

UPDATE re Bus Service 27

I am very sorry to let you know that Oxfordshire County Council officers have advised me that the 27 service between Bicester and Langford will cease on 4th September 2022. I have told them how disappointing this will be to those who use or require the service, but the increased costs of renewing the service contract combined with the low usage recently mean that the Council has regrettably decided not to make an increased subsidy for the route. I am actively exploring with officers whether any alternative service could be put in place and your feedback and suggestions would be welcome. I would be happy to meet with those affected to discuss the situation.

Officers told me the following:

“The current arrangements expire shortly so Oxfordshire County Council recently conducted a tender process for continuation of services on the route between Launton, Bicester and Langford. The tenders received showed cost increases of between 21% and 44% on the current price. Having reviewed the usage of service 27 between Bicester and Langford, and the funds available, the Council have regrettably concluded that it will no longer be possible to provide this service and it will be withdrawn on 4th September 2022.

Recent usage data supplied by the operator suggests that service 27 is used by an average of 5.9 passengers per day (less than three return trips and less than one journey per bus). Unfortunately, it is no longer sustainable for this service to be provided on its current basis.

The Council has no direct budget to subsidise the operation of bus services not associated with new development schemes, but, following the withdrawal of service S5 by Stagecoach we were able to utilise some of these funds on a replacement service. When Red Rose took over, the plan was to operate both services 17 and 27 on an hourly basis but this did not prove possible due to road closures and disruption caused by HS2 and EWR construction. The service was reduced in an attempt to restore reliability, but following the receipt of tenders the Council has now concluded the best possible opportunity to establish a sustainable commercial service over the next three years lies in providing a regular route between Aylesbury, Launton and Bicester.”

I have had a number of conversations with officers in the last few days to explore whether any alternative arrangement could be made. They heard late on Friday 19th August that national government has made some additional funds available to commercial operators and local authorities to keep bus services running for the next six months; as they had no warning about this, it came too late to affect the decision on the 27 service. At my request, they are now looking at some alternative options to see if some form of bus service can be provided to Langford, bearing in mind its extremely low use.

The bottom line is that, without regular usage, no bus service to Langford will be sustainable. I know there have been issues with reliability of the current service so I am keen to hear from anyone who does use the service regularly – or who would if it were reliable and at a convenient time for them. If we can establish the potential level of demand is higher than the recent figures, the case for a service will be stronger.

There are examples elsewhere in the county where parish councils (the equivalent of Bicester Town Council for us) are financially supporting limited services. I suggest holding a Zoom meeting in the next fortnight with those who are interested in how we could sustain a service in the future so we can explore options together. Please email me at calum.miller@oxfordshire.gov.uk if you would like to take part and I will be happy to set up a meeting.