

## Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee

12 October 2016

### **Bus Subsidies Task and Finish Group**

Wednesday 28 September 2016 – County Hall, Dorchester

Present:- Hilary Cox and Daryl Turner (Elected Members), Andrew Shaw (Dorset Travel Team Service Manager) and David Northover (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies:- Andy Canning (Elected Member)

Arising from the meeting of the Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 15 June 2016, a meeting of the Bus Subsidies Task and Finish Group met to consider the service overview and scoping report relating to bus subsidies.

#### Context

As a result of Central Government reducing funding for Dorset County Council, significant savings are required to balance the budget. Consequently, County Council agreed to reduce the overall budget for supported transport by around 50% (£1.5 million), the budget for school transport also being reduced by £850,000 - to be implemented by 2017/18. Reductions to school transport achieved by running services more efficiently were in progress. Nevertheless, a radical approach to both public and schools transport was needed to meet the savings target. It was recognised that it would not be possible to retain the current public bus network within the constraints of the revised budgets and many existing services would change. To address this situation proposals included:-

- prioritising remaining subsidy on those core routes that were able to serve the most people and contribute the most to the economic growth of the County. These core routes were the regular interurban services serving around 80% of Dorset's population
- opening many more school services for use by the public, ensuring rural residents could access Dorset's market towns
- working closely with community transport operators, community groups and councillors to develop Dorset's community transport network
- working closely with operators to attempt to secure rural 'in-fill' routes. In-fill routes are rural services that operate between school opening and closing times, making use of empty vehicles travelling to and from schools services. A consultation exercise had been held about these proposals with its results helping to decide how to proceed with the review and help to form the future shape of Dorset's transport network. A procurement exercise would be taking place during autumn 2016 to determine how the future provision of passenger transport across rural Dorset would be delivered.

#### Considerations

As part of the means to provide alternatives to the bus routes in order to solve rural transport issue, the Group acknowledged that community transport played a critical part in delivering practical solutions to community needs, offering greater flexibility with timings and destinations and having the ability to connect with public bus routes and trains. Many areas in Dorset had access to a community transport scheme which responded to demand and charged a fare to provide a door to door service, ranging

from volunteer car schemes and Dial-a-Ride services, to car sharing services, neighbourhood car schemes and Car Clubs.

Dorset Community Transport had access to vehicles which were much more likely to meet their full capacity than traditional 56 or 72 seater buses. Whilst taxis played their part in what rural transport was able to deliver, it was not the most cost effective means of delivering this to a final destination, however it might be practical to use taxis to access a regular bus service.

The Group considered that their purpose was to scrutinise the process and methodology which had been followed to ensure that this had been properly applied. This included what consideration was given to Equability Impact Assessments (EqIA), the impacts on social isolation, how it met the outcomes of the Corporate Plan, what alternative arrangements were in place to provide the delivery of community transport and how this was being applied.

To supplement this there was also a need to establish how the County Council had come to the conclusion that savings should be met from this service rather than elsewhere, and their reasoning for this.

Critical to the success of any alternative arrangements for delivering rural transport was the participation of local communities to organise their own community transport and the means by which this might be encouraged. Focus would remain on achieving this so as to ensure that no community was readily disenfranchised.

The Group saw that the amalgamation of public and school transport where practicable would also go a long way to addressing need by the effective and efficient use of resources and was seen to be a positive and pragmatic solution. Bus companies were being encouraged to explore the prospect of doing this in the interest of all.

The Group considered that in order to determine that the process followed was delivering what it was designed to achieve and in a way that was sustainable and manageable, evidence could be provided about:

- the reasoning for taking the decisions which had been taken for reducing the passenger transport budget
  - how the process had been determined, how it was being applied and the benefits it was designed to bring
  - how rural isolation was being acknowledged, accounted for and mitigated against
  - how the Council's Corporate Plan aims were being met in terms of benefits to health and wellbeing and economic growth
  - what strategy there was for delivering alternative options
  - the principle, rationale and methodology for implementing and delivering that strategy
  - how that strategy fitted with the principles of the LTP and complemented the delivery of other transport strategies within that
  - the criteria on which the decisions taken have been made
  - what options were available and the accessibility to these alternatives
  - how EqIA's had been applied and on what basis
  - the transport procurement arrangements and their application
  - the business case justification, being undertaken by consultants for the course of action being taken
- Summary and conclusion

Overall the Group considered that the proposed arrangements should provide the scope for a more flexible, reactive and focussed service being developed and

delivered in cooperation with communities and stakeholders in recognising the part they could play in maintaining an accessible service.

Duration of Meeting – 3.00 pm – 4.00 pm