

Appendix C

Report by the Executive Passenger Transport Task & Finish Group

On proposed financial changes to the non-commercial bus network

1 Background

- 1.1 An Executive Task and Finish Group (TFG) was set up by the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport to advise him on the delivery of a new Bus Strategy. To complete this work they also considered all of the bus services operated under contract by the County Council to align with the new strategy and within the proposed 2019/20 budget.
- 1.2 The TFG met a number of times to consider the strategy and review service funding. The meetings were chaired by the Cabinet Member and sought the views of the TFG on possible changes to supported services based on proposals put forward by officers.
- 1.3 The cross party membership of the TFG consisted of:
 - Cllr David Bradford
 - Cllr Joy Dennis
 - Cllr Nigel Jupp
 - Cllr Andrew Baldwin (Member of ECFSC)
 - Cllr Kate O'Kelly
 - Cllr Brian Quinn

2 The approach taken

- 2.1 The TFG met on 11 October 2018 to agree how officers would present options for their consideration and what insight data they required. Previously the TFG had met with the main bus operators (Stagecoach, Metrobus and Compass Travel) when considering the strategy to understand how their businesses operated and their key challenges and opportunities.
- 2.2 The October meeting was held at the start of a formal consultation with bus users on the impacts if any changes were made to the supported non-commercial bus services. These services account about 15% of the total bus network with the remaining 85% being operated commercially.
- 2.3 The TFG met on 20 November 2018 just as the formal consultation had closed and considered the options proposed by officers along with the feedback recorded at that time from bus users and other interested bodies including user groups, District/City/Town and Parish Councils, and SDNPA.

- 2.4 Each service proposal was set out as had been done at a previous review in 2011/12 for consistency.
- 2.5 Each service was reviewed individually and recommendations made for the Cabinet Member to consider in his upcoming Decision.
- 2.6 The TFG looked at the costs of delivering the services, what areas were served, the patronage levels and the nature and extent of possible impacts from data drawn from a bus user survey.
- 2.7 At time of the meeting over 2800 responses had been formally recorded with a further 1100 entered subsequently.
- 2.8 Officers proposals for reductions were based on each service being scored against various criteria including alignment with the Bus Strategy (and therefore the West Sussex Plan).
- 2.9 The TFG agreed that rural villages should retain a service unless usage was so low and the cost uneconomic. It also considered the impacts of increased social isolation for residents with protected characteristics, predominantly older residents and people with disabilities.
- 2.10 The TFG also considered where the withdrawal of a service could lead to linked commercial services being de-registered by the bus companies as a consequence.
- 2.11 The expectation was a reduction in funding of £0.5m to live within the proposed 2019/20 budget.

3 Additional challenge

- 3.1 Officers outlined to the TFG that the viability of local bus services can be greatly impacted by their recommendations in relation to supported bus services.
- 3.2 Bus companies interwork vehicles and staff used on supported services with commercial operations and sometimes school bus work. Sometimes there can be unintended consequences of reducing funding for supported services on these other services.
- 3.3 Bus companies, especially the small to medium sized operators, have been contending with rising costs for some time and the reduction of funding can have dire consequences on their viability as a local supplier of services as well as a contributor to the local economy.

4 Other Key Considerations

- 4.1 Officers identified a number of savings options with varying level of impacts and risks if they were pursued.
- 4.2 Where officers proposed to reduce frequencies of some services they highlighted the risk of existing buses becoming overloaded as a consequence, particularly by free bus pass holders who are the main users of the supported services.
- 4.3 Officers highlighted where residents have alternative services including other local bus services, rail and community transport or shared taxis.

5. The outcome

- 5.1 The TFG asked that other authorities could be contacted seeking funding to retain any reduced services.
- 5.2 The TFG also agreed that officers would work with Community Transport operators and other partners to fill in any gaps including looking at use of the WSCC minibus fleet through formal agreements to help sustain local services.
- 5.3 It was recognised that officers would need to work with bus operators following the review to see how they can sustain their businesses providing valuable public and school bus services where they are may not be commercially viable.
- 5.4 Appendix D (which is exempt from publication due to containing commercially sensitive information) sets out all of the services and the TFG recommendations made with regards to future funding from 2019/20.