

DATA LABEL: PUBLIC



## **COUNCIL EXECUTIVE**

### **PETITION - LOCAL BUS PROVISION BATHGATE TOWN SERVICE**

#### **REPORT BY HEAD OF OPERATIONAL SERVICES**

##### **A. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

The purpose of this report is to consider petitions submitted by both the Mental Health Advocacy Project and residents of Belvedere and Easton areas regarding the reduction of the evening journeys of the service.

##### **B. RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that the Council Executive;

1. Note the outcome of the passenger engagement exercise;
2. Note that an amended service can be provided within current budgeted resources;
3. Note the timescales for implementation;
4. Agree to amend the LBS 5 service to reflect the outcome of the passenger engagement exercise – option 1.
5. Instruct officers to progress the necessary application with the Office of the Traffic Commissioner.

##### **C. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS**

<b>I</b>	<b>Council Values</b>	Focusing on our customers' needs; being honest, open and accountable; providing equality of opportunities; developing employees; making best use of our resources; working in partnership.
<b>II</b>	<b>Policy and Legal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equality Issues, Health or Risk Assessment)</b>	<p>The council has a policy of supporting public transport services where resources permit. The Transport (Scotland) Act 1985 states that it is the duty of the council, in exercising their power, to conduct themselves as not to inhibit competition in the commercial market.</p> <p>The council's procedures on dealing with petitions require that petitions are considered by Council Executive.</p>
<b>III</b>	<b>Implications for Scheme of Delegations to Officers</b>	None

<b>IV</b>	<b>Impact on performance and performance Indicators</b>	The council has a target PI for Public Transport of having 90% of residents with access to an hourly or better daytime service Monday to Saturday. It is possible that changes in the commercial and subsidised network could impact this PI.
<b>V</b>	<b>Relevance to Single Outcome Agreement</b>	The local bus network contributes to a number of outcomes by connecting communities with services and employment.
<b>VI</b>	<b>Resources - (Financial, Staffing and Property)</b>	The current annual net cost of the LBS 5 is £94,502. The approved Public Transport budget for 2020/21 is £9.72 million.
<b>VII</b>	<b>Consideration at PDSP</b>	The petition was considered at D&T PDSP on 11 February 2020.
<b>VIII</b>	<b>Other consultations</b>	Financial Management Unit

## **D. TERMS OF REPORT**

### **D.1 Background**

Two petitions were received by both the Mental Health Advocacy Project and residents of Belvedere and Easton areas regarding reduction of the evening journeys of the LBS 5 Bathgate Town Service. The petitions requested that the council reconsider the decision to limit the hours of operation of the town centre LBS 5 service.

West Lothian Council's Public Transport Strategy was approved by Council Executive in June 2015 and outlines the council's commitment to maintaining a public transport network to meet the majority of transport needs for local people, while creating the savings which are necessary to ensure that the service is sustainable and affordable for the future. A key feature of the Public Transport Strategy was to achieve financial savings within the contract local bus network following an assessment. This assessment considered patronage levels on each service as well as seeking to remove duplication of bus services and make best use of resources. The council does not necessarily seek to use its financial support to provide service users with a choice of travel destinations or service type; preferring instead to seek to provide accessibility for as many people as possible to locations at which social needs can reasonably be met.

The council also has a performance indicator aiming for at least 90% of residents to have access to an hourly or better bus service within 800 metres of their home address. The council is current exceeding this target at 91.6%.

### **D.2 Local Bus Service (LBS) 5A/5B**

West Lothian Council has historically subsidised town services operating in more residential areas than the commercial bus network currently extends to. In 2016 town service routes (Armadale, Bathgate and Whitburn) were redesigned to operate between the hours of 9am and 3pm Monday – Friday and between 9am and 12pm on Saturdays, as studies of previous town service operations had shown that patronage dropped significantly outwith these hours.

In September 2016, the council identified one off time limited funding to extend the then newly designed town centre routes to 5pm Monday – Friday and 3pm on a Saturday. At its meeting of 25 June 2019, Council Executive extended the funding to 28 September 2019 and agreed that after this date the timetables would revert back to the originally designed routes and timetables from 30 September 2019.

The current service for the LBS 5 operates as a 5A/B route where the 5A operates in one direction and the 5B completes the reverse route. This provides an hourly service in both directions throughout the operating hours. A map of the service is provided in appendix 1.

### **D.3 Request for Alternative Timetables**

The petition submitted by residents within Belvedere and Easton requested consideration of alternative timetables which may result in the operating hours being extended. These suggestions are as follows:

1. Reduce service to a single bus running one of the existing routes once an hour on the original timetable.
2. Create single bus around both A and B routes on alternative hours.
3. Redirect funding for LBS 8 service to increase operating hours of LBS 5A/B.

The above suggestions were investigated and it was found that alternative timetables for 1 and 2 could be feasible however this would reduce the service level provided and potentially increase journey times for certain areas of the route.

Suggestion 3 was not found to be feasible as the LBS 8 service provides a link for the area of Boghall on a Sunday which does not exist commercially. Removing this route would leave the area unserved at this time.

Based on the consideration of the suggestions above it is clear that any change to the timetable for the LBS 5 town service will have an impact on journey times and the service level provided. It is also recognised that this impact may differ across the various areas served by the LBS 5. In order to ensure that an informed consideration can be made officers committed to undertake a passenger engagement exercise to understand the views of the full range of passengers utilising the service in order to inform a recommendation to Council Executive.

### **D.4 Passenger Engagement Exercise**

On 25 February 2020, council officers undertook a public engagement exercise through a drop in event based in Bathgate Partnership Centre to gather the views of service users on the proposed timetable options. The event was advertised on Bus services, in bus shelters and on social media prior to the event. Three council officers attended with a representative from E&M Horsburgh and Bus Users Scotland also in attendance.

The following timetable options were discussed with service users:

1. Revise timetable to provide a circular route in one direction retaining an hourly service extending to 5pm Monday – Friday and 3pm on a Saturday.
2. Revise timetable to provide a service in both directions on alternative hours extending to 5pm Monday – Friday and 3pm on a Saturday.
3. Retain current operating hours in order to preserve an hourly service in both directions.

During the event, 33 service users gave permission to record their views. A summary of the results is as follows:

<b>Preference</b>	<b>Pax</b>	<b>%</b>
Option 1 (Hourly Circular 9am - 5pm)	14	43%
Option 2 (2 Hourly, 5A & 5B)	12	36%
Option 3 Keep it the same	2	6%
Either option 1 or 2	5	15%

Option 1 proved to be the most popular choice of service provision with 43% of passengers preferring an hourly circular service. Overall, 94% of passengers were in favour of a change of service level which would result in extending the hours of operation.

#### **D.5 Consideration at PDSP**

This report was considered by D&T PDSP on 11 February 2020. The panel agreed that officers should undertake the passenger engagement exercise on the noted options and that the outcome should be reported to Council Executive. The report was scheduled to be discussed at the 24 March meeting of the Council Executive however the meeting was cancelled.

#### **D.6 Public Transport Financial Pressures**

The approved Public Transport budget for 2020/21 is £9.72 million. Public Transport expenditure for the current financial year is anticipated to be within budgeted resources, taking account of one-off resources to mitigate recurring pressures.

Discussions with the current operator of the LBS 5 have confirmed that an alternative timetable based on an hourly circular service would result in a £5,000 per annum reduction on current operating costs, therefore this option can be met within the current budget.

## **D.7 Implementation of service changes**

Should the council wish to progress with an amended timetable for the LBS 5 Bathgate Town Service an application will be made to the Office of the Traffic Commissioner to amend the service in line with normal practice.

The Office of the Traffic Commissioner requires a notification period of 42 days for any service change, which would mean a revised service would commence on Monday 5 October 2020.

## **D.8 Impact of COVID 19 on Local Bus Network**

The local bus network has been severely impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic with patronage levels falling by approximately 85% and, as a result, the 2 main large local bus operators have significantly reduced their network coverage to minimise the financial impact on the company. From the engagement with suppliers there is an understanding that the overall reduction in patronage is having a significant impact on commercial business and the temporary reduction in the network is necessary to mitigate some of the impact of this. At this point it is unclear how the network will recover post COVID 19 and highly unlikely that the commercial network will be reinstated without change.

The travelling habits of passengers are likely to be different after any recovery period with new travelling habits formed and many passengers potentially opting not to use public transport due to health and safety concerns. Additionally, any physical distancing requirements set by the Government will also have an impact on commercial services reducing the number of people permitted to be on public transport at any one time; local bus operators have indicated that, with physical distancing measures on board, capacity will be reduced to between 20% and 30%. This will affect the ability of a route to be commercially viable for operators and there is therefore a significant chance that the subsidised network will have to be amended to provide links and services which were previously provided on a commercial basis.

The Public Transport Unit has been liaising with local operators continuously throughout this period to keep updated with movement in the network and projections for service review and recovery. Early discussions with operators have highlighted concern regarding continuing both contracted and commercial services in their current form. PTU will continue to liaise with operators and review changes to both the commercial and subsidised network.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

In response to petitions received by both the Mental Health Advocacy Project and residents of Belvedere and Easton areas regarding the reduction of the evening services of the LBS 5 Bathgate Town Centre bus service, Council officers undertook a passenger engagement exercise which showed the preferred option for service 5 would be to revise the timetable to provide a circular route in one

direction, retaining an hourly service extending to 5pm Monday – Friday and 3pm on a Saturday.

**F. BACKGROUND REFERENCES**

None

Appendices/Attachments: Appendix 1 – Map of LBS 5 Town Service

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Jim Jack, Head of Operational Services

Date of meeting: 18 August 2020

Appendix 1– Map of LBS 5 Town Service

