

Option 24/7 – Written evidence (TTS0045)

I represent Option 24/7, Wiltshire's countywide bus user group. We work closely with Wiltshire Council and local bus operators to help improve bus services in our county, and we would like to answer your Call for Evidence, by answering some of your questions based on our own experience and future plans:

Regarding Question 3, Wiltshire has a commitment to improve integration between bus and rail services, including improved frequencies and extensions of bus services to almost every railway station in Wiltshire. This would dovetail with the provision of "mobility hubs" designed to integrate with active travel modes such as cycling and walking at such locations, plus other key interchange locations that are non-rail served.

Regarding Question 4, Wiltshire aims to decarbonise bus services right across the county, and is about to launch an initiative called "Cleaner Buses" which will bring together ideas from stakeholders and the wider public into one coherent plan to achieve this aim. Wiltshire will also partner with others to develop innovative implementation solutions, such as exploring the potential of community bus bonds with The Big Lemon Community Interest Bus Company to help fund the purchase of electric buses, for example.

Regarding Question 5, Wiltshire is putting a structure in place that will be genuinely reflective of bus user needs and aspirations. There will be a Forum of which we will be permanent members, and a Board, made up largely of council officers and bus companies, of which we will not. However, it is clear that the Forum will drive the Board - eg It will be the Forum's role to monitor targets, run feasibility studies and develop business cases for service and infrastructure improvements etc, and the Board's role to implement what the Forum recommends. Also, Option 24/7 have signed their Service Level Agreement with Wiltshire Council, which will run initially from April 2022 to April 2023, and be renewed annually thereafter. It sets our monthly Bus Service Improvement Plan meetings with Wiltshire Council in stone, and also allows for Option 24/7 to be given responsibility for bus surveys and the Passenger Charter to begin with, opening out to helping to conduct feasibility studies and drawing up business plans for new bus services and infrastructure further down the line. Option 24/7 have also been awarded funding towards their day-to-day activities by Wiltshire Council. Therefore, we feel that this structure makes Wiltshire ideally placed to benefit from further devolution of transport policy.

Regarding Question 8, we note that in our region, there appears to be a movement in favour of regional oversight of cross border bus routes and issues. We do not support this, as we believe oversight of cross border bus routes and issues is best conducted bilaterally by the relevant local authorities on either side of the border, and not by having such oversight imposed on them by a remote regional civil servant who may be based a significant distance away from the territory of either local authority involved. Also, Wiltshire Council has built up a track record of financially supporting cross border bus services, often with no reciprocal funding provided by the other local authority involved, and thus we believe that Wiltshire Council has earned the right to retain significant oversight of cross border bus services in their area.

March 2022