

# LEAFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

12 November 2013

## **Re: Review of subsidised bus services in the Witney, Woodstock and Chipping Norton areas**

I write to express the concern and dismay of Leaffield residents at the threat of deep, significant and destructive cuts to our local bus services. The community is entirely dependent on the subsidised services under threat as no daily commercial services connect Leaffield to Witney or Charlbury. The scale of the cuts outlined in the consultation document, if carried through, could lead to Leaffield becoming one of the most isolated villages in Oxfordshire for a village of its size.

Leaffield may only be 18 miles Northwest of Oxford but after the proposed cuts the village could be up to 3 hours away in total via public transport including a 2.5 mile walk to Finstock to catch the nearest regular bus along winding unlit roads with no pavements. This 3 hour journey each way would mean it is no longer viable for residents of Leaffield to commute to Oxford by public transport.

The residents and the Parish Council are especially concerned that according to the consultation documents **“It is likely that services C1 and T1 will be recommended for withdrawal in May 2014”**. This appears to preempt any attempts to democratically consult on the issues and reach an appropriate solution that continues to provide an essential service to the village whilst balancing the need for reduced subsidy in the current economic climate. This language suggests that Oxfordshire County Council has already taken the decision to withdraw the service without looking at alternatives.

The Parish Council would like to take this opportunity to highlight the potential negative impact on certain groups in the community who have limited access to private transport such as the young, disabled and older people. This impact has been looked at in other areas in similar consultations. The Bevan Foundation highlighted to Powys County Council in Wales the following when Powys County Council were looking to cut funding for 12 rural bus routes.

“The effect of the reduction of subsidy to the bus services is likely to be an significant increase in inequality between [groups of people with protected characteristics] and the

rest of the population of Powys. **This is likely to be associated with a reduction in well-being amongst affected groups of people and an increase in demand for public services unless mitigating action is taken.**”

- Bevan Foundation report on the equality impact of withdrawing 12 bus services in Powys

([http://www.bevanfoundation.org/2013/09/equality\\_assessment\\_saves\\_powys\\_buses/](http://www.bevanfoundation.org/2013/09/equality_assessment_saves_powys_buses/))

Residents are particularly concerned about the effect that the lack of available public transport is having on the young people in Leaffield who cannot drive and / or have no access to a car. They can potentially be isolated in Leaffield unable to engage in social activities, education, training or employment opportunities. This section of our community is entirely reliant on parents and others giving lifts which is not always possible or is only possible at significant hardship to parents.

The Commission for Rural Communities has looked at the rural dimension affecting the number of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). Their report “Tackling Rural Disadvantage” considered many factors including transport, careers advice, employment and training, and youth services.

On transport the commission found that poor rural transport affected the progression through education into employment:

“Young people in rural areas are more dependent than their urban counterparts on public transport, particularly for accessing education and training. However, the high cost and low availability of public transport in rural areas is a significant challenge for young people, and can **act as a barrier to their post-16 choices and overall progress into employment**. For many rural young people, having a driving licence and being able to afford a car is essential. However, insurance costs are often prohibitive.”

-Commission for Rural communities - tackling rural disadvantage - July 2012

(<http://www.defra.gov.uk/crc/files/Barriers-to-education-employment-and-training-for-young-people-in-rural-areas.pdf>)

Leaving Leaffield with no regular public transport connection is likely to increase the inequality between groups that have ready access to private transport and those that have not. We would urge the County Council to conduct its own equality impact assessment at the earliest opportunity and fully support any attempts to reduce inequality in our community.

You will already be aware that transport users in the village have presented a petition to save the C1 / T1 service with 88 signatures to the local consultation meeting on the 10 October 2013. The transport users took the opportunity to stress that for many the service is the only means to get to work and to Charlbury station from the outlying villages.

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The C1 / T1 service is an essential service for residents:

- who commute to work. If the bus service is withdrawn these residents will have no other option but to resort to private transport increasing traffic and pollution.
- needing access to higher / further education and training (including work experience) in Oxford e.g. Oxford and Cherwell Valley College.
- needing access to medical facilities either in Charlbury or Oxford.
- travelling on the long distance rail network.

The proposed withdrawal of the service will increase rural inequality, increase the “rural penalty” and damage the sustainability of the local community. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for Rural Communities, a House of Commons committee summarised the issue:

“For rural communities to be sustainable they need to retain people of working age who can contribute to the local economy. There is currently a clear drift of young people to urban areas. While unaffordable house prices and fewer job opportunities in rural areas are principal factors behind this migration, **the lack of adequate transport to access employment opportunities is a significant issue.**”

House of Commons: Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee Rural Communities -Sixth Report of Session 2013–14.  
(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmenvfru/602/602.pdf>)

The committee also agreed with the Rural Services Network who stated :

**“Action to try and sustain rural transport networks—especially for those without a car or unable to drive—is vital to the social and economic fabric of rural communities.”**

It is generally acknowledged that the county needs to trim budgets as well as maximising the return on investment. Leaffield Parish Council is committed to sustainable transport links providing value for money. With local grass roots consultation and development we believe a suitable transport strategy can deliver the existing level of service whilst maximising the return on investment.

The Villager 14, 21 and 24 are essential shopper services for those who otherwise would have no access for a weekly shop in Witney. The subsidy is minimal for these services and the parish council would urge the county council to retain the current service pattern.

Service 243 duplicates a Witney service on a Tuesday and provides an additional service to Witney on a Friday. We would support the retention of both the Tuesday and Friday service but would acknowledge that there may be some scope for a single round trip on both days in order to free up financial resources for use on other higher priority local services.

For service C1 / T1 we would urge the council to retain the peak C1 service and consider moving to a more flexible Demand Responsive Transport bus service connecting leaffield with other destinations off peak.

On a purely technical note the Parish Council wish to challenge part of the consultation document which dismisses “non essential and highly directional journeys” from cost calculations on the C1 / T1 service. Cost per journey calculations can only be accurate if they contain all earnings including journeys as above. Such revenue may subsidise more essential journeys.

In looking to the future there are a number of potential avenues for development (particularly around the C1 / T1 service):

- Partnership funding from First Great Western - it is noted that First Great Western have previously stepped in when RH Transport went into administration to continue the C1 service on a temporary basis.
- Partnership funding from local bus companies who provide a onward transport solution for local bus services
- An off peak Demand Responsive Transport bus service similar to Cango (Hampshire) and Connect2Wiltshire (Wiltshire), successful on demand bus services linking rural areas. This could include increased direct access between Leaffield and Witney which was recognised as a priority in the last local transport needs survey.
- Work with Go ride to increase profitability of service whilst balancing increased fares and reduce subsidy.
- Work with Go ride and other local bus companies to make changes to the route to increase profitability and / or increase access. For example links with the X9 at Finstock and the S3 at Fawler / Stonesfield or through ticketing and timetabling arrangements.

The County Council may also wish to look to technological solutions, it was recently announced that £65 million was being invested in bringing driverless pods to Milton Keynes. Such technology could be used to run between Leaffield and Charlbury providing a vital transport link. Alternatively electric or hybrid fuels may lower the cost per user and make services more cost effective. We would encourage the Council to start and sponsor a debate about how these or other technologies can provide rural transport solutions in the future.

In conclusion, we urge Oxfordshire County Council to consider the significant impact the proposed cuts would have on both individuals and the local community. Rural Communities can be fragile and deep cuts made on a purely financial basis can easily destroy the community

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reducing sustainability in the future. There is no viable alternative for residents and the community if the daily service to Charlbury is withdrawn.

Leafield Parish Council looks forward to Oxfordshire County Council's response and to working in partnership in the future to deliver sustainable local transport solutions.

Your Sincerely,

Luke Caunt  
Parish Councillor  
on behalf of Leafield Parish Council

CC

David Cameron - MP  
Councillor Barry Norton - Leader WODC  
Councillor Warwick Robinson - WODC  
Councillor Simon Hoare - OCC, WODC  
Councillor Louise Chapman - OCC, WODC  
Oxford Rural Communities Council