

# Villages and Beyond

A CASE STUDY OF CONNECT2WILTSHIRE

Executive Summary

Review of Pewsey Vale  
Line 1 and Taxi Buzz services  
by Wayconsult Associates  
for the Association of Kennet Passengers  
on behalf of Wiltshire Council

April 2010



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## INTRODUCTION

The Pewsey Vale, the subject of this report, used to be referred to frivolously by transport planners as “the grave yard of transport planners” until, that is, the advent of Rural Bus Challenge in 1998 and everyone woke up to new possibilities. The new funds brought about Wigglybus, one of the earliest experiments in demand responsive transport as part of a scheduled public bus service. The service broke through the mindset that said that shopper buses on market days would suffice. When the Department for Transport money ceased in March 2007, Wiltshire brought the Wigglybus scheme within the fold of their newly created Connect2Wiltshire and new taxi buses were born.

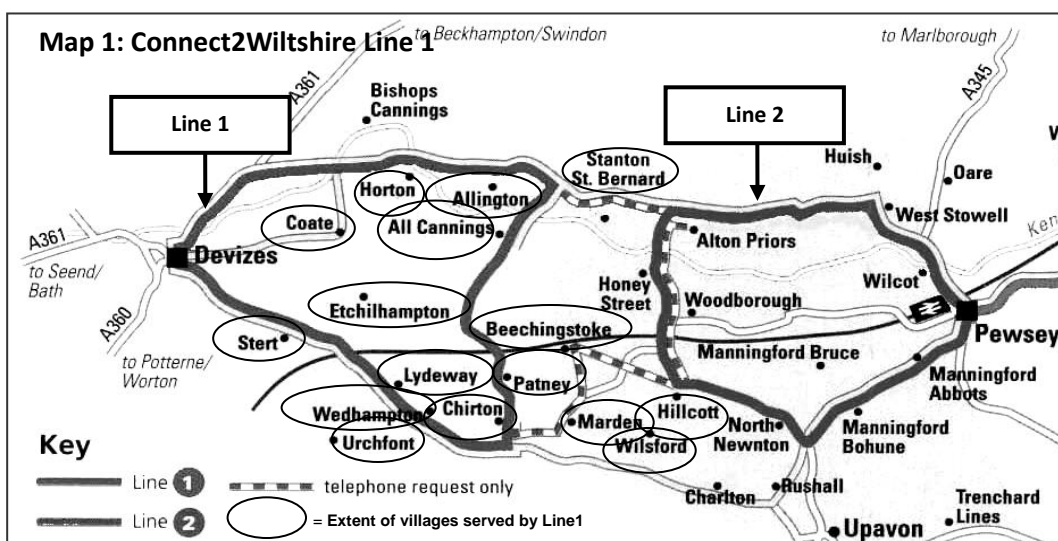
Wiltshire’s target subsidy is not an automatic and services must prove their worth. The prospects for rural public transport are not promising and services will be less well funded than in the past. The challenge now requires hard headed thinking to put services on a more attractive, more viable footing.

This review commissioned by Wiltshire Council is good practice and offers an opportunity to tackle the problems positively and creatively in this harsher financial climate. The next steps for Kennet Passengers are to work with all parties on costed examples and consult widely.

## SUMMARY REPORT

References to text in the full report are written in brackets

1. The purpose of this review is to evaluate performance of the Pewsey Vale Connect2 Wiltshire (C2W) and trends starting from 2002/03 when it operated as Wiltshire Wigglybus. The review focuses on the Line 1 catchment area (nearest Devizes), taxibus-type operations, and Rail Link services. The proposal included Devizes Town services due to anecdotal dissatisfaction with the reduced services/longer routes. By the time this review went live, the Town Services was a commercial operation which meant that data is no longer available for this evaluation.
2. What follows are the results of very detailed work with recommendations for a routes review. To derive best value in rural transport, fine grained detail is a requirement. The review also serves as a case study for flexible services for Wiltshire Council’s public transport review by their consultants, Mouchel.



## Results and analysis: Line 1

3. The general picture is one of increased use from 2002-05 followed by a steady decrease until 2007-08 when decline in ridership was arrested. The combined monthly averages indicate that stability has been maintained (ref paras 3.2 and 3.3). Although the overall passenger totals for Line 1 roughly equate to the combined usage for Lines 2 and 3, the pattern is very similar (ref paragraph 3.4).
4. The headline figures for costs from October 2007 appear healthier: Wiltshire's data for 2008/09 gives an annual "whole project subsidy per passenger (trip)" of £1.83. However if call centre costs and an allowance for capital costs of vehicles are added the subsidy amounts to an estimated £3.26 per passenger trip. This is a reduction of £1.23 on the subsidy per trip from April to October 2007, and is even below the figure of £3.36 for the peak ridership year of 2005/06 (ref paragraph 3.7). This has largely been achieved as a result of nearly doubling the number of school journeys in October 2007 from 17% to 33% and an increase in charges for school journeys since April 2008.
5. The buses appear to be largely used for educational transport and by people without ready access to a car. In 2006/07 the ratio of educational contribution to revenue was four times greater than the educational contribution to passenger trips. This expresses the extent to which the education contribution cross-subsidises the general public transport operation. Without the higher per journey education contribution the overall cost per passenger trip would be higher than the headline figure of £3.26 suggests (ref paragraph 3.10).
6. The ridership analysis shows that a relatively small number of village locations account for a significant proportion of all trips (35%), whilst a long 'tail' of locations make up the rest with less than 1 user a day. This is not to say that these locations are unimportant. They are likely to be very important for the individual users, but it suggests that there may be more efficient ways of meeting those travel needs (ref paragraph 3.14).
7. Line 1 is one of two circular routes completed in an hour. This makes for a circuitous and long journey in one direction for those living at the start or end of the circuit. If Line 1 services are unchanged there is little prospect in growth in passenger numbers. A larger and more broadly based pool of users is undoubtedly desirable to safeguard the future security of the service (ref paragraph 7.1).
8. The Kennet Passengers' household survey in 2006/07 showed that 1 in 5 were bus users, around half the people who tried the service found it wanting in some way, and the rest (about 1 in 3) are not hostile to bus use in principle but had never tried the service (ref paragraph 4.2). A high degree of resistance to use of the service by the car-available is somewhat discouraging given that modal shift was an objective of the Wigglybus from the outset (para 4.5).
9. There is a national policy imperative to reduce CO2 emissions from transport, and modal shift is an important tool. The point to emphasise is that modal shift will not come about through service improvements alone but by a range of actions implemented in tandem (see paragraph 4.6). At present, it requires only a capture of just over 1% of the 88% non users to increase bus usage by 10% (ref paragraph 4.6).
10. A relatively low response rate to the supplementary household survey in December 2009 (about 17%) suggests that results should be treated with caution. However the results, which included a test for an alternative direct service between Devizes and Pewsey, sent a strong message about which service changes would most likely attract car users: reducing the long journey time. Other issues highlighted were: reliability, routes, direct rail links to London, cost and bus shelters. Those who found the long journey time to be a barrier to use represent the 'soft' end of the car user spectrum<sup>1</sup>. By combining this sample with the original 2006/07 survey the results show that usage could rise from 12% to almost 18% from this sample alone. This implies a modal shift by up to 50% if the whole target market were captured (ref paragraphs 5.9 to 5.13).

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<sup>1</sup> Definition: the 'soft' end of the car user spectrum are motorists prepared to consider using public transport.

### *Results and analysis: Rail Link from Devizes to Pewsey*

11. There was a spectacular increase in use of 240% between April 2008 and March 2009. This is attributed to the full complement of three morning services enabling commuters to arrive in London before 0900. In the peak month the average loading was over 450 which amounted to about 6.5 per run (ref paragraphs 3.19 and 3.20). When the Rail Link services were reduced from three to one in March 2009 and the contracts merged with the Marlborough-Devizes and taxibus usage roughly halved. The service was estimated to have high support costs but there are reasons to question data reliability. For instance revenue from concessionary travel is not included in the headline figures.
12. The December 2009 survey of parkers in and around Pewsey station revealed that 5 out of 7 respondents gave rail links to London as a reason for being interested in the potential for the bus as an alternative to the car for longer distance journeys. Whilst the return is only 14%, these and similar responses elsewhere affirm support for direct services between the towns.
13. Meeting rail user needs means targeting connections at 06:25/06:35, 07:22 and 08:09 at a price that compares favourably with parking fees. A fairly high 7 out of 18 respondents stated that timetable information would encourage them to use the rail link (ref paragraphs 5.14 to 5.17).
14. The Rail Link contributes to sustainable transport objectives, encourages modal shift and reduces considerable parking stress in and around Pewsey station. The social benefits of improving mobility by rail for those with low car ownership should not be underestimated.

### *Results and analysis: Call centre*

15. The increase in call centre costs is a matter of possible concern: In 2007-08 the final 6 months of Wigglybus operation followed by the first 6 months of C2W call centre costs averaged £3,300/month. The cost by mid-2009 had more than doubled to £6,768/month. The facility is currently costing over £81,000 a year to run, a higher cost than running one bus for a year. There are possibly good reasons for the increase, not least the inclusion of Calne services in the latter figure, but ridership on the core services was static over the period, so activity levels would not have been higher (ref paragraph 3.11).

### *Recommendations*

16. The main principles are that proposals must demonstrate their contribution of Wiltshire's objectives (social, economic and environmental), and operate in tandem with other measures such as parking, traffic management and awareness raising. Recognising the financial constraints in public funding the maxim is to achieve more within current and future budgets whilst ensuring that any service evaluation has a holistic focus (ref paragraphs 8.1 to 8.3).
17. The most important targets are residents who represent the 'soft' end of the car user spectrum: already potentially interested in using the service. To profit from their interest four actions are recommended:
  1. Lines 1 and 2 should be revised to overcome the inconvenience of circular routes and provide two linear routes between Pewsey and Devizes, one serving the northern villages of the Pewsey Vale, the other serving the southern villages. There are several service options, discussed in paragraph 8.7.
  2. The Devizes Rail Link taxibus service should be restored to the level of service prior to March 2009, provide an earlier connection at least with the 07:22 and combine with linear routes (above) and the evening Taxibuzz.
  3. The Devizes Town Service should be subject to further community survey and review to assess whether the current offer is the best that can be achieved.

4. The Call Centre arrangement should be further reviewed, given the substantial increase in costs in recent years. There are strong arguments for a local call centre integrated with other transport information functions in a transport hub based in Devizes (ref para 8.5).

### **Wider lessons for Wiltshire Council**

18. Educational transport is essential for the financial sustainability of rural public transport such as C2W.
19. The review highlights the value of assessing each of the services as an integral component of a Pewsey Vale transport package: if the business case is developed on the viability of one part of a service alone the ridership for the whole service is eroded and the effectiveness diminished.
20. Wiltshire Council need to maximise the value for money of a call centre located in the community.
21. Readily available performance data, good quality household information are essential.
22. The cost issues for the call centre provide an opportunity to provide county-wide strategies for public transport information.
23. Community transport could provide an alternative operation with the overriding benefits of local identity, local knowledge and responsiveness to local needs.

### **Next Steps**

24. The next step advocated by Kennet Passengers is a consultation exercise once two or three packages of options have been illustrated and their costs estimated.
25. To overcome commercially controlled data, the community needs to carry out a survey to find out who uses the Devizes Town Bus and the service's potential benefits to town housing developments and traffic growth.

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