

ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**THURSDAY 14 JANUARY 2021**

The following questions were received from Mr. M Hunt CC

1. “Public Transport has taken quite a knock during the last year. What do we know about the use of the County’s contribution (including Concessionary Fares) to local bus services, the support provided by central government and the ability of existing services to survive the coronavirus public health crisis?”

Response

Leicestershire County Council is continuing to pay operators concessionary travel reimbursements at 2019/20 (pre-covid-19) levels during 2020/21, in line with government guidance. Total spend in 2019/20 was £5.03m. Expenditure in 2020/21 is therefore expected to be at that level.

The funding support for operators from central government is in the form of the Covid-19 Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG). This funding is designed to ensure bus operators can maintain necessary services at a level which is enough to meet reduced demand, but also to allow adequate space between passengers on board, in line with social distancing guidance.

The authority has claimed the following amounts from the Government’s CBSSG funding:

- 17 March - 8 June 2020 - Amount claimed: £170,121
- 9 June - 3 August 2020 - Amount claimed: £99,241
- 4 August - 28 September 2020 - Amount claimed: £247,412.20

The CBSSG fund is expected to run until at least 18th January 2021. Further claims will be made for the remainder of this period as appropriate.

Additionally, Government has enabled local authorities (LAs) to use Supported Bus Services Funding (SBSF) allocated to them last year pre-Covid-19 to subsequently provide additional support to subsidised services during the Covid-19 period; the authority was awarded £556,000 of SBSF. This funding was originally intended to enable LAs to improve some current supported services and to restore some lost bus services where most needed. It is now expected that all of this funding will be required to support subsidised services affected by Covid-19.

Further information on these funds can be found on the County Council public website which is updated periodically as part of our commitment to transparency and compliance with the funding terms and conditions. This can be accessed at:

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/roads-and-travel/buses-and-public-transport/covid-19-support-for-passenger-transport>

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The impacts on the current bus market and service provisions have been, and continue to be, significant. It is not currently known whether the government will extend the CBSSG funding past 18th January, or if so for what period. Therefore, it is difficult to foresee the true impact on service provision in the future, however the County Council remains committed at present to supporting existing service provision to enable our communities to access essential services in line with our Passenger Transport Policy and Strategy (PTPS) during this difficult time. We continue to engage with operators on an on-going basis, which informs our on-going approach to service provision.

2. “Our current Local Transport Plan places a significant emphasis on Quality Bus Partnerships to offer more accessible public transport including a joint approach between local authorities and bus operators to improve services. It states that the local authority will invest in transport infrastructure, passenger facilities and/or information and the bus operator invests in higher quality services and/or newer vehicles aimed at increasing bus patronage and improving customer satisfaction. What are the Quality Bus Partnerships delivering in this regard and what areas do they cover?”

Response

During the life of the LTP3, working relationships with operators have transitioned away from formal Quality Bus Partnerships, a concept largely founded on traditional fixed routes operated by conventional buses; however, the authority continues to have strong working relationships with bus operators, communicating frequently to support the commercial bus network, in provision of quality information and service provision. This is in line with the adopted authority’s PTPS, publication of which post-dates LTP3.

The authority continues to invest in Passenger Transport infrastructure through area and corridor approaches such as the A426 quality bus corridor, which saw the delivery of bus priority measures married with enhancements to buses and bus stop infrastructure. In addition to these types of projects, we continue to ensure high quality infrastructure, and services where appropriate, are provided for new developments through the development management process. This might not always be in the form of a traditional ‘bus’, as the ArrivaClick on demand service running to New Lubbethorpe shows. Even pre-pandemic it was becoming apparent that more flexible models of passenger transport operation might offer a more appropriate and longer-term basis as a way forward for passenger transport; this serves to highlight why the authority’s PTPS enables a more flexible approach in comparison to the LTP3.

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3. “Whilst the County Council has improved much of the infrastructure to support bus passengers within major schemes, like Loughborough Town Centre, and sometimes where section 106 monies are available for new developments, what responsibility do the County Council or Quality Bus Partnerships extend to the provision of bus shelters where new bus routes are established in existing conurbations, particularly where services are at half hour or longer intervals.”

Response

We understand there are benefits in installing additional bus shelters where new routes are established, however this is considered on a case by case basis taking into account factors such as location, frequency and usage levels. The costs associated with a new shelter i.e. purchase, installation, on-going maintenance and cleaning are balanced against the aforementioned factors when assessing the situation. In most cases when new routes are introduced that fall outside of major schemes and new developments, the likelihood is that the service will be less frequent and will have little or no established usage therefore a bus shelter would not be considered appropriate. However, a particular location could be reviewed again when more data becomes available or usage increases.

4. “There is widespread confusion over the supply and maintenance of bus shelters across the county, and particularly whereby Districts say County is responsible, County is vague and unclear, and Parishes just get on with it regardless. Are we concerned and if so where can I access a clear and definitive County Council policy on the supply and maintenance of infrastructure to support bus users?”

Response

We appreciate that the ownership of bus shelters can be very confusing for the general public as the situation has developed historically with the County, district and parishes being responsible for their own bus shelters. The County Council however has a clear and established responsibility for a total of 210 bus shelters across the county and provides cleaning and maintenance for those assets through an external contractor. In cases where the County is not responsible for a shelter and where damage is reported, County tries to establish ownership but ultimately if there is a health and safety implication, the repair costs will be covered by the County Council. These cases occur infrequently, and a resolution is found in a timely manner. The PTPS (section 6.4) outlines how the County Council supports the bus operators and the commercial network and in turn bus users. The County Council will always consider requests for new or replacement shelters against the factors explained in

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Q3 and will permit third party shelter installations under a licence arrangement, where it is considered safe and feasible and will always signpost Districts or Parishes to appropriate suppliers.

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1. “Do we have any latitude within Government guidelines in paying over £5million concessionary fares to bus companies and where can the guidelines be accessed.”

Response

The methodology set out in the Government guidance in paying Concessionary Travel represents their preferred approach for calculating reimbursement. Authorities are free to use the methodology of their choice in estimating reimbursement subject to ensuring compliance with European regulation No 1370/2007, as well as relevant domestic legislation that governs concessionary travel reimbursement. While the Government has drafted this guidance to be wholly consistent with legal requirements pertaining to the compensation payable to bus operators, in specific certain circumstances it may be appropriate to deviate from it.

Authorities must reimburse bus operators for all concessionary journeys starting within their boundaries, regardless of whether the concessionary passholder making the journey is resident in the area. Reimbursement to operators are normally paid as a product of the number of concessionary passholder journeys, which has obviously dropped significantly during the pandemic. The Council has been paying operators at the same amount as 2019/20 throughout this financial year, in accordance with government Covid-19 guidance which urged authorities to reimburse at these levels despite the reduction in passenger numbers.

By maintaining concessionary fares funding at pre-Covid levels, the Council are playing an important part in supporting local bus services. In turn, this is allowing the government to maintain its support for the bus network. The most recent government guidance while asking that payments are made at pre-Covid levels, does allow authorities to consider reducing concessionary fare reimbursement funding to the level of service that operators are providing, so if an operator is only providing 80% service levels then the authority may consider reducing concessionary fare funding to 80%. Since the introduction of the most recent lockdown local operators have begun to consider such reduction in service levels.

Government guidance can be accessed here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909536/reimbursing_bus_operators_for_concessionary_travel_2020_to_2021_guidance.pdf

2. “In what way have our bus services transitioned from ‘on traditional fixed routes operated by conventional buses’?”

Response

Since the development of the LTP3 over a decade ago there has been a notable change in the bus market with more and more flexible demand responsive transport services in operation, the Arriva Click service around Lubbethorpe is a recent

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example of this. The Government's drive for better rural mobility through demand responsive solutions, together with the rapid advancements of mobile apps and platforms emphasise the way in which the bus and passenger transport market as a whole is changing and heading. The County's recently adopted Passenger Transport Policy and Strategy (PTPS) aims to reflect this.

3. "The Passenger Transport Policy and Strategy states that "The Bus Services Act 2017 has opened possibilities for new partnership models (e.g. Advanced Quality Partnerships and Enhanced Partnerships)" When would this become relevant?"

Response

Whilst the 2017 Act has opened further possibilities for new partnership models, this is very much dependent on the funding available and the desire of commercial operators to enter into such partnerships. Advanced Quality Partnerships and Enhanced Partnerships tend to be most viable where there is a healthy and established commercial bus market in operation and this is more generally the case within large Cities. Leicestershire has an extensive supported bus network and the focus of our Passenger Transport Policy and Strategy (PTPS) has been to complete a full review of this network to ensure access to essential services is being provided in the most cost-effective way (albeit review progress has been impacted by the pandemic). The passenger transport market has been changing and the Covid-19 pandemic will generate significant challenges for operators with even further changes likely in the future, the need to adapt to these changes flexibly will therefore be key. With such challenges and changes on the very near horizon it will be important to assess the impacts before considering the value of entering into any such formal partnerships.

4. "Would you not agree that in the provision of bus shelters, just as with many public services, to paraphrase Bruce Springsteen, nobody takes responsibility if everyone's responsible?"

Response

The County Council is clear on the bus shelters it is responsible for and maintains and cleans those shelters accordingly.