

From: David Brazier, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport
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To: **Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee – 19 May 2022**

Subject: **Supported Buses – Consultation Update**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Past Pathway of Paper: **N/A**

Future Pathway of Paper: **N/A**

Electoral Division: Countywide

Summary:

For the financial year 22/23 to support the council achieve a balanced budget, the net budget for supported bus services is proposed to decrease by £2.2M.

In order to inform final decisions, an eight-week public consultation was conducted from 24th February. This closed on 20th April attracting 2,562 responses. Officers are continuing to analyse responses and this paper provides an update on current findings. A fuller report will come to a later meeting of this Cabinet Committee.

Recommendation:

The Cabinet Committee is asked to note the paper and initial consultation outcomes.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The financial support of public bus services is a discretionary activity with the only obligation on Local Transport Authorities to consider funding (but not to actually fund) bus services in this way. In response to austerity and reduced funding from Central Government, a number of authorities have reduced or completely ceased to fund public bus services.
- 1.2 The pandemic has had a profound impact on the use of buses in Kent and across the UK. Government advice to avoid the use of public transport during the pandemic plus changes to lifestyle and working patterns have contributed to a sharp decline in the use of services, particularly at off-peak times. In 2019/20 over 3.7m journeys were completed on KCC subsidised bus services. In 2021/22, this figure was 2.3m, so increasing the £ per passenger journey subsidy provided to all services by KCC.
- 1.3 From April 2022, the net budget for supported bus services has reduced from £6M to £3.8M to support the council achieve a balanced budget in 22/23.
- 1.4 This paper summarises the outcomes from the associated public consultation, highlighting impacts and considerations to inform final decisions.

2. Background and approach to prioritising services for consultation

- 2.1 There are currently 129 contracts supported by the Council, including those for the Kent Karrier Dial-a-Ride services. These contracts cover a range of service types including support for specific journeys, journeys on specific days i.e., Sundays, funding for whole services and journeys which provide journeys to and from school.
- 2.2 In response to previous needs to reduce the spend on public bus services but where the saving required has been smaller, the approach adopted has been to focus resulting changes on frequency reductions, sharing resource and other more solutions designed to limit the impacts on passengers.
- 2.3 The saving required in this instance is too great as a proportion of the overall budget to allow for this approach and the opportunities for savings have largely been deployed and are now extremely limited.
- 2.4 For this reason, the approach to identifying the potential saving required has been to apply KCC's Criteria for the Support of Public Bus Services to identify contracts for potential withdrawal. The criteria prioritises services taking account of the days and times of use and the performance of the contract in value for money terms, calculated as a £ per passenger journey figure. **

** Calculated as the annual cost of the contract divided by the number of journeys made on it. 2019/20 journey numbers have been used in order to consider pre-pandemic / steady state usage.

- 2.5 The criterion for prioritising services is shown below and a full list of the services identified for consultation is attached as Appendix C of this report.

Priority	DAYS OF OPERATION	£ Per Passenger Journey
1	Any day of the week	Less than £3
2	Monday to Friday	£3 to £5
3	Monday to Friday	Over £5
4	Saturday	£3 to £5
5	Sunday and evening	£3 to £5
6	Saturday, Sunday & evening	£5 to £7
7	Any day	Over £7
8	Poorly performing contracts with extremely limited implications	Regardless of cost

- 2.6 By applying the criteria, 48 contracts up to the total value of £3m have been identified for potential withdrawal. It should be noted that these include all contracts in categories 8 through to 2 and some of the more poorly performing contracts in Category 1.
- 2.7 As a consequence, the contracts identified include services and journeys of all types including journeys used by school children, services which represent the only public transport for some rural communities and all of KCC's Kent Karrier Dial-a-Ride services.

3. Consultation

- 3.1 In order to fully understand equality and other impacts and to inform final decisions a public consultation ran for eight weeks from 24 February to 20 April 2022. The consultation asked for a range of feedback to understand user characteristics, journeys purposes, user impacts and equalities implications.
- 3.2 To support the consultation comprehensive advertising and promotion was undertaken consisting of; mailshots to Kent Karrier Members and Travel Saver customers, social and other media releases, advertisement in the Kent Messenger, posters displayed on buses and literature being available in all libraries and gateways.
- 3.3 As a consequence, 2,562 responses were received along with 55 letters and emails sent to the Public Transport team. In addition, the Council has also received three petitions, focussed surveys conducted by Kent Karrier operators and a Parish Council, four MPs letters and a focussed report by Compaid the operator of west Kent Karrier schemes regarding the impacts of the withdrawal of these services.
- 3.4 Analysis of responses in terms of user characteristics, geographic distribution and the services attracting a response together with the overall number of responses provides an assurance that the outputs from the consultation are representative and provide a robust basis on which to understand impacts and make final decisions.

4. Key Considerations

- 4.1 Often the number of residents using these services are quite limited and have fallen during and since the pandemic.
- 4.2 The proportion of respondents unable to identify an alternative travel option is notable and this increases amongst the elderly and disabled aged groups and also 27% claim they have no alternative to any services they use. Consideration of services as a lifeline and a route to independence is high amongst residents aged 75 & over and residents with a disability. Fears of isolation and impact on mental wellbeing are key concerns.
- 4.3 It is important to consider the context of the wider commercially provided bus network which faces its own challenges. Use of buses across the County is struggling to recover from the impacts of the pandemic and when coupled with rising costs, this is already leading to the withdrawal of services by bus operators. This will make the likelihood of providing alternative solutions more limited and there is a concern that the further withdrawal of significant funding from the network could prompt further commercial service cancellations and may jeopardise the viability of some smaller transport businesses.
- 4.4 17 contracts included for consideration are identified as meeting a school transport need. 50 children using these services have a legal entitlement to free transport to school and will need to be provided with an alternative solution. However, there will be many others for whom no solution is available.

- 4.5 It is important to note that children currently travelling will have predicated their choice of school on the presence of a bus service and whilst no service is “guaranteed” it is clear from the consultation responses that users and their parents will have organised domestic arrangements around the current network and alternative travel options are identified as limited amongst this group.
- 4.6 Related to the above, the impacts on traffic congestion at peak times and on-air quality should also be considered. Contracts with a school’s transport element are not concentrated on any particular parts of the County but do include services taking scholars to schools in Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells and Sittingbourne all of which have existing issues with congestion on certain corridors. Although it is not possible to reliably quantify the air quality implications, assessment of the carbon impact relating to one of the school days only services has estimated that 21 tonnes of carbon per annum would be generated should all bus journeys be made by car compared to 2.7 tonnes on the current bus service.
- 4.7 Although many of the bus services operating at off peak times will cater for the same group of users and carry many of the same impacts, because of it being more focussed on elderly and disabled members and those living in the most rural areas, the impacts on Kent Karrier members should be given particular consideration.
- 4.8 Kent Karrier is a demand responsive transport scheme with eligibility for membership orientated towards those who cannot use or do not have access to conventional public transport. It is therefore important to consider the presence of Kent Karrier as a form of “safety net” offering limited access to essential services for anyone meeting the criteria. Therefore, whilst the nature of these services means that these contracts perform poorly in value for money terms, they offer a different value to the user as is identified in the consultation outputs.
- 4.9 Through the conducting of their own survey and the submission of a more focussed report, the operators of the Kent Karrier service have highlighted their concern about the particular impacts on services users whilst also raising the risk of knock-on impacts on other Council services in respect of SEN Transport costs and on Adult Social Care.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1 From April 2022, the budget for socially necessary bus services has been reduced from £6M to £3.8M. Not withdrawing services to the value of £3m will require for the budget to be increased if not to produce an overspend.
- 5.2 KCC has been provisionally awarded £35m funding from Government to support delivery of Kent’s Bus Service Improvement Plan. The BSIP funding conditions preclude us from using the revenue funding element to support existing commercial/supported services, its focus is on future developments.
- 5.3 A condition of the funding is to “lock in” spend on bus services in 2022 / 23 levels for three years and so the outcomes in this instance will inform funding levels over this period.

6. Legal implications

- 6.1 The Transport Act 1985 requires that Local Transport Authorities (LTAS) are required to consider the support of socially necessary bus services. However, expenditure in this area is a discretionary activity with LTA’s being under no obligation to provide subsidy for this purpose. Therefore, the Council can reduce or stop the funding to support bus services.
- 6.2 Services carrying children with a statutory entitlement to free transport to school under the education act are unaffected by these proposals, as where required alternative provision will be provided through dedicated contracted provision not open to the public.
- 6.3 A failure to manage the process of change robustly in terms of demonstrating a consideration of the implications from Equalities and other perspectives carries a risk of decisions being subject to judicial review.

7. Equalities implications

- 7.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment was completed prior to the consultation identified more significant and adverse impacts users with the protected characteristics of; Age (the elderly), Sex (Females, Disability, and those with carer responsibilities).
- 7.2 The outcomes of the consultation re-enforce this understanding in identifying that these groups are more likely to be reliant on these services for their journey purpose and less likely to have access to alterative transport solutions. In addition, Age in respect of Younger Persons has also been identified as being more adversely impacted for the same reason and notably that these users are unable to legally drive as an alternative.
- 7.3 Opportunities to mitigate the impacts for any of these groups are extremely limited.

8. Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet Committee is asked to note the paper and initial consultation outcomes.

9. Background Documents

- Appendix A – Full list of services consulted on for withdrawal

10. Contact details

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