

TRANSPORT DECISIONS COMMITTEE – 11 FEBRUARY 2010

REVIEW OF GRANTS FOR PROVISION OF LOCALLY ORGANISED TRANSPORT SCHEMES FOR PEOPLE WITH MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS

Report by Head of Transport

Introduction

1. This report invites the Committee to consider future funding for three locally organised community transport schemes. One, Volunteer Link-Up (VLU) is already provided with one year's experimental funding, and the other two (Didcot Volunteer Centre Car Scheme, and Cholsey Car Scheme) are new requests for grant. The report also provides information regarding cessation of the "Grovelands Shopperbus" shared taxi service for people with mobility impairments.
2. Funding is sought for an experimental period of one year only for the Didcot and Cholsey car schemes. Having formerly received such experimental funding, a longer funding period is now sought for the VLU scheme.
3. Details of all the schemes being reviewed (including the recently-withdrawn Grovelands "Shopperbus") are contained in Annex 1. For each scheme this offers detail of funding arrangements, parishes served, the number of journeys undertaken, cost per passenger journey of subsidy, a summary of consultation responses and details of any comparable alternative services available.

Grant Support Principles

4. Oxfordshire County Council has continued to give grants for a number of locally-organised transport schemes, some of which date back to the 1980s. All the schemes being considered in this report are locally-organised, where the local community is either providing funds or volunteer effort (or both) and therefore the absolute cost of these schemes is low.
5. The Council's Bus Strategy refers to the importance placed on supporting a healthy community transport sector, either through direct grants or through a range of support services and advice delivered, in the main, through Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC). Such community transport plays a large part in delivering transport for people who are unable to access conventional public transport and enable wider participation in social, recreational and community activities.
6. In the case of all three of the community car schemes, the client pays the volunteer driver a fare for the journey (which in the case of hospital journeys meeting NHS criteria may be re-claimed from the Hospital Trust on

application). It is the irrecoverable overhead costs related to the scheme organiser, the administration of the scheme, and the actions required to match journey requests with volunteer drivers which the County Council is being asked to contribute towards.

7. All volunteer car schemes are encouraged to try to secure funding from the appropriate NHS Trusts to support the costs associated with those journeys undertaken to meet hospital appointments and by clients referred to schemes by the Hospital Transport Unit. For example, it is reckoned that some 40% of all VLU journeys are made to meet medical purposes. ORCC works with schemes, collectively and individually, to lobby the NHS in this way. Nevertheless, securing financial support from the NHS has proved very difficult in the past.
8. ORCC also works with community transport projects to ensure best practice in the management of car schemes and to improve the recording of journey data. In particular, ORCC have been working with VLU to set up new software to enable such data to be provided in future. ORCC hope also that the software package, once shown by the VLU trial to be effective, may in future be rolled-out to other small-scale community transport schemes throughout Oxfordshire.
9. It is expected that this will streamline the work of many car schemes and provide direct benefits to the organisations as well as data for the schemes' funders and other partners. In particular it is hoped that the future provision of journey data that the new software will provide will at last enable car schemes (with ORCC's support) to make a more robust case to the NHS Trusts for funding from that source.
10. For each of these reviews consultation has been carried out with all the appropriate Parish Councils, District Councils and relevant County Councillors, as well as Transport For All and the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. Specific responses are summarised for each scheme in the attached Annex and copies of all consultation responses have been deposited in the Members' Resource Centre. Any additional responses received from Members will be reported to the Committee orally.

“Grovelands Shopperbus” shared taxi service

11. Grove Parish Council had for many years organised a weekly Wednesday shoppers' service from three selected residential homes in Grove and Wantage. The service was originally started using a leased minibus with volunteer drivers, but since May 2004 had taken the form of a shared taxi service. Users of the service were picked up from their residences, taken into Wantage Market Place and then returned, all at pre-determined times.
12. At the time of the last review of this service, in 2007, continued funding for this service was considered to be a 'marginal' decision. It was considered that the loss of the shared taxi would be likely to have a significant detrimental effect to the mobility of residents of only one of the three residential homes served.

13. Since then, the case for continued funding of this service had further weakened and officers determined to conduct an early review and consultation. This was brought to a premature termination by the decision of Grove Parish Council to withdraw the service with effect from 31 October 2009.
14. Accordingly, the County Council's contribution has ceased from the same date and this represents a saving of £1,076.93 in a full year.

How the Project Supports LTP2 Objectives

15. These various services aim to enable extra transport opportunities for people with mobility impairments or the elderly. This therefore contributes to the LTP2 objective of "Delivering Accessibility". These extra transport opportunities improve access to community facilities and therefore contribute to improving the quality of life for some people, minimising the risk of social exclusion.

Financial and Staff Implications

16. The total cost of these various schemes currently amounts to £3,576.93 on a full-year basis. The total cost of the recommendations below amounts to £3,750.00 on a full-year basis. Funding for these schemes would be drawn from the Public Transport Policy budget, which is projected to be overspent. The slight increase in spending implicit in these schemes would therefore place further strain on this budget. However, the actual amounts are very small and supporting volunteer-led community transport provision is generally of much lower cost than providing transport to isolated communities or mobility-impaired people in other ways. The report is not considered to raise any staff implications.

RECOMMENDATION

17. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to:**
 - (a) **note the closure of the Grove Parish Council's "Grove Shopperbus" shared taxi service and agree cessation of County Council financial support;**
 - (b) **pay Volunteer Link-Up (West Oxon.) £2,500.00 per annum (but with annual adjustments for inflation) to support the provision of its volunteer car scheme for a period of three years commencing 1 April 2010;**
 - (c) **pay Didcot Volunteer Centre £250.00 to support the provision of its volunteer car scheme for an experimental period of one year commencing 1 April 2010 and to ask officers to work with the organisers of the scheme and with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council to develop methods to streamline the administration of**

the scheme and to enable it to provide more robust data on the number of journeys made, journey purpose, etc;

- (d) pay Cholsey Car Scheme £1,000.00 to support the provision of this volunteer car scheme for an experimental period of one year commencing 1 April 2010, on the understanding that the age restriction policy will be lifted, and to ask officers to work with the organisers of the scheme and with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council to develop methods to streamline the administration of the scheme and to enable it to provide more robust data on the number of journeys made, journey purpose, etc.**

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Background papers: Correspondence with service providers and user representatives (refer to contact officer)

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November 2009

Supplementary Report by Head of Transport

This annex provides supplementary details in a standard format for each of the schemes under discussion in the main body of the report.

“Grovelands Shopperbus” shared taxi service – SERVICE WITHDRAWN

Current funding arrangements agreed up to: 9 December 2011 (but now prematurely terminated).

Cost of current funding arrangements: £1,076.93 per annum (with annual inflationary increases).

Other sources of funding: Grove Parish Council has supported the service financially. Other income came from the fare of £1 per single journey charged to each user.

Parishes served: (2) Grove and Wantage

Nature of service provided: A Wednesdays-only shared taxi service, organised and part-funded by Grove Parish Council, providing transport to the residents of three residential homes (two in Grove, one in Wantage) to and from Wantage Market Place.

Number of journeys undertaken: 291 per annum (at time of last review)

Cost per passenger journey: £3.44 (at time of last review)

Response to consultation:

Consultation terminated following decision by Grove Parish Council to withdraw service with effect from 31 October 2009.

Alternative services available:

Of the three residential homes served, one is earmarked for closure in the near future; one is located within 1 minute walk of a bus stop served by regular public bus service (using accessible buses) to/from Wantage Market Place.

Alternative transport for people with disabilities and mobility-impairments who are unable to use conventional public transport can be made by Octabus Dial-a-Ride.

Alternative transport for people with mobility-impairments who are unable to use conventional public transport can be made by the Wantage IAC volunteer car scheme.

Volunteer Link-Up (West Oxon.) Community Car Scheme

Foundation of scheme: Volunteer Link-Up (VLU) was founded in 1983 and has been based, since its formation, in Witney. VLU is, first and foremost, a volunteer bureau, aiming to link people who have some time to spare with people in the community who need assistance, and provides a range of services in addition to the volunteer car scheme.

Current funding arrangements agreed up to: 31 January 2010

Cost of current funding arrangements: £2,500 per annum.

Other sources of funding: Volunteer Link-Up receives funding from Social & Community Services for other aspects of its work, including S&CS clients who are referred to the VLU scheme. This support currently comprises £28,980, and is governed by a contract between S&CS and VLU. The purposes for which S&CS pay to support the VLU volunteer car service are different from those of the E&E Directorate.

Parishes served: (81) All parishes in West Oxfordshire District

Nature of service provided: Volunteer drivers use their own car to transport people who cannot use conventional public transport. Many of the clientele are elderly or infirm and cannot walk any distance. The scheme currently has some 537 clients, who are served by 49 volunteer drivers, who take them shopping, to dentists and opticians, hair and beauty appointments, to visit family members in care homes and hospitals, as well as to doctors and hospital appointments.

Number of journeys undertaken: 2,900 per annum (2008/09)

Cost per passenger journey: £0.86 (2008/09) (or £1.44 if journeys referred by non-emergency hospital transport or for medical purposes are excluded).

[For comparison, the cost per passenger journey for the Octabus dial-a-ride service in West Oxfordshire is £19.71 if one includes both the County Council and West Oxfordshire District Council's contributions].

Response to consultation:

Responses from 15 consultees, including parish councils of: Swerford, Standlake, Eynsham, Enstone, Hanborough, South Leigh, Salford, Ramsden, North Leigh, Fulbrook, Milton-under-Wychwood, Cassington, Finstock, and Witney Town Council; also Transport For All.

All respondents expressed positive support for the scheme, except for Enstone, South Leigh and Salford Parish Councils, which were more neutral, expressing either that they were unaware of the service, or that they had "no objections".

Standlake, Fulbrook, Hanborough, and Eynsham Parish Councils report that they contribute to the car scheme financially. A member of Hanborough Parish Council is a volunteer driver for the scheme.

Alternative services available:

Alternative transport for people with disabilities and mobility-impairments who are unable to use conventional public transport can be made by Octabus Dial-a-Ride, which serves all parishes in West Oxfordshire District.

Alternative community transport schemes for people with mobility-impairments who are unable to use conventional public transport are available in 36 West Oxfordshire parishes (of which Villager Community Bus – a scheduled service similar to conventional public transport services – is the only alternative service in 17 parishes).

45 parishes in West Oxfordshire have only the Octabus and Volunteer Link-Up schemes to provide transport for those unable to use conventional public transport.

Didcot Volunteer Centre Car Scheme

Foundation of scheme: Didcot Volunteer Centre was established in March 2000 and is based currently in a room at the Methodist Church in Didcot. The Centre offers a volunteer car scheme, serving Didcot and the surrounding villages.

Current funding arrangements agreed up to: This is a new funding request.

Cost of funding arrangements requested: No specific sum requested, but officers suggest £250 per annum to meet current reported deficit.

Other sources of funding: The Volunteer Centre reports an income of £4,102.99 in 2008, of which £1,014 was received in the form of grants. The reported expenditure was £4,338.52 in the same year and the organisation thus recorded a loss of £235.53. Whilst the organisation has reserves of just under £6,500, the scheme organisers are concerned about the continuing losses, and of the possibility of increased costs. In addition, it is stated that the £264 annual grant received from South Oxfordshire District Council is not being renewed. Oxfordshire County Council's Social & Community Services Directorate supports the Volunteer Centre with a grant of £500 in recognition of the number of journeys which the car scheme undertakes to and from Council-run Day Centres. This supplements the Council's own transport provision, either to provide journeys for new clients where there is no Council-provided transport available or where the only Council provision can only provide for part of the client's transport needs.

Parishes served: (15); Nine in South Oxfordshire District (Aston Tirrold; Aston Upthorpe; Didcot; East Hagbourne; Little Wittenham; Long Wittenham; North Moreton; South Moreton; West Hagbourne); Six in Vale of White Horse District (Blewbury; Chilton; Harwell; Milton; Steventon; Upton).

Nature of service provided: Volunteer drivers use their own car to transport people who cannot use conventional public transport. The scheme currently has some 400 clients, who are served by 17 volunteer drivers, who provide transport to meet a variety of purposes (see below).

Number of journeys undertaken: Information provided by Didcot Volunteer Centre shows that the car scheme undertook 736 journeys in the period 1st January to 30th June 2008, of which 33.4% were for shopping, 21.2% for trips to hairdressers, 9.8% for hospital visiting, 7.6% for journeys to social clubs, 5.7% for trips to dentists, 3.8% for trips to opticians, and 18.5% for 'other' purposes.

Cost per passenger journey: £0.17 (based on full-year projections of reported patronage figures above)

Response to consultation:

Responses from 5 consultees, including parish councils of: East and West Hagbourne; and Didcot Town Council; also Transport For All and Cllr Patrick Greene.

All respondents expressed positive support for the scheme.

Cllr Patrick Greene stated “This car scheme serves not only Didcot but also local surrounding villages, and is of great value to local residents who are unable to use public transport. This scheme offers a service that I would not want to see withdrawn”.

Alternative services available:

Alternative transport for people with disabilities and mobility-impairments who are unable to use conventional public transport can be made by Octabus Dial-a-Ride, which serves all parishes in Vale of White Horse District. However, there is no comparable dial-a-ride service for those parishes in South Oxfordshire District.

Alternative community transport schemes for people with mobility-impairments who are unable to use conventional public transport are only available in 2 of the 9 South Oxfordshire parishes served, and 2 of the 6 Vale of White Horse parishes served.

Cholsey Car Scheme

Foundation of scheme: Formed in 2000. The scheme has a co-ordinator who is paid for six hours' work each week. The scheme does not have any premises, as the co-ordinator works from home.

Current funding arrangements agreed up to: This is a new funding request.

Cost of funding arrangements requested: £1,000 per annum.

Other sources of income: The scheme has supported itself significantly in the past, raising some £600 per annum from cake and book sales towards its current £1,200 per annum running costs. However, it is expected that these costs will now rise to some £1,800 per annum in the course of compliance with employment legislation, and this may threaten the continuation of the service without the surety of a grant contribution.

Parishes served: (1) Cholsey.

Nature of service provided: Volunteer drivers use their own car to transport elderly and disabled residents of Cholsey who cannot use conventional public transport. The scheme currently has "over 40" clients, who are served by 25 volunteer drivers, who provide transport to meet a variety of purposes. Clients tend to be over 70 years old, and reach 90+.

Number of journeys undertaken: Information provided by the scheme shows that they undertook 151 return journeys in the period October to December 2008. These were made up of 64 shopping; 29 doctors' appointments; 21 hairdressers; 21 church meetings; 12 visits to friends, and 4 opticians. It is significant that there were no hospital visits in the period. It is understood, however, that such journeys are typically made around 4 or 5 times each month. Nevertheless the very small demand made on this car scheme for health reasons is unusual when viewed against most car schemes in Oxfordshire.

Cost per passenger journey: £0.83 (based on full-year projections of reported patronage figures above)

Response to consultation:

Responses from 3 consultees, comprising Cholsey Parish Council; Transport For All and Cllr Patrick Greene. Two respondents expressed positive support for the scheme. Transport For All expressed reservations.

Cllr Patrick Greene stated "This scheme deserves the support of the local county councillor".

Cholsey Parish Council stated: "The Community Car Service...takes residents to church meetings, hairdressers, shopping and a host of other places which we feel is beneficial to the elderly or disabled people of Cholsey."

Transport For All stated: "It is noted that this scheme only deals with people who are 60 or over. This certainly is not "transport for all", and we have concerns about anyone under 60 who has mobility problems living in Cholsey. Also the ratio of drivers to clients is very generous and works out at 1.6 clients per driver, whereas another scheme supported by OCC has 12 clients per driver. As regards the annual grant, this seems very generous considering the relatively low number of journeys undertaken. In conclusion, the view of Transport For All is that we would want to see the age restriction removed, and an increase in passenger journeys."

Cholsey Car Scheme has been approached by officers to seek clarification of their age-restriction policy. We are advised that this policy is in practice not rigidly applied. People with a disability or mobility-impairment below this age would not be turned away without good cause. The car scheme organisers have a concern that they lack the skills or, in some cases, the physical strength to accept clients who require manual handling. Officers have put them in touch with the trainer at ORCC who provides MIDAS and PATS training free of charge to community transport schemes.

Alternative services available:

No alternative dial-a-ride or community transport scheme is available for residents of Cholsey parish.