus Users UK response to Worcestershire
County Council Consultation:**

The proposed withdrawal of subsidised bus
services in Worcestershire

Bus Users UK's response

Supporting socially necessary bus services

Public transport solutions have become more vital to ensure equality of opportunity to all sectors of society, as well as reducing carbon emissions and congestion.

Local Authorities subsidise services in order to meet the requirements of Section 63 of the 1985 Transport Act to ensure that there is not serious social deprivation through lack of public transport to communities that need it.

Such subsidies are providing for a social need and ensure that people in isolated communities are not denied access to opportunity. Isolated communities are not necessarily rural: housing estates in Droitwich or Redditch, for example, can be equally isolated for the 20%¹ of people without access to private transport, whether through income, age or disability

Given the make-up of the county of Worcestershire, which is both largely rural and also contains a number of disadvantaged housing estates within some of its urban areas, it is difficult to understand how a complete withdrawal of subsidy would comply with that duty.

Access to public transport also underpins other measures to reduce overall public expenditure. To facilitate savings public services are centralised: this would typically include hospitals and schools, though also includes doctors' surgeries, Post Offices, council-provided leisure services, job centres etc and it is essential that people still have access to such services where they have been moved out of the immediate community. Substantial public savings have been made by such measures, and some of the cost associated with those savings is in ensuring people can still access them. To remove such services from the immediate locality then to withdraw the means of people on low incomes, with disabilities or the elderly, to access those services would appear to create an unacceptable disadvantage to those people.

Passengers understand that Worcestershire County Council, like every local authority, is required to make substantial savings in the current climate. Prioritising those savings is always going to be a difficult job. But when making those priorities it needs to be considered that bus services are not simply a dispensable luxury.

Bus services are essential to enable people, including those on low incomes and with disabilities, to:

- access employment
- access education
- access health services
- get to shops
- avoid isolation and social exclusion
- enjoy a greater degree of well-being

The first three of those requirements are always at the top of local authority spending priorities, and removing bus services risks people losing access to those essential services.

¹ National Travel Survey

Bus services are often able to access shopping centres in an environmentally-friendly and more effective way than the private car, and bus users contribute to the high street economy in a way which is often underestimated. Removing bus services and thereby denying access to local retail centres to people without private transport is likely to stifle economic growth.

Avoidance of social exclusion and encouragement of well-being can often reduce the burden on local health and social services and enable more active citizenship.

Even for those able to afford to run a car, bus services can provide an alternative which is sustainable and can provide better access to town centres, alleviating congestion at peak times.

Providing bus services at lower cost

There may be opportunities to ensure that bus companies are providing best value for money, and imaginative approaches to the tendering process can increase savings, through better vehicle utilisation and ensuring services are in line with real local requirements. This approach is unlikely to remove the need for funding altogether but is likely to reduce it, possibly substantially.

Encouragement can be given to community transport schemes. These may well need some pump-priming funding to get them off the ground, but could well be a solution for many of the villages in Worcestershire, especially if these can be arranged to provide connections with the commercial network. This has the potential to strengthen the local network by feeding more custom into commercial services. However imaginative ticketing systems and good communication between community service providers and commercial bus operators will need to be fostered for these to work effectively.

Solutions involving community transport, or using taxis, demand-responsive transport etc to reduce the cost of individual journeys to more remote locations, can be non-inclusive. Many of the community transport schemes already in use across the country operate under Section 19 permits which limits their use just to members of the scheme. Use of Section 22 permits enables community transport to benefit the whole community and to enable people to make journeys spontaneously. This may well reduce the cost savings somewhat but will give greater benefit.

Greater value could also be attached to bus services in some parts of the county by effective marketing; many of the routes affected are quite scenic and could be attractive for leisure travel if properly marketed.

Conclusion

Bus Users UK has serious concerns at the potential level of service cuts. If fully implemented, we believe there could be major communities in Worcester, Kidderminster, Droitwich and Redditch left with no means of accessing main-road bus services or rail services for wider employment and other opportunities.

It would seem that many villages would also be removed from the public transport network and it would appear that sizeable towns such as Pershore and Upton-on-Severn would be devoid of public transport while Great Malvern and Evesham would have only interurban links, to Worcester in the case of Malvern and only out of the county to Stratford from Evesham. Our analysis suggests that most of the south of the county would be devoid of any alternative to car use, with resultant social isolation and loss of opportunity to engage in the fundamentals of life for many, a lack of a sustainable alternative for all and a detrimental effect on local business.

Removal of all financial support for bus services in an entire county is unprecedented and would appear to be counter to the requirements of the 1985 Transport Act. This is especially concerning in a largely rural county with major pockets of urban deprivation.

Whilst some change to the current supported network would seem inevitable, Bus Users UK would urge that a level of subsidised bus service should continue to be provided to protect passengers in Worcestershire from isolation.