

County Council

14 December 2018

Item 6(e) Notice of Motion from Dr O’Kelly

Bus Services – Briefing Note

Background

The County Council can exercise its duty under the Transport Act 1985 to secure the provision of such public passenger transport services as it considers appropriate to meet any public transport requirements within the county which would not, in its view, be met apart from any action taken by it for that purpose.

This duty has to be exercised with mind to the affordability of funding such services as well as the impacts on its residents who may not have any suitable alternatives. In addition, the Council has to be mindful of the sustainability of the commercial bus network where some parts of services need support to ensure the wider network remains viable. Therefore, funding has to be prioritised.

Currently, approximately 85% of local bus services in West Sussex are operated on a fully-commercial basis by bus companies with the remaining 15% funded by the Council where it has chosen to contract socially necessary bus services where they are not commercially viable. In some cases this has been the funding of whole services and also part funding of wider commercial services to ensure they remain commercially viable.

The Council also provides financial grants for some local community transport schemes for residents unable to use conventional bus services or where they do not operate. In addition, the Council has duties to fund school transport for eligible children as well as make provision for the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (Free off peak bus travel for older and disabled people).

The Council has developed relationships with the bus operators supporting the continued sustainability of all bus services that provide 27 million passenger journeys each year. The supported services and funding of school travel on local bus services where possible also helps sustain the commercial network.

Local bus services face two key challenges being increased congestion affecting commercial services mainly along the coast and in the towns in the north of the county (Crawley, Horsham and East Grinstead) and a lack of commercial viability for conventional bus services in rural areas.

The proposed Bus Strategy is needed to ensure the future approach to supporting bus and community transport aligns with the West Sussex Plan 2017-22 that sets out the direction and vision of the County Council and to respond to the Bus Services Act 2017.

Sustained financial pressure on Council funding means that part of overall Council wide savings need to come from financial support for the non-commercial bus network to help achieve a balanced budget in 2019/20.

Financial Support for the Non-Commercial Bus Network

An Executive Task and Finish Group (TFG) looked into how best to approach any reductions in financial support. This work included meeting with and considering the views of bus operators, considering alternative funding options and taking account of the many comments from the public from a Bus User Survey.

The Survey was used as an Impact Assessment giving the TFG an understanding of the use of existing surveys and the impact on users if they were to be changed. In recognising that all services play a valuable role, the approach was to determine which categories of services were of greatest benefit to residents of West Sussex. These services comprise:

- Those routes which carry people that we have a legal duty to transport e.g. eligible school children
- Those routes which serve isolated rural communities
- Those routes where there are no alternatives
- Those routes which help to maintain access to key services such as hospitals, shopping and work at appropriate times of day.

Each supported service/part service was scored against a set of weightings applied to criteria used in a previous review in 2011/12 including:

- Cost per passenger
- Journey purpose
- Patronage trends
- Funding/resource alternatives
- Alternative travel choices
- Interchange points on route
- Contribution to land policy
- Frequency reduction possibility
- Overall contribution to financial saving

In addition, based on area served and passenger types/numbers each service was scored against the following priorities in the West Sussex Plan:

- Best start in life
- A prosperous place
- A strong, safe and sustainable place
- Independence in later life

On that basis, and reviewing the comments made by bus users, city/town/parish councils and South Downs National Park the TFG considered all bus services for reduced financial support. A set of proposed changes were passed to the Cabinet Member for Highways and Infrastructure as a part of a single decision in December 2018. This was to allow the affected bus operators the time to deregister or change registration of the services through the Traffic Commissioner that takes up to three months before coming into effect.

Revenue consequences of proposed changes

Public Transport Support Gross Expenditure Budget	Current Year 2018/19 £m	Year 2 2019/20 £m	Year 3 2020/21 £m	Year 4 2021/22 £m
Revenue budget	2.570	2.570	2.269	2.269
Effect of TFG recommendations	0	-0.301	0	0
Remaining budget	2.570	2.269	2.269	2.269

In the review the Cabinet Member and the TFG recognised the challenge of trying to sustain existing services where possible. Difficult choices had to be made but with all of the data on use and impacts from the survey taken into account. Where a service could be in danger of withdrawal the opportunity was explored to still operating a reduced service only where residents would have enough time to complete their visits to shops, medical appointments and other activities. In some cases proposals included a withdrawal if the service was being used by such a small number that the cost per passenger was extremely high. In such cases officers would work with local communities to seek alternatives such as car sharing, shared taxis or community car schemes.

In some cases the TFG proposed to retain support for part services to continue to ensure the commerciality of the rest of the local bus network that could fail if funding was withdrawn.

It is recognised that any change to financial support could affect many people who rely on affected bus services. The complicated nature of bus services means that any funding reductions may bring risks which may be summarised as follows:

- Increased car use leading to congestion, increased highways maintenance costs and significant harm to the sustainable transport agenda.
- Increased social isolation, particularly rural communities and for older people. This can lead to increased demand on other services such as Community Transport.
- Increase demand on other County Council resources such as Adults' Services.
- Increased costs to the Council's Home to School Transport (this was taken into account by the TFG in its review).
- Reduced support to the local economy and employment.
- Greater and disproportionate impact on lower income groups.
- Potential impact on the viability of smaller bus operators.
- Increased risk of under capacity on remaining services i.e. the buses will be full and passengers may be unable to board.
- The effect on the changing shape of day care in the county.

Lee Harris

Executive Director Economy, Infrastructure and Environment