

3rd February 2020

From:

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In December, I met with our MP (Michelle Donelan) and alerted her to the upcoming demise of the D3 bus route from Bath to Melksham, with evening and Sunday service onward to Devizes and Urchfont. At the time, the probable end of this bus service was not common knowledge. It was announced to staff and Wiltshire Council about 10 days ago, and in a press release by First on 28th January 2020. We now have an end date of 4th April.

Two operators have been running buses from Bath to Melksham in recent years - First with their D3 and Faresaver, in competition, with their x72. Both have increased their frequency to attract passengers to the point where there's not enough business to sustain them, and something had to "give". That's the way the bus market is designed to work - survival of the fittest. So it makes overall sense to be reverting to a sustainable level of provision.

Unfortunately, the x72 and D3 follow significantly different routes, and the x72 does not run on Sundays or in the evening. And it would leave significant gaps in the provision if the D3 simply disappeared. Faresaver are working on a new commercial timetable which will fill some of the gaps, but it's unlikely that it will include evening or Sunday services, or that it will be able to cover all the route variations of both current services (see footnote for details)

Asking First to continue their service will not result in a change of heart. And even if they were persuaded to change their minds, the service probably wouldn't last for long as the overcapacity would still exist. We need to look to build for the future with operators who want to be here for the future.

Commercial (daytime, Monday to Saturday) routes will become clearer in the next week or so. Evening and Sunday services, previously supported by Wiltshire Council, will need to be re-tendered. Faresaver are the obvious company to run them, but others such as Go-ahead or Stagecoach, both of which operate into Devizes and may have a vehicle available evenings and Sundays, are other possible bidders.

Evening and Sunday service are vital. Evenings, they allow people to get home from work after the last Faresaver bus at 17:40, students to get to and from evening class, hospitality and other shift workers (many in low paid jobs) as well as people travelling for leisure. The late buses back (21:30 and 23:20 from Bath) are often very busy. Sundays, similar, buses into Bath in the morning and back in the afternoon are busy and needed. The reason these services are not commercially viable is because the evening / weekend traffic is one way with the bus empty the other way, and early in the week and off season the leisure traffic that would help fund them is limited.

In Melksham, we had a similar situation in 2014 when First withdrew the 234 (last service from Chippenham at 22:16, subsidised) and the last bus is now at 17:30. As I understood it, Wiltshire Council invited bids for an evening service, but then decided not to place a tender - rather to spend the money realised from the previous contract for other purposes. We are

Buses! Melksham! Future!

Public Meeting – all welcome

The Canberra Centre, 56 Spa Road, Melksham, SN12 7NY
7th February 2020, starting at 19:00

Following up on the news last week that First's D3 bus service to and from Bath (and Devizes, evening and weekends) is being withdrawn after service on 4th April, **but looking forward to the future.**

Further details:

<http://www.option247.uk/> * <http://www.mrug.org.uk/>

rather scared of the same thing happening again, and Melksham loosing its very last evening and Sunday bus services. Wiltshire Council have already told us that their budget will be very tight for next year and they probably cannot afford like for like replacement. A service with a single vehicle and one driver each evening / Sunday might work and be cheaper, loosing service beyond Devizes to Urchfont though.

This whole potential loss of a service that's well used, at a time when election manifestos promised investment to look after bus routes outside the cities, is ironic. It won't help towards zero carbon either as people take to cars (those who have a car available) into Bath. It's not as if the buses are carrying fresh air - "we use the buses a lot, most times when we go to Bath on the D3 the bus is quite full, in fact sometimes people have to stand" from my mailbox in the last few minutes.

There remains a wider issue - that the town bus is running around underloaded and could be tuned to be far more useful. This is an ongoing discussion with Wiltshire Council who say they are receptive but then put it on the back burner while they sort out immediate issues.

Suggestions we have put on the D3 / X72 take the town bus potential into account, but really it needs to be progressed on the tail of the current window of opportunity. Having the bus call at the station when there were no daytime trains and 3,000 journeys a year by rail would have been silly. Now that there are 17 train calls per day, 75,000 journeys a year, and the buses pass the top of Station Approach, time-able to provide a raillink like the highly successful experiment on 2014 in addition to catering for existing customers and serving new housing areas on the outer opposite side of town.

Useful links:

<http://www.mrug.org.uk/bus.html> - meeting details

http://www.mrug.org.uk/mkm2020_o247.pdf - draft bus proposals

<http://www.passenger.chat/22836> - First and Faresaver press releases and initial comment

Eight passenger flows on which existing D3 passengers can't easily switch to Faresaver's current x72 bus:

- * All Whitley journeys
- * All evening journeys
- * All Sunday journeys
- * All Mallory Place journeys
- * Batheaston and Box to Atworth / Melksham journeys (and back)
- * Melksham Forest / Queensway journeys to west of Melksham (and back)
- * Melksham Forest / Queensway journeys to Bowerhill (one direction)
- * Melksham and Atworth to Bathwick, Holbourne Museum area stops (inbound)

Guessing – Faresaver may choose to run 2 buses an hour from Bath – one to Devizes "direct" and the other to Bowerhill via Batheaston, Box, Whitley, and Melksham Forest. It has the benefit of a 30 minute service, fast services for Sells Green, Devizes and beyond, and hourly services to the places First used to serve. Makes sense; does not sort out evenings or Sundays.

This list may not be exhaustive - for example

- * there could be specific timetable gaps in x72
- * there could be vehicles / services where the combined traffic is beyond the vehicle's capacity