

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE –
THURSDAY 10 SEPTEMBER 2015
CABINET – WEDNESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2015
OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL SUPPORTED TRANSPORT (SUBSIDISED
BUSES AND DIAL-A-RIDE) CONSULTATION
REPORT OF THE HEAD OF LEISURE AND COMMUNITIES
(Contact: Dene Robson, Tel: (01993) 861481)

(The Overview and Scrutiny decisions on this matter will be recommendations to Cabinet)

1. PURPOSE

To consider a consultation document from Oxfordshire County Council, together with the views of Local Members, in respect of proposed changes to subsidised bus services and to the Dial-a-Ride service in Oxfordshire.

2. RECOMMENDATION

That the Cabinet considers and agrees a response to the consultation document, informed through the views submitted by local members and the Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1. Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) is consulting on its service change proposals for subsidised bus services and Dial-a-Ride. A copy of the core consultation document (Appendix A) and supporting schedules is included in the appendices.
- 3.2. At present Oxfordshire County Council subsidises over 100 bus services across Oxfordshire, which makes up around 9% of the bus network. This means that more than nine out of ten services run without any public subsidy.
- 3.3. The background for the current proposed changes is on-going cuts in central government funding and Oxfordshire County Council's plan to make financial savings on supported transport services as one contribution to reducing budgets and the drive to find savings. As part of the budget setting process in February 2015, the County Council reduced the overall supported transport budget (approx. £31 million per annum) by a fifth (£6.3 million).
- 3.4. As far as possible, the County Council is attempting to make savings in supported transport by running services more efficiently (it has been estimated that £3.7 million of the targeted savings can be achieved by bringing together all the supported transport services that the County Council operates and funds). However, the shortfall (£2.6 million) in targeted additional savings is now intended to come from supported transport services which the County Council is not required to provide by law.
- 3.5. Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet has directed that the consultation explores two proposed options in looking at reducing the current £4 million a year that the County Council pays in bus subsidies and in running the Dial-a-Ride Service. Option 1 is for the withdrawal of all bus subsidies. Option 2 would see bus subsidies reduce by £2.3 million. The changes would come into effect for the financial year starting in April 2016.

- 3.6. Within option 2, the service change proposal looked at three different ways that bus services could be prioritised and funding reduced. These are: 1. Fund services that are deemed most likely to be used by older and disabled people (off peak services); 2. Prioritise bus services running at peak hours during weekdays; and 3. Prioritise bus services running in the evening and at the weekend (commonly used to access leisure activities). The County Council's current preferred approach under option 2 is to support the funding of services that are most likely to be used by older and disabled people (as this is considered to provide a safety net; offer better value; and protect more services).
- 3.7. The proposed service changes in options 1 and 2 are assessed against individual subsidised services in Appendices B and C of this report (extracted from the County Council's consultation papers). The County Council has undertaken to work with bus companies to see if some of the bus services can continue without a subsidy.
- 3.8. In addition to the options for scaling back bus subsidies, the consultation paper proposes that the County Council will no longer be able to fund Dial-a-Ride as a council provided service from the end of the current financial year. Dial-a-Ride is a non-statutory supported transport service that provides a door-to-door service for those who have poor mobility and are unable to use, or do not have access to conventional public transport. The County Council intends to mitigate the impact of the proposed Dial-a-Ride cut through working with the voluntary sector (with initial start-up support from the County Council) to encourage voluntary groups to step into running Dial-a-Ride services.
- 3.9. The County Council is seeking consultation input so that it can assess whether any further modelling of possible change options is appropriate. The further assessment will also take into account all relevant factors (statutory requirements; government guidance; cost; risk etc.) in guiding the decision on whether or not the proposed changes are taken forward.
- 3.10. As part of the consultation exercise, a series of public meetings were held around the County with a West Oxfordshire session being held in Witney on Tuesday 7 July.
- 3.11. At the Witney consultation event, members of the public (including Parish Councils) sought information on the levels of subsidy required to keep specific services operating. This information would then enable parishes to consider whether there was any scope for a local funding action to step in and support the retention of a given service. The County Council has undertaken to provide information on the subsidy levels in the next couple of weeks following the consultation session.
- 3.12. The County Council is developing a Service and Community Impact Assessment for the proposed changes so that it can better understand the projected impact of the proposals. This impact assessment will give particular emphasis to the assessment of impacts on groups that have protected characteristics (these include age and disability).
- 3.13. In terms of informing a specific set of overarching consultation comments from the District Council, a couple of preliminary considerations are worth noting. Firstly, the District Council would be concerned to ensure that rural areas are not left isolated as a consequence of the review. Secondly, it is important to recognise the increasing older age profile of the population in the District's settlements that lie beyond the principal market towns of Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton. These points and other specific observations are suggested for inclusion in the District Council's response to the consultation.

- 3.14. As set out in the Local Plan for West Oxfordshire District, there is a series of main settlements that provide access to key services and facilities. This, of course, is the case with the District's main market towns (Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton) but is also true of the role played by a series of smaller settlements that function as rural service centres (Bampton, Burford, Charlbury, Eynsham, Long Hanborough and Woodstock). In considering the network of service provision, the County Council would be advised to look at the need for a continued linking of the smaller villages with these key settlements in order to preserve access to key services.
- 3.15. The issue of service access takes on a heightened significance when account is taken of the older age profile of West Oxfordshire's population. The demographic breakdown for the area shows that at the time of the last Census (2011) there were already 2,740 West Oxfordshire residents aged 85+ and that this figure is forecast to expand to 4,400 by 2021. Further to the forecast expansion in the already significant numbers in the highest age bracket of the older population, there are particular concentrations of older age populations in West Oxfordshire's rural areas beyond its main towns.
- 3.16. As a local economic area, West Oxfordshire's Travel to Work Area exhibits the strong relationship the District area has with neighbouring districts within the Oxford City region. The 2011 Census identified a net outflow of 8,000 commuters, with 20,000 people travelling out of the District to work each day and 12,000 travelling in. Oxford is the principal destination for out-commuters and the link with the County town is a key element in the functioning of the local economy.
- 3.17. West Oxfordshire's Local Plan recognises that transport is a key issue for the local area. As a rural area, there is already a significant general reliance on private vehicles with around 80% of commuting journeys being made by car. Local Plan policy commits the District Council to working in partnership to increase the use of bus, rail and community transport through the provision of improved services and facilities.
- 3.18. The maintenance of an effective transport network is an important consideration in the context of the above local area characteristics. It is significant in terms of maintaining sustainable local communities, providing decent access to services and providing for social inclusion. The District Council requests that the County Council takes into account the preceding commentary in the review process along with the specific views submitted by local members, the Council's Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the minutes for the Council's Cabinet consideration of this issue.
- 3.19. District Councillors are invited to review the list of bus services affected by the proposed changes and to provide comment based on local knowledge of the possible impacts of service withdrawals. Further details of the consultation including supporting information, a frequently asked questions paper; and a methodology paper can be reviewed on Oxfordshire County Council's website www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/stconsultation

4. ALTERNATIVES/OPTIONS

The Cabinet can decide to make additional observations and provide further commentary that develops the inputs from local members and the comments from Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct District Council financial implications arising from this report.

6. RISKS

If taken forward, the withdrawal of bus subsidies (either in whole or part) and the cessation of Dial-a-Ride provision in its current form will reduce the network of bus services that operate across the County. This change may have a particular impact on vulnerable groups and the County Council's consultation exercise and the Service and Community Impact Assessment will inform the approach that is eventually taken. An attempt is being made to mitigate impacts through the County Council's joint working with bus operators and the voluntary and community sector.

7. REASONS

The provision of bus services accords with the Council aim to sustain vibrant healthy and economically prosperous towns and villages.

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