

DATA LABEL: OFFICIAL - PUBLIC



DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSPORT POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

UPDATE – LOCAL BUS CONTRACTS AND COMMUNITY TRANSPORT PROVISION

REPORT BY HEAD OF OPERATIONAL SERVICES

A. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to update the Panel on the further impact of COVID 19 on the timescales for implementation of the Total Transport Review (TTR) outcomes and to inform the next steps required.

B. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended the Panel;

1. Note the further impact of COVID 19 on the local bus network and the implementation of the TTR outcomes;
2. Note the recommendation to extend the current subsidised local bus contracts;
3. Note the recommendation to progress with community transport related TTR outcomes separate from the revised contract review period;
4. Note the recommendation to commence a community bus pilot;
5. Note the next steps.

C. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

I Council Values	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
II Policy and Legal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equality Issues, Health or Risk Assessment)	<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>
III Implications for Scheme of Delegations to Officers	None
IV Impact on performance and performance Indicators	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.

V	Relevance to Single Outcome Agreement	The local bus network contributes to a number of outcomes by connecting communities with services and employment.
VI	Resources - (Financial, Staffing and Property)	The approved Public Transport budget for 2020/21 is £9.72 million
VII	Consideration at PDSP	
VIII	Other consultations	Financial Management Unit, Procurement Services and Legal Services.

D. TERMS OF REPORT

D.1 Background

At its meeting of 23 June 2020, Council Executive considered a report on the impacts of COVID 19 on local bus contracts and the Total Transport Review. It was agreed that both the redesign and retender of the subsidised local bus network and the implementation of the outcomes of the TTR would be delayed by 6 months in order to allow for sufficient recovery of the commercial local bus market. The agreed revised contract review period is contained within Appendix 1.

Given the uncertainty of both the pandemic and the recovery of the local bus network, it was also agreed that a further 6 months extension would be available should it be required.

D.2 Further Impact of COVID 19 on Local Bus Network

As previously reported, the local bus network has been severely impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic. Although demand for public transport has increased slightly in comparison to the initial March 2020 lockdown, Transport Scotland is reporting that current demand levels are still reduced from 2019 levels by up to 80% impacting the commercial viability of bus services in West Lothian.

Local bus operators are currently supported by the Scottish Government's COVID 19 Support Grant which covers the gap between operational costs and the anticipated loss of fare-paying passenger revenue that bus operators experience due to physical distancing and reduced carrying capacity. This funding has permitted operators to operate services at approximately 90% mileage coverage on pre COVID 19 levels in order to ensure sufficient public transport links for essential journeys and key worker services.

The grant was extended on 7 August 2020 and 14 October 2020 with funding made available until 17 January 2021. Given the further advancement of the virus and heightened restrictions across Scotland, the Scottish Government further extended the funding on 15 December 2020 until 31 March 2021. However, the recent lockdown measures have placed further uncertainty on the recovery of the commercial local bus network.

D.3 Further Impact of COVID 19 on Contract Review Period and TTR Outcomes

As the local bus network has been further impacted by COVID 19 and the viability of the commercial market is unknown, it further demonstrates that it is likely the commercial market may reduce post COVID 19 and council subsidy would potentially be required to cover existing connections. This increases the risk that the council would be unable to deliver a revised strategy based on new principals and that the commercial market would not be stable enough to sustain new long-term contracts.

It is therefore recommended that the contract review period is further revised by utilising the remaining 6-month extension to existing contracts in order to continue to assess the full impact of the pandemic and, in particular, understand the Scottish Government funding position post 31 March 2021. An example of a revised contract review period is contained within Appendix 2.

As there is an interdependency between the tender of new contracts and the TTR, an extension of the current contracts would further postpone implementation of some of the review outcomes. However, it is recommended that the outcomes related to the commencement of community transport solutions are separated from the review to become a stand-alone project and taken forward to explore community transport solutions which may be required to aid the recovery of the public transport network and ensure vital connections are available.

It would be anticipated that a report would be taken through committee in the new financial year outlining the potential community transport solutions which can be implemented within the current network utilising the £300,000 funding available in financial year 2021/22 previously agreed by Council Executive in February 2020.

D.4 Community Bus Pilot

As part of the above recommendation, consideration has been given to the potential for a Community Bus Pilot in early 2021 to inform recommendations to Council Executive on potential Community Transport Solutions.

D.4.1 Available Resources

Discussions have been ongoing with HcL, who operate the council's Dial-A-Ride and Dial-A-Bus services. At the moment, Dial-A-Ride is operating as it is one on one transport however Dial-A-Bus is suspended due to the pandemic. This means HcL has vehicles and drivers spare that we could temporarily redirect to another service until such times as West Lothian moves far enough down the tiers that Dial-A-Bus can be reinstated.

As part of the TTR outcomes relating to community transport, there was a commitment to support HcL in obtaining the necessary licences to accept concessionary card holders on Dial-A-Bus services. Officers have been progressing this with HcL and, once completed, HcL can operate a fare taking service using their spare resources. This could potentially be used as a pilot for a community bus operation.

D.4.2 Additional Considerations

The commencement of the pilot is dependent on a number of factors whilst we move through the roadmap in the recovery from the Covid restrictions, including the following:

- Successful HCL application for Section 22 Permit granted by the Office of the Traffic Commissioner (OTC).
- Successful and timely purchase of Electronic Ticket Machines (ETMs) by HCL. Should these not be in place before the service is registered with the OTC, then fares cannot be charged. This would mean a decision would be required as to whether to delay the service start until these are in place, or provided.
- Application to and Confirmation from Transport Scotland of acceptance of HCL onto Concessionary Reimbursement Scheme.
- No objection from commercial operators in the operating area will determine whether HCL can request short notice registration of the new service from the OTC; otherwise the full 42 days notice period will have to be observed.

D.4.3 Recommended Operating Area

In order to obtain the maximum feedback possible from the pilot scheme, it is preferred that the operating area for a community bus pilot should meet the following criteria:

- Where the bus service will be connecting to amenities within the specific community within a reasonable mileage range;
- Where the bus service will connect to multiple community services including healthcare, food shopping, medicines and personal care;
- Where the routing of the bus can cover a wider residential area that is not currently serviced by traditional bus services;
- Where the bus service will connect to wider public transport services; and
- Where passenger engagement has already taken place.

Officers have reviewed the potential operating areas within West Lothian and it is recommended that Broxburn and Uphall should initially be utilised as a pilot area for a community bus scheme. The outcome of the pilot will be used to inform further recommendations on the implementation of additional community transport schemes using the TTR outcomes.

D.4.4 Pilot Objective and Performance Monitoring

In order to measure the success of the pilot the following objectives and performance monitoring will be implemented throughout the project:

- Improve independence and accessibility for key target groups within the pilot area;
- Review the need for ongoing town service local bus provision;
- Support local businesses within the pilot area;
- Support the development of local third sector community transport providers.

Public engagement has identified a feeling of isolation due to mobility issues and lack of public transport options for this target group. It is intended that the pilot would promote independence amongst this group and ultimately improve mental health by providing more accessible links back into the community. Users of the service would be surveyed on their views to measure the success of the pilot.

Publicity and promotion of the service will be key feature in ensuring we reach the target group, and it is intended that the pilot service will be promoted locally via the council website and social media outlets, as well as via local press and community groups. How users found out about the service can also be built in to the survey to gauge which media had the biggest impact on service usage.

The pilot will test the public appetite for the provision of town service in Broxburn. This will be monitored through the recording and review of passenger numbers and fares collected during the pilot to assess performance indicators such as average subsidy per passenger and average passengers per journey.

The pilot would ideally support local business and services by providing direct links from residential areas to 'main street', where this is currently not possible within the current bus network. This is especially significant under the current restrictions that are in place as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, as this service will provide a means of accessing essential amenities for those who would benefit from this support. The Passenger Transport Service will liaise with the Broxburn & Uphall Traders Association to identify performance monitoring and engagement measures which would demonstrate the impact of the pilot on local businesses.

It is hoped the pilot will support HCL in their development as an operator, where council officers will guide and support this third sector organisation through registration process with the Office of the Traffic Commissioner with a view to increasing sustainable community transport solutions for people within West Lothian.

D.5 Next Steps

To report to the Council Executive meeting on 9 February 2021 seeking approval to amend the contract review period, vary the local bus contracts to extend by a further 6 months and implement a Community Bus Pilot.

To report back to Council Executive in Spring 2021 on the outcome of the community bus pilot with further recommendations on community transport solutions within West Lothian.

E. CONCLUSION

Local bus services have been further impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic. The recovery of the market is unclear and it is highly unlikely that the commercial network will be reinstated without change. The current uncertainty and instability of the network further impacts the timeline for reviewing the passenger transport strategy and subsidised contracts.

The interdependency between the tender of new contracts and the TTR means that the extension of the current contracts would further postpone implementation of some of the review however the community transport related outcomes can be progressed as a stand-alone project. A community bus pilot would help inform recommendations for community transport solutions in West Lothian.

F. BACKGROUND REFERENCES

None

Appendices/Attachments:

Appendix 1 - Initial Revised Contract Review Timeline

Appendix 2 - Recommended Revised Contract Review Timeline

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Appendix 1 – Initial Revised Contract Review Timeline

Task	Revised Date
Prepare Revised Strategy	July - October 2020
Strategy Paper - D&T PDSP	November 2020
Strategy Paper - Council Executive	December 2020
Passenger Engagement	January - February 2021
Contract Redesign based on new strategy	January – March 2021
Contract Options Paper - D&T PDSP	May 2021
Contract Options Paper/ Tender Approval - Council Executive	May 2021
Contracts out to tender (Timescales dependent On Framework)	May 2021
Tender Close	June 2021
Tender Evaluation Deadline - including Passenger forecasts, cost per passenger estimates	June/July 2021
Ranking of Contracted Services	July 2021
Forecasts of budget implications of tender results	July 2021
Contract Award Paper - Council Executive Meeting	September 2021
Contract Award Letters to Operator	September 2021
Registration with Traffic Commissioner	September 2021
Contract Start Date	October 2021

Appendix 2 – Recommended Revised Contract Review Timeline

Task	Revised Date
Passenger Engagement	February – May 2021
Contract Redesign based on Passenger Engagement	May – November 2021
Revised Strategy Paper - D&T PDSP	August 2021
Revised Strategy Paper – Council Executive	September 2021
Contract Options Paper - D&T PDSP	November 2021
Contract Options Paper/ Tender Approval - Council Executive	November 2021
Contracts out to tender (Timescales dependent On Framework)	November 2021
Tender Close	December 2021
Tender Evaluation Deadline - including Passenger forecasts, cost per passenger estimates	December 2021/ January 2022
Ranking of Contracted Services	January 2022
Forecasts of budget implications of tender results	January 2022
Contract Award Paper - Council Executive Meeting	March 2022
Contract Award Letters to Operator	March 2022
Registration with Traffic Commissioner	March 2022
Contract Start Date	April 2022