**BUS SERVICE REVIEW**

At its July meeting, Earley Town Council’s Community & Youth Sub Committee took on board MERA’s suggestion that to ensure there was no repeat of the bus timetable shambles that resulted in the temporary introduction of the 12 service along Silverdale Road and the 22 service on Beech Lane in 2017.

MERA put the case to the council that it would be better to have a blueprint drawn up that could be implemented quickly in the event of a further funding crisis in the future. Currently, service 19a/c is not financially viable and is reliant on additional funding from Wokingham Borough Council.

The Council agreed that this was a sensible plan and they were particularly interested to note that under MERA’s proposals, it was likely that new services could be introduced that did not rely on the current amount of financial subsidy and that might turn out to be capable of being run as commercial services.

Wokingham Borough Council has been made aware of MERA’s proposals and Earley Town Council has formed a Bus Working Party to consider the ideas put forward and to work on detailed proposals which may or may not include the routing suggestions proposed by MERA.

The full report is set out below.

**SECONDARY BUS ROUTES IN EARLEY**

**Report for Earley Town Council**

**BACKGROUND**

In September 2017, Reading Buses introduced a revised bus route and timetable to replace the 19a/c service following an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Wokingham Borough Council to increase the funding for this subsidised operation. The company claimed that this route was making a loss, even with the Borough Council’s subsidy.

Following the public outcry greeting the changes made to the route, a public meeting was held at the Oakwood Centre, Woodley, at which it was clear that those attending were in favour of reintroducing the 19a/c service. Feelings were particularly high in the Woodley area because the new 12 service was found to be confusing to residents and had added half an hour to the journey from Culver Lane to the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Additionally, there were unacceptable gaps in the timetable, with the first bus leaving after 9am and with a much-reduced service after 2pm.

Maiden Erlegh residents were mainly affected by the complete absence of any rush hour services to Reading in the early morning and late afternoon (the first bus in the morning passed Silverdale Road Shops at 9.58am; and after the 2.45pm journey, the next bus was not due until 6pm). Only two buses operated out of town between 2.25pm and the end of the rush hour - at 4.40pm and 6pm. For reasons that are not clear, the company had removed the commercial services altogether despite good passenger numbers at these times. Indeed, the 7.52am service from Silverdale Road Shops and the 3.30pm from Reading were always full on schooldays and on occasions passengers were unable to board.

Earley Town Council set up a Bus Working Party to look at alternatives with Wokingham Borough Council and different options were explored. The council favoured the reinstatement of the route to Asda that had been withdrawn some years earlier (the old 41/12 service) and additionally, MERA put forward another alternative which it considered was likely to be profitable and would not require a subsidy. This envisioned a connection between Maiden Erlegh, Hatch Farm Estate, Emmbrook and Wokingham.

Recognising that Woodley residents were particularly upset about the changes to the timetable, Earley Town Council took a decision to join with Woodley Town Council with a view to resolving the problem which culminated in the public meeting at the Oakwood Centre, Woodley.

Following the public consultation, politicians on all sides considered that reintroducing the 19a/c service was the best option, and Wokingham Borough Council commenced a tendering process which resulted in a successful tender bid from Reading Buses with a revised 19a/c timetable.

While this process was being carried out, the commercial 19b service was extended to Whitley Wood and re-numbered as a 19. This appeared not to be successful, and it was soon replaced by a 22 service which terminated at Asda and provided an extended route from Reading to Caversham Heights. This, too, was not a popular service, and Reading Buses eventually decided to reintroduce the original 19b service to feed into the 19a/c routes.

**RESIDENT FEEDBACK**

Overall, resident feedback received by MERA has been positive, with passengers no longer concerned about return journeys in the afternoons, which were few and far between when the 12 service was in operation. However, the following issues have been raised by elderly people in particular.

1. **Gaps in timetable.** There are two significant gaps in the current bus timetable on Mondays to Fridays. After the 7.53am 19c service from Silverdale Road Shops, the next bus is two hours later, at 9.47am. This causes problems for bus users with early hospital appointments, who are faced with a long wait for their scheduled appointment if before 10.15am. There is also a similar gap on the 19b service between 3.05pm at Beech Lane and 5.15pm, which causes problems for Asda shoppers returning home as well as those relying on the service to journey to the hospital or town centre in the late afternoon. These gaps are caused because some journeys are diverted to serve the X3 journeys between the Town Centre and Shinfield Park in the morning and between Shinfield Park and the Town Centre in the afternoon.
2. **Difficulties for bus users in visiting doctors’ surgeries.** The 19c service no longer calls at Brookside Close, which means that those bus users now have to walk further and have to negotiate a steep hill between Gypsy Lane and the first bus stop in Silverdale Road. Additionally, there is no connection on the Silverdale Road route with Chalfont Surgery, which is one of the surgeries that is part of the Brookside General Practice.
3. **No service to Asda.** Residents have complained that they are unable to use a bus to travel to Asda, which provides good value grocery and clothes shopping that is particularly important to the elderly. The existing 19a/c service provides a connection with Woodley via a circuitous route, but many find Waitrose too expensive to shop there regularly. Beech Lane residents do have direct access to Asda by bus on the 19b route. The recent announcement that McColls in Silverdale Road is to close in November means that the Post Office based within that shop may also close, which provides an added reason for a connection with Asda to be restored.
4. **Infrequency of service.** Many residents find that an hourly service is too infrequent, and they have asked that MERA attempt to secure an increased frequency on the 19a/b/c routes into Reading, which they say will also increase passenger usage.
5. **Lack of services into Wokingham.** Although there is a good service between Earley and Wokingham provided by the 4/X4 service along the main Wokingham Road, there are no direct connections between Maiden Erlegh and Lower Earley into Wokingham, which means that some residents find it very difficult to visit the council offices to access services.
6. **Lack of facilities on bus routes.** Elderly people can be hampered when their needs are not taken into consideration. Many bus stops do not have shelters or seats, and none of them within Maiden Erlegh or Lower Earley have real time information displayed. Younger people do tend to use their mobile phones to access real time bus information, but of course there are many older people who do not have or understand how to use such technology.

**POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

Frequency of services and routing appear to be the key to resolving many of these problems. MERA put forward a number of proposals at the last review, and these were designed to ensure the longer-term viability of these services. Suggestions included:

1. Instead of a connection to Woodley, the Silverdale Road service could be re-routed via Toseland Way, Rushey Way, Hatch Farm estate (which currently has no service at all), Winnersh Crossroads, Emmbrook (Dog and Duck) and Wokingham. This extended route should be much more viable that the existing route into Woodley, and it is pertinent to note that both the 19a and 19c routes carry virtually no passengers at all for most of the day at the Mill Lane section of the route. By diverting the route as suggested, passengers residing at Hatch Farm and Emmbrook could have a direct bus service into Reading for the first time, including connections with the hospital.
2. Alternatively or additionally, an hourly service could run from the Danywern Drive estate, Winnersh, which is currently served only by the 128 Courtney Buses service along the main Robin Hood Road. This leaves most people on the estate without a bus service as it is too far to walk to the main road. By connecting the estate with Hatch Farm, Earley, the RBH and Reading Town Centre, this could provide Silverdale Road or Beech Lane with a more frequent service when combined with the suggested Wokingham route.
3. Concerns over the lack of a connection from Silverdale Road to Asda could be overcome by running a service via Toseland Way, Kilnsea Drive, Rushey Way and Hillside Primary School, with the return journey via Chalfont Way, Rushey Way, Kilnsea Drive, Rushey Way, Gypsy Lane and Silverdale Road. Such a service would also provide direct connections to RBH for residents of Toseland Way, Kilnsea Drive and the Hillside Primary School neighbourhood for the first time, as well as reintroducing a boarding point at Brookside Close. This would enable one of the Hatch Farm services to use Beech Lane instead of Silverdale Road, providing both Beech Lane and Silverdale Road with viable half hourly services.

Further details of these options are set out in Appendix 1. MERA contends that such imaginative solutions as these could transform the secondary bus services in Earley and that they would be unlikely to require the subsidy currently being paid by Wokingham Borough Council.

**OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Clearly, all MERA’s proposed solutions would involve discontinuation of the link between Silverdale Road and Woodley (unless the Borough Council decided to subsidise such a service). We do not believe that this should have an impact on Woodley services, which could continue to operate as at present, but terminate at Toseland Way from Woodley. This was one of the proposals that was put forward originally by Reading Buses as a possible solution to the funding issues that resulted in the introduction of the temporary 12 service.

It is important to note that Reading Buses may have concerns that the proposed connection between Silverdale Road and Asda could impact on the 21 service, but it is thought that such an impact would be minimal. It is pertinent to note that there are also duplications between the 19a/c service and Woodley service 13/14.

When options were considered previously by the Town Council, there was a proposal that the Silverdale Road services should be routed via Pepper Lane and the University rather than Whiteknights Road. MERA has not received any representations indicating that such a diversion would be popular or used very much by residents and in the end, this idea was not pursued. However, if a more frequent service was established, some services could be diverted if this was considered necessary, without leading to a loss of frequency for Whiteknights Road route residents.

MERA has been asked on occasions to push for evening and Sunday services on these routes, but in our view, these would not be likely to be well used. However, it might just encourage residents to use the services more regularly instead of using their cars, and for this reason, the Borough Council may wish to provide a subsidy for such enhancements to the service if required. Given the financial savings that could be made through the withdrawal of a subsidy on the daytime services, the local authority might consider this to be a viable option. This could form part of the climate emergency response to encourage residents to use their cars less frequently for journeys into Reading.

**CONCLUSION**

MERA understands that the provision of public transport in underused areas can be very expensive when there are competing demands, particularly for statutory public services, which must come first. However, our belief is that some of these bus services could be run on a commercial basis if the will is there to do so. We have been advised previously by the Borough Council that they cannot require bus companies to run specified routes and frequencies unless these are routes that would not exist without subsidy. However, we believe that it is appropriate for discussions to be held with a local authority and the relevant providers of public transport with a view to optimising services, even on profitable routes.

Reading Buses have been willing to discuss requirements in the past, and the extension of the original proposals in relation to the 19b bus route from Meldreth Way to Asda is an example of such consultation with the company on a commercial route that has been successful.

It should be noted also that Courtney Buses has recently been acquired by Reading Buses, which may indicate that a wholescale overhaul of routes operating in the Wokingham Borough may be likely in the near future.

In relation to bus shelters, bus seats and real time information, we would like to see CIL money being used to fund these enhancements to encourage use of our bus services, easing congestion and air pollution as well as providing a lifeline for elderly and disabled residents.

The Town Council is recommended to consider this report and establish a blueprint for Earley bus services in the future to ensure that its views can be put forward when the next major revision of services is under consideration.

**APPENDIX 1**

**POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS: FURTHER INFORMATION**

We have set out three main proposals in our report on Secondary Bus Routes in Earley. These are now explored in more detail.

**Option A**

**New service: Reading Station, Kings Road, Royal Berkshire Hospital, Addington Road, Eastern Avenue, Whiteknights Road, Wilderness Road, Betchworth Avenue, Silverdale Road, Gypsy Lane, Mill Lane, Toseland Way, Rushey Way, Lower Earley Way, Hatch Farm Estate, King Street Lane, Wokingham Road, Old Forest Road, Toutley Road, Matthewsgreen Road, Milton Road, Wokingham Broad Street**

This proposed new service would ensure that Maiden Erlegh residents received a regular service that was more likely to be profitable, and therefore less likely to rely on subsidisation. The problem with the existing service 19a/c is the lack of ‘productive bus stops’ beyond Whiteknights Road. Most journeys beyond Gypsy Lane are unused by passengers, unlike service 19b, which is operated as a commercial service. This is possible because there are further bus stops beyond Beech Lane which are regularly used by passengers.

The advantages of such a new service include:

* The Silverdale Road service is better protected for the future as it would be unlikely to require a subsidy to continue operating.
* The Hawkesdon area of Lower Earley, the new Hatch Farm Estate and Emmbrook would receive a direct connection to Royal Berkshire Hospital for the first time.
* There would be a much quicker, direct service to the hospital from Wokingham Town Centre. An existing connection is by service 3, which operates via Arborfield.
* Emmbrook residents would receive a more frequent service to Wokingham and Reading.
* Hatch Farm Estate residents would receive a bus service for the first time.
* The Brookside Close bus stop could be reinstated, to provide better accessibility for elderly and disabled passengers.
* If the 19a/c service continued to operate, a half hourly service could be provided along Silverdale Road, which would encourage usage.

**Option B**

**New service: Reading Station, Kings Road, Royal Berkshire Hospital, Addington Road, Eastern Avenue, Whiteknights Road, Wilderness Road, Betchworth Avenue, Silverdale Road, Gypsy Lane, Mill Lane, Toseland Way, Rushey Way, Lower Earley Way, Hatch Farm Estate, King Street Lane, Robin Hood Lane, Danywern Drive, Watmore Lane, Robin Hood Way, Robin Hood Lane (and back to Reading).**

This is could be an alternative or an addition to Option A. The housing estate off Robin Hood Road is currently unserved by a convenient bus service. At present, these residents can only access public transport by walking some considerable distance to Robin Hood Road in order to access the 128 Reading – Twyford – Wokingham service. However, it should be noted that some of the advantages of Option A would not exist under this proposal unless the two options were brought together to provide a half hourly rather than an hourly service between Reading and Winnersh Cross Roads.

It is interesting to note that Courtney Buses has been taken over by Reading Buses, which may provide a good opportunity to review routes into Wokingham.

**Option C**

**New service: Reading Station, Kings Road, Royal Berkshire Hospital, Addington Road, Eastern Avenue, Whiteknights Road, Wilderness Road, Betchworth Avenue, Silverdale Road, Gypsy Lane, Mill Lane, Toseland Way, Rushey Way, Kilnsea Drive, Rushey Way (continuing past Hillside Primary School), Chalfont Way, Rushey Way (and back to Reading).**

The advantages of such a new service include:

* The Silverdale Road service is better protected for the future as it would be unlikely to require a subsidy to continue operating.
* All residents of Lower Earley would receive a direct connection to Royal Berkshire Hospital for the first time.
* Residents of Maiden Erlegh and most of Lower Earley would have a direct connection to both Brookside and Chalfont surgeries and Asda for the first time.
* The Brookside Close bus stop could be reinstated, to provide better accessibility for elderly and disabled passengers.
* If the 19a/c service continued to operate, a half hourly service could be provided along Silverdale Road, which would encourage usage.

It should be noted that this only partially resolves the problem of connecting Lower Earley residents to all surgeries because Beech Lane residents would have only a connection to Chalfont Surgery. However, consideration could be given to applying both Option A and B above, enabling alternate Hatch Farm services to operate via Beech Lane instead of Silverdale Road. This would resolve that problem.

A possible objection might be registered by Reading Buses to the suggested connection with Asda as this would introduce further competition for passengers on the service 21 route. However, it is suggested that the conflict is not as great as may be first imagined. Passengers using the Hillside, Chalfont Way and Rushey Way bus stops up to Kilnsea Drive would not be likely to use the service to Reading as it would be a longer route to take, and of course the Rushey Way section between Chalfont Way and Kilnsea Drive would involve passengers standing on the opposite side of the road for a less frequent hourly service. Although it is conceded that the Kilnsea Drive to Hawkesdon Way section is vulnerable to such concerns, appropriate scheduling of the two services should resolve most of these issues. It is also appropriate to point out that providing additional routes and improved frequencies is likely to increase overall passenger usage of bus services.

**Other considerations**

The ultimate solution might be a ‘mix and match’ of the above options. The best solutions would be those that increase frequency of services along Beech Lane and Silverdale Road. This would encourage usage and improve the choice of destinations available. It would also allow alternate services to operate via Pepper Lane and Shinfield Road rather than Whiteknights Road.

The new services could operate alongside the 19a/c service if the council considers that this would be desirable, although the conclusion is likely to be that this service should no longer use Silverdale Road, instead following only the Woodley section of the route and terminating at Toseland Way. Assuming that is the case, a half hourly service through Beech Lane and Silverdale Road could be provided by:

* A combination of the 19b and a Hatch Farm service for Beech Lane
* A combination of an Asda and a Hatch Farm service for Silverdale Road and
* A combination of either an Asda or a Hatch Farm service with the 19a/c on Silverdale Road.

The solutions outlined are considered to be the most likely to be acceptable to Reading Buses. Of course, there are other more drastic alternatives available, such as extending certain 17 service journeys to Lower Earley and Maiden Erlegh (and indeed, Woodley) on circular extended routes, but we consider that this may not be acceptable to Reading Buses unless there is a significant decline in passenger numbers over time on the Wokingham Road section of this route.

MERA believes that there are real opportunities to make bus travel in the area both more attractive to passengers and without subsidy. Our view is that it is well worth considering all the options available in detail so that at the next major timetable revision we can look forward to the prospect of considerable improvements in the provision of our bus services.

**APPENDIX 2**

**IMPACT OF PROPOSALS ON WOODLEY & NORTH EARLEY SERVICES**

During discussion of this report at the MERA Executive Committee on 8 August 2019, ACER (the residents’ association representing North Earley) expressed concern that in developing plans for Maiden Erlegh, bus services operating in Woodley and North Earley could be adversely impacted. Consequently, a commitment was made that a separate appendix would be devoted to proposals for these areas.

It became apparent at a very early stage of consideration that a solution was at hand which would improve these services with the same level of subsidy from Wokingham Borough Council as the existing 19a/c service.

Assuming that an agreement could be reached that one or more of Options A,B and C in the main report would be operated as commercial services (ie requiring no subsidy from the council), this money could be used solely to support a new route which followed the existing 19c service from Reading to Woodley via Church Road and terminating in a loop comprising Loddon Bridge Road, Coppice Road, Drovers Way, Crockhamwell Road, Loddon Bridge Road and back into Reading following the existing 19a route.

This would require only three buses to operate a half-hourly service, thus providing an improved frequency with the same level of funding. Although the existing 19a/b/c service uses four buses, the 19b is a commercial service and so there would be no financial saving unless the existing level of frequency was maintained (ie an hourly service), which would require only two buses on the route.

If a connection with Earley was considered to be important, this service could be extended from Loddon Bridge Road to Wokingham Road (Loddon Bridge), Mill Lane, Toseland Way and Gypsy Lane (Brookside Close) and back to Reading via Mill Lane, Loddon Bridge and Loddon Bridge Road. This extended route would allow Woodley and North Earley passengers to change buses at Toseland Way, Rushey Way or Gypsy Lane to access services towards Asda or Silverdale Road and would not require any more buses to be used than if the loop in the first example was adopted.