

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

Introduction

1. This report invites the Cabinet Member to consider future funding for two locally organised community transport schemes, the current funding arrangements for which expire on 31 March 2011. This date marks the end of an experimental one-year funding agreement, entered into as a result of the decision of the Cabinet Member for Transport in January 2010.
2. Oxfordshire County Council has continued to give grants for a number of locally-organised transport schemes, some of which date back to the 1980s. Both the schemes being considered in this report fall into this category. In both cases, the local community is either providing funds or volunteer effort (or both) and therefore the absolute cost of these schemes is low.
3. In the case of both of the community car schemes referred to below, 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), and it is the irrecoverable overhead costs related to the scheme organiser, the administration of the scheme, and the need to match journey requests with volunteer drivers which the County Council is being asked to contribute towards.
4. 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. Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC) works with schemes, collectively and individually, to lobby the NHS in this way.
5. For both of these reviews consultation has been carried out with all the appropriate Parish Councils, the District Council and relevant County Councillors, as well as Transport For All, Oxfordshire Unlimited, and ORCC. Specific responses are summarised in the appropriate sections and copies of all consultation responses have been deposited in the Members' Resource Centre. Any additional responses received will be reported to the meeting orally.

Didcot Volunteer Centre car scheme

6. Didcot Volunteer Centre was established in March 2000 and is based currently in a room at the Methodist Church in Didcot. The centre reports that it has over 400 clients, who have mobility and low income issues and are disadvantaged older adults. The Centre provides, amongst its services to the community, a car scheme providing transport to and from medical, hospital and other appointments for those who are physically unable to use

conventional public transport. The car scheme is served by a pool of some 20 volunteer drivers (mainly themselves aged over 60 years), who provide pre-booked journeys to the clients, using the drivers' own cars. The service is provided to residents of Didcot and outlying villages and parishes (which include the Astons, Milton, Blewbury, the Moretons, Chilton, Steventon, the Hagbournes, Upton, Harwell and the Wittenhams).

7. All the drivers are volunteers, who give their time freely. Users of the service are charged at a rate of 40p per mile, except that there is a flat-rate charge of £4 for local trips and £15 for Oxfordshire hospitals.
8. The service is unable to accommodate the needs of wheelchair-users. Parishes in the Vale of White Horse district are additionally served by the Octabus Dial-a-Ride service, but there is currently no Dial-a-Ride service serving South Oxfordshire parishes, and most of the parishes served by the Didcot Volunteer Centre car scheme have no other community-based transport scheme for the benefit of residents of the parish.
9. Information provided by Didcot Volunteer Centre reports that the service undertook 2,870 drives during the period 11th January to 4th November 2010 (and anticipated that the 2010 year-end total would reach 3,500 drives), taking service users to hospital appointments, doctors, shopping, hairdressers, hospital visiting, dentist, clubs and visiting friends etc.
10. The total annual running costs for the scheme are currently around £4,500 per annum. The greatest single outlay is £2,000 per annum to pay the scheme organiser for six hours per week (at close to minimum wage). The Centre states that "it is becoming increasingly difficult to find funding for this running cost each year". The Centre have accordingly asked the County Council if it would be prepared to fund the costs of the scheme organiser in future – "A longer term agreement would give us a more stable basis for the future, enabling Didcot Volunteer Centre to maintain this low-cost solution for our community transport users and keep pace with the planned expansion in Great Western Park".
11. 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 is too early in the morning for the client. Sometimes the car scheme will take clients to the Day Centre, and S&CS will provide the return journey.
12. Following an initial experimental grant of £250 for the financial year 2010/11, the organisers of the car scheme have now requested a grant of £2,000 per annum in future.

13. On this basis, and extrapolating the figure for passenger journeys shown above, the subsidy cost per passenger journey in a full year would be approximately 29p.
14. A letter of support has been received from Cllr Tony Harbour (County Council member for Didcot South division) who stated: "I fully support the group and the work they do. Without this service a lot of people would be stranded and not able to leave their home, which is something most of us take for granted. As a member of Didcot Town Council I know we do grant aid them a small sum each year to enable them to carry on the fantastic work they do. Therefore if there is any way that the County could continue to support them and possibly increase the money they are able to make available I would be fully supportive of this".

Cholsey Car Scheme

15. Cholsey Car Scheme was formed in 2000 and is managed by a committee of six persons. 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.
16. The scheme is operated to provide door-to-door transport to elderly and disabled residents of Cholsey who cannot use conventional public transport. It currently has a complement of 20 volunteer drivers (of whom approximately ten are regular drivers for the scheme), who provide journeys for some 40 clients. Clients tend to be over 70 years old, and reach 90+.
17. The service is provided solely to Cholsey residents who are unable to use, or who find it very difficult to use, conventional bus services. The service is unable to accommodate the needs of wheelchair-users. There is currently no Dial-a-Ride service serving Cholsey parish, and no other community-based transport scheme is known to operate for the benefit of residents of the parish.
18. The Car Scheme organiser reports that the service undertook 309 journeys during the first six months of 2010 (with a further 184 journeys between 1 July and 11 October 2010), taking service users to hospital appointments, doctors, hairdressers, church meetings, shopping, opticians and visiting friends etc. Cholsey car scheme organisers report an upward trend in the level of demand for their service. Based on figures supplied by Cholsey car scheme, journeys for health purposes generally seem to account for approximately a quarter to a half of all journeys.
19. The scheme has supported itself significantly in the past, raising some £600 per annum from cake and book sales towards its current £1,300 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. The scheme organiser is paid an honorarium of £1,200 per annum, but this has not paid regard to minimum wage legislation.

20. The car scheme is seeking a grant of £1,000 per annum to assist its continuation. Based on 625 return journeys each year (extrapolated from the figure for January-October 2010) this would equate to a cost per passenger journey of £1.60.
21. Supportive comments were received from Cholsey Parish Council, which stated "Cholsey Parish Council fully appreciates and values the service that the above scheme provides for the village and a small donation is generally contributed on an annual basis from the Parish Council. The service is well used, no other transport scheme operates within the Cholsey parish, and the drivers are all volunteers. There is currently no Medical Centre within the village. The scheme provides a door to door service, unlike the bus which can be difficult for the elderly and not necessarily at the required times. It also has the added advantage that the car driver will assist, if necessary, the patient safely through doors etc, to the appropriate waiting area at a hospital/doctor appointment. I do hope the Council will continue to support this much needed and appreciated service."

Financial and Staff Implications (including revenue)

22. The total cost of these various schemes currently amounts to £1,250.00 per annum. The total cost of the recommendations below amounts to £3,000.00 per annum. The report is not considered to raise any staff implications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

23. **The Cabinet Member for Transport is RECOMMENDED to:**
 - (a) **Pay Didcot Volunteer Centre £2,000.00 per annum to support the provision of its volunteer car scheme for a period of four years commencing 1 April 2011, 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.**
 - (b) **Pay Cholsey Car Scheme £1,000.00 per annum to support the provision of this volunteer car scheme for a period of four years commencing 1 April 2011, 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.**