

# Local Bus Services and Strategy Review

**Cabinet**

**Date: 7<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

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Author: Cabinet Member for Sustainability, Highways and Transport and the Head of Highways and Transport

Wards: All

Locality Affected: All

Parishes Affected: All

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## **1. Purpose and Reasons**

- 1.1 To inform Cabinet of the results of the public consultation on bus service revisions and reductions proposed in line with the proposed revised draft Local Bus Strategy. These changes are required to meet the Council's ongoing revenue budget pressures.
- 1.2 To seek Cabinet's support for the revised bus strategy, and to authorise Officers to use this strategy to guide future Council funding of bus services.
- 1.3 To inform Cabinet of the two year extension of the Dial A Ride Contract provided by Swindon Dial A Ride.

## **2. Recommendations**

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 To note the results of the public consultation concerning proposed bus service revisions and reductions being proposed, in line with the proposed revised draft Local Bus Strategy as set out in Appendix 1, and its implications for local bus services as set out in Appendix 2, and the proposed service revision and its implications for Dial a Ride and Community Transport.
- 2.2 To adopt the revised Bus Strategy as summarised in the body of the report and set out in full at Appendix 1.
- 2.3 To authorise the Head of Highways and Transport, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Sustainability, Highways and Transport, to implement bus service revisions as set out in Appendix 2, which includes consultation concerns to retain funding for some evening bus services as well as to implement the mitigation measures set out in the body of the report.
- 2.4 To note that the Council will continue to subsidise bus services through the use of the £176,000 Bus Service Operators Grant.
- 2.5 To note receipt of a petition about the withdrawal of evening bus services to Chiseldon signed by 648 residents.

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Further information on the subject of this report can be obtained from Nigel Hale, Direct Dial 466211, [nhale@swindon.gov.uk](mailto:nhale@swindon.gov.uk).

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- 2.6 To note that the Dial A Ride Contract provided by Swindon Dial A Ride has been extended for two years from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2016 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2018 at a cost of £146k per annum.

## 3. Detail

### Background

- 3.1 The 2013 Local Bus Strategy has been reviewed in order to enable the Council to ensure that the Borough has in place a bus network that optimises the balance between the cost to the Council Tax payers and addressing passenger needs. This follows the approval of the Council's Budget for 2016/17.
- 3.2 In response to pressures on revenue funding, it was proposed to withdraw all revenue funding support for local bus services and to review the present dial a ride /community transport contract arrangements by 2020. The draft revised Local Bus Strategy attached in Appendix 1 reflects this decision and would enable its implementation to be made.

### Public Consultation on Local Bus Services and Strategy Review (including Community Transport and Dial a Ride Services)

- 3.3 Before a revised strategy could be implemented, the Council undertook a public consultation. The public consultation commenced on the 18<sup>th</sup> July and ended on the 22<sup>nd</sup> August. This public consultation included the proposed service revision and review of Dial a Ride and Community Transport following the Council's decision to reduce the Community Transport budget of £312.4k by £100k in 2016-17 (£200k full year implication in 2017-18), in line with the revised draft Local Bus Strategy in Appendix 1.

### Introduction and respondent profile

- 3.4 887 valid responses to the survey have been received and processed. 75% of responses are from users of the bus service, and around 70% say they are local residents or taxpayers. Just under one in five responses is from a member of the Dial A Ride service.
- 3.5 Demographic data indicate that there were respondents of all ages, but that response was more heavily concentrated in older age-groups. Nearly two in five respondents were of pensionable age, whilst one in five is aged under 35. Three in five respondents are female, two in five male. 33% are working full time and a further 14% in part-time work. 6% are students, and 40% are retired. Almost all respondents are white British. A total of 45% have a disability; the largest group among these are people with impaired mobility. Responses have come from all areas of Swindon but significant numbers of responses were received from Wroughton, Chiseldon and Highworth. 40% said they have access to a car.

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## Patterns of use

- 3.6 75% of respondents use a bus service at least once a week and to travel to and from for work, and a similar proportion for health-related travel (though this tends to be less frequent and regular in nature). More than 80% of respondents use the service for shopping, and a similar proportion for leisure. 33% uses the bus service for education. Respondents therefore frequently use the bus for a number of different activities.
- 3.7 Regular service users are most heavily concentrated on weekday daytimes; 66% of respondents are regular users at these times. This falls to 40% who are regular evening travellers, or who use Saturday services every week, and 20% who travel regularly on Saturday evenings. Regular use of Sunday services is lower: just 20% are regular users of Sunday services during the day, and this halves to 10% on Sunday evenings.
- 3.8 80% of respondents live within easy walking distance of a bus stop. 33% have concessionary passes. Small proportions of respondents use the bus service with a buggy, mobility scooter, or bicycle.

## Service principles and proposed changes

- 3.9 Asked about the financial principles set out in the draft revised strategy, there was a measure of agreement with these, though there are also many dissenting voices. The main area of concern is the need to ensure that those who are disadvantaged by their circumstances or their geography retain access to a service they may be more dependent on. There is also a view among some that it is reasonable for taxpayers to expect provision of an adequate bus service for all.
- 3.10 Similarly, there is a measure of agreement with the service principles articulated in the strategy, again with accompanying concerns. These include the desirability of prioritising travel for leisure (on the basis that it contributes to the economy of the Borough, as well as socially), and the changing nature of work, especially for young people on low pay, often with hours that last into the late evening. There is a call for priority to be given to the needs of the elderly and people with disabilities.
- 3.11 The thinking behind the hubs, and the BusLink provision, received a cautious welcome, but with question marks against sustainability and viability of these services, their capacity to provide for people at busy times or with mobility needs, and their impact on journey times. Several people query why no hub provision is being made for West Swindon, which they feel is being inequitably treated as a result. Others are unsure that their existing travel needs will be covered, and need more detail and precision. Questions are raised about the longer – term sustainability of the proposed Community Transport Organisation and its capacity

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to manage complex operations. Blunsdon Parish Council and Chiseldon Parish Council supported the bus link concept.

3.12 It should be noted that West Swindon has a higher proportion of commercial bus services so will be less affected by these changes.

3.13 Advised of the proposed changes to services, all proposals attract some comment. Respondents raise the most concern about changes to

3.13.1 Service 7: Town Centre to Highworth. Concerns are primarily over isolation of Highworth, and the effect on students, employees getting to and from work especially at South Marston, and young people's access to evening leisure.

3.13.2 Service 8: Freshbrook to Chiseldon. Problems travelling to and from work or hospital, isolation of residents of Chiseldon.

3.13.3 Service 9: Wroughton to Freshbrook. Although there are some impacts on residents of Freshbrook, the main concerns here focus on isolation of Wroughton, and the impact on students, employees getting home from work, and villagers' access to evening leisure.

3.13.4 Service 22: Swindon to Okus. Travel to and from work in the evening; night shift workers; loss of leisure, social and childcare access.

3.13.5 Service 71: Swindon to Thorney Park. The focus is on the impact on employees getting home from work, and Wroughton villagers' access to evening leisure.

3.13.6 Parish councils are opposed to reductions in services which they view as damaging to their communities. West Berkshire expressed interest in taking over two services.

3.13.7 A petition from Chiseldon Parish residents has been received in protest to the proposed cut by the Council of the evening bus services through Chiseldon (Service 70 and 70A). This petition has been acknowledged by the Cabinet Member for Sustainability, Highways and Transport and will be taken note of as part of this report. The Council will explore with Chiseldon Parish Council the possibility of sharing the cost of funding of these services including the Service 72A journey as well.

3.14 Some proposed service changes, however, attract very little interest or concern, including

3.14.1 Service 65: Swindon to South Marston

3.14.2 Service 25: Swindon to Kingshill

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3.14.3 Service 21: Swindon to Penhill Valley

3.14.4 Service 47: Swindon to Lambourn

## Dial A Ride service

- 3.15 25% say they use the Dial A Ride service. The largest proportion of these use the service once or twice a week, but about 25% of those using Dial A Ride use it less than once a month. The main purposes of using the service are for shopping, visiting friends and relatives. Dial A Ride users live all over Swindon but there are significant numbers living in Wroughton and Old Town.
- 3.16 There is considerable opposition to any changes in funding for the Swindon Dial A Ride. The service is especially important to those unable to walk to a bus stop, enabling them to carry out everyday activities such as shopping, keep hospital appointments etc., and is believed to play an important part in overcoming social isolation. BusLink type services are not seen as an alternative because of the need for a door to door service, for adapted buses, and for supportive drivers.
- 3.17 The contract provided by Swindon Dial A Ride will be extended for a further two years from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2016 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2018. This will be at a cost of £146k per annum. The service will be an off peak service only operating Monday to Friday 0900 to 1630 and will meet the majority of user needs. At the same time the rural shopping day service provided by Swindon Dial A Ride will continue at its current contract price.
- 3.18 Dial a Ride are free to provide peak hour Monday to Friday services, and Saturday services to their users but these services will not be subsidised by the Council.
- 3.19 It has not been possible to maintain a peak time service within the reduced budget however only six passengers were likely to use peak time transport for purposes such as employment. A number of taxi type vehicles are operating which have access for passengers with disabilities and these can be an alternative for those who no longer use a Council subsidised peak time service available to them.
- 3.20 Further mitigation is proposed through setting up a workers concessionary scheme for people with disabilities to support Dial a Ride users who are in employment. This will be funded through the use of the available Bus Service Operators Grant, and not the revenue support budget.
- 3.21 The Dial A Ride service will remain an issue of concern while subsidised through the revenue budget. Several consultation responses indicated closure of Dial A Ride, but there should be no fear of this happening. A new two year contract extension has been agreed with Swindon Dial A Ride, and the new level of

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service from 1<sup>st</sup> September will be an off peak only Monday to Friday service (0900 – 1630).

- 3.22 The longer term sustainability of the service will be explored over the next two years. For example moving dial a ride from revenue support funding to other sources, assistance on capital funding and policy changes such as improving relationships with developers to access Section 106 funding. Other ideas will be considered such as integrating with education transport. Where it is beneficial to the service, early decisions will be made to reassure passengers that the dial a ride service will be available beyond 2018.
- 3.23 It is recommended that no further changes occur to the funding of Dial A Ride while discussions are ongoing with Swindon Dial A Ride to ensure the charity remains viable without further subsidy.

## Other comments

- 3.24 Respondents are supportive of all the proposals to improve the bus service, but improved punctuality is by far the most important improvement that can be made. Better bus stops and interchanges, with better real time information, are also high priorities, though all measures are supported.
- 3.25 Other improvements called for by respondents include cleanliness, customer service and driver courtesy, punctuality and reliability - of information, as well as services. There are also those who ask for night buses, better quality vehicles, and improved space for buggies and wheelchairs. Several people question whether money allocated for improvements should be spent instead on maintaining existing services.
- 3.26 Invited to give their views on a pattern of service set out in the survey, respondents are broadly acquiescent, but several express disappointment at the proposed reductions in evening and Sunday services and services to specific communities, particularly in rural areas. Observations already made about the impact on shift or late-evening workers are restated, as are concerns about the viability of BusLink for people with disabilities.

## Conclusion

- 3.27 Overall the proposed revisions to the Local Bus Strategy are supported although there is concern about some evening services and their importance to shift workers and younger people being able to travel in the evening. A number of daytime services received little support and it may be advisable to withdraw these and not replace with any alternative hub type service, if support to some evening services is to be maintained.



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## Draft Revised Bus Strategy - Key Points

- 3.28 The full revised draft strategy is included at Appendix 1 and its key points are summarised below. While the responses to the consultation are noted, it is not proposed that the draft principles be amended.
- 3.28.1 Council will work with the main commercial bus operators to support the bus charter principles as set out in the Local Bus Strategy.
- 3.28.2 A Bus Network Partnership Board will act as an advisory group to the Cabinet Member on bus issues.
- 3.28.3 The Bus Network Partnership Board will act as a liaison between commercial bus operators and the Council in the development of bus services, bus priorities and highway improvements to support a commercial bus operation.
- 3.28.4 Commercial operators will define the bus network as 95% of current local bus operation is commercial.
- 3.28.5 The Council will suggest commercial proposals where the need arises for consideration by commercial operators.
- 3.28.6 The Council will work with local organisations including parish/town councils to develop where there is a need, a supporting network of BusLink services using a number of transport hub centres to enable passengers to connect with commercial bus services.
- 3.28.7 Initially three transport hubs will be identified in North Swindon (Orbital Retail Park), East Swindon (GW Hospital) and South Swindon (Old Town). These will be developed if there is sufficient demand for them and initially by working with the main bus operator in the area served.
- 3.28.8 The Council will develop and create a Community Transport Organisation if necessary to deliver sustainable transport solutions and BusLink connecting services to the transport hubs. BusLink connecting services are likely to use conventional buses operated by the commercial bus operators to either link to their main service or be an extension of a commercial bus service.
- 3.28.9 A bus improvement plan for the highway will be established every year.
- 3.29 The draft revised strategy includes a commitment to working with the bus operators to improve the highway network to help deliver bus punctuality and the introduction of a Bus Punctuality Partnership.

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- 3.30 In order to meet the service needs and underlying budget demands, it is recommended that Cabinet approved the revised draft bus strategy so that officers may use it as the basis of future proposals.

## Mitigation measures

- 3.31 In response to other issues raised during the consultation, Cabinet is asked to consider authorising the Head of Highways and Transport, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Sustainability, Highways and Transport to implement the following measures.
- 3.31.1 The Council will set up if required a Community Transport Organisation to deliver sustainable transport solutions, which will run BusLink hub-based services that connect into the commercial network.
- 3.31.2 SBC will support the setup of BusLink hub services with transitional funding.
- 3.31.3 Transitional funding within existing budgets such as Bus Service Operators Grant will also be available from SBC to pump-prime services to become commercially viable, and will support the development of new funding streams where these might be available and required.
- 3.31.4 SBC will work with the Community Transport Organisation to help ensure the continuation of local services where commercially viable or the Community Transport Organisation wishes to continue with service support and provision.
- 3.31.5 The Council will continue to work with the Community Transport Organisation to secure Section 106 and any additional funding will be used to extend bus services, and contribute to BusLink hub services.
- 3.31.6 Where a bus route is subsidised by less than £1 per passenger per trip, the Council will expect bus operators to take all necessary measures to achieve a commercial approach so there is no ongoing subsidy.
- 3.31.7 The Council will use only the £176,000 Bus Services Operators Grant to subsidise future bus services.

## Review and Rationale

- 3.32 Where BusLink hub services fail to become commercially viable during any transitional support period, the Council will review the operation of the services with the Community Transport Organisation if it is introduced. Where this has resulted from the lack of patronage of the service and there is no strong community desire to cover the shortfall, a decision will be taken to remove the BusLink type hub service at the next contract break.



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## 4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 Unless replaced, the existing bus strategy and criteria will remain the adopted policy of the Council and so the strategy needs to be revised in order to meet financial pressures and the budgetary framework agreed by Council.
- 4.2 A “do nothing” approach would commit the Council to continue to fund services with limited patronage and no commercial viability. The absence of a Community Transport Organisation would allow no alternative means of local community involvement and funding where communities would otherwise be willing to step in and support the service.

## 5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

### Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 The proposals contained in this report will contribute to the challenging £20m general fund budget pressure faced by the Council for 2017/18. A 2 year extension to the Dial A Ride contract of £146,000 per annum has been agreed with effect from 1st September, 2016.

### Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.2 Legal and Human Rights considerations have been taken fully into account in compiling this report. It is considered that the recommendations of this report are compatible with Convention Rights.

### All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.3 No other relevant implications have been identified in the preparation of this report.

### Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.4 A Diversity Impact Assessment (DIA) has been completed. No adverse or other significant impacts were found at this stage. Copies of the assessment can be obtained from the report author.

### Risk Management

- 5.5 A risk assessment has been undertaken as part of the Highways and Transport Business Plan.

## 6. Consultees

- 6.1 The Corporate Director, Resources (Section 151 Officer) and Director of Law and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

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## **7. Background Papers**

7.1 None

## **8. Appendices**

8.1 Appendix 1 Draft revised Local Bus Strategy 2016

8.2 Appendix 2 Public Transport Contracts 2016/17

8.3 Appendix 3 Copy of Public Consultation document

## **9. Key Decision/Decision in Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan**

9.1 This is a Key Decision and is included in the Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan for September 2016.