7. Improving Accessibility

Objective 4 - Improve accessibility to work, education and services

The core objective for accessibility is to allow people to access the services they need to fully participate in the activities of the county; this will bring benefits both in terms of reducing social exclusion and developing the economy of the county.

Policies

Policy AX1 **Oxfordshire County Council will publish and keep up to date a separate Bus Services Funding Strategy, and develop and manage the Concessionary Fares Scheme in Oxfordshire.**

Policy AX2 **Oxfordshire County Council will work with partners and particular sections of the community to identify how access by public transport to employment and services, particularly healthcare and education, can be improved.**

Policy AX3 **Oxfordshire County Council will support the use of community transport and dial-a-ride services and encourage the use of taxis and private hire vehicles to meet local accessibility needs, including those of disabled people.**

Policy AX4 **Oxfordshire County Council will continue to allow the use of bus lanes by taxis and private hire vehicles.**

Policy AX5 **Oxfordshire County Council will manage the parking under its control to take into account the specific accessibility needs of the local area, including those of disabled people.**

Policy AX6 **Oxfordshire County Council will encourage the growing and inclusive use of the county's waterways, and support appropriate opportunities for developing transport on the waterways network.**

Accessibility Strategy

7.1 Our strategy for improving accessibility includes:

* Improving the county's network of bus services
* Ensuring services are available for all, including people with disabilities
* Improving access to and use of the county's waterways

The term "accessibility" is used both to cover whether individuals, particularly those with mobility or sensory difficulties, can use transport services, and also the extent to which people in general can get to a range of services across an area. This chapter includes policies for both these aspects of accessibility.

Bus Services

7.2 The policies for bus services in this chapter are clearly linked to and overlap with those outlined in Chapter 11 on Promoting Public Transport. Both these chapters need to be read together to gain a full picture of our activities in this field. In this chapter the emphasis is on minimising social exclusion due to lack of transport opportunities is minimised.

Duties and responsibilities

7.3 A consistent policy of promoting public transport over the past quarter century has created a culture of bus use in Oxfordshire which is second to none among English rural counties. Continuing promotion of bus use will be essential to meet the council's objectives over the next two decades.

7.4 National legislation lays down what we may and may not do in relation to subsidy for bus services. This is mainly set out in the Transport Act 1985, with some minor amendments introduced by the Transport Act 2000.

7.5 Bus operators are free themselves to decide what commercial (unsubsidised) services to provide; we have no direct control over these services. Timetables for all bus services must be registered with the Traffic Commissioner – a Government appointee – who can ensure that services run to their registered timetable, but cannot influence the timetable in the first place. Operators must give the Traffic Commissioner and the local transport authority at least eight weeks notice of service introductions, withdrawals and timetable changes.

7.6 Oxfordshire County Council has a duty to arrange "such services as they consider it appropriate to secure" to meet public transport needs which are not met by commercially run services. We can subsidise these extra public transport services, but for at least three quarters of all subsidised bus services must invite competitive tenders and decide which tender to accept solely on the basis of securing "best value" for public funds.

7.7 A bus service can be arranged without tendering to meet an unexpected and urgent requirement (such as a commercial service withdrawn at eight weeks notice), but tenders must subsequently be invited.

Subsidy Policy

7.8 Oxfordshire County Council will publish and keep up to date a separate document outlining when we will support services that are not commercially viable, how those services will be monitored and managed, what level of service will be required and how services will be reviewed. The amount of support for non-commercial services is constrained by the funding that is available to us. In the short term we will be looking to see how the funding available can be used most effectively to provide for people's minimum access requirements within very tight financial limits. This raises some difficult and fundamental questions about how public transport services are to be delivered in the future.

Community Transport

7.9 Oxfordshire has a large number of community transport schemes in operation throughout the county (some 60 community-led schemes were detailed in the 2009 *"Directory of Community Transport Schemes in Oxfordshire"* published by the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council), ranging from car schemes whereby volunteers provide transport using their own cars, to schemes providing shared minibuses to local groups, to schemes providing regular timetabled transport services much in the manner of a conventional bus.

7.10 Most community transport schemes in Oxfordshire are self-financing, but rising costs and legislative requirements are becoming a burden for some. The rising age profile of the volunteers themselves is also of concern when contemplating some schemes' sustainability. Where funding is available Oxfordshire County Council is prepared to offer support for community transport schemes in the form of grants. The

Oxfordshire Community Transport & Accessibility Partnership may also be able to support schemes with money accessed through the national *Rural Access to Services Project* (RASP).

7.11 Funding can take the form of 'seed-corn' start-up grants (whereby up to £1,000 to help set up a new community transport scheme can be made available). For already-established schemes larger grants can be provided; such requests for funding will normally only be provided on an experimental one-year basis and the effectiveness assessed before any further grant commitment is entered into. Assessments will be made on a similar basis to that used to assess subsidy provision for conventional bus services.

7.12 In limited circumstances, capital grants may be made available to community transport schemes, for example to help with the purchase of new vehicles. Similarly, there may be circumstances when vehicles owned by the council can be made available to community transport groups. However, such capital grants are likely to be highly restricted, at least in the short to medium term.

7.13 We are keen to support volunteer co-ordinators who take telephone calls from clients and arrange transport to meet specific journey needs. We have explored the provision of stipend payments to such organisers, but this support is constrained by minimum wage legislation, and many smaller schemes will be reluctant to take on the administrative and constitutional burdens associated with becoming employers. We will continue to explore ways of supporting these key individuals who are the lynchpin of many community transport schemes.

Access to healthcare

7.14 It is important to ensure the best possible access to health facilities. However, the number of people travelling from any location to any specific health facility at a particular time is inevitably very low. It is thus rarely possible to justify a bus service purely for travel to a single health facility.

7.15 Because of low passenger numbers, and the limitations on the physical space available for buses on hospital sites, it is not normally possible to provide services for patients and visitors direct from outlying towns and villages to main hospitals. The objective will therefore be to ensure a frequent service between hospitals and the nearest town or city centre or other suitable point where connections can be made from further afield.

7.16 Research on accessibility to healthcare undertaken in 2005, and other more anecdotal evidence since, has indicated that perceived problems in getting to the hospitals by bus are often due, not to lack of services, but inadequate information about services which are available. This is especially the case when an interchange is required; information on where to change, onward connections, tickets and other issues can be perceived as difficult to obtain.

7.17 Oxfordshire County Council therefore expects health providers to give a high priority to accessibility by existing public transport in making location decisions on health facilities. We expect providers themselves to make financial contributions towards any additional services necessitated by location decisions of this sort, and we will work with healthcare providers to assist them with ensuring the best value for any funding which they make available for this purpose.

7.18 In the longer-term there may also need to be a review of operational issues at the hospital, including the times at which staff are employed, and the arrangements for appointments. This relates to ensuring support for bus services throughout the day and encouraging a greater spread of general traffic travelling to and from the hospitals throughout the day and hence helping to mitigate congestion issues. A review of appointment times may also be useful to help improve accessibility to healthcare. An example of this may be scheduling appointments at times when there is good public transport access for those people that do not have access to a private car.

7.19 The partnership working undertaken so far with the health sector has focused on the Headington area because of the high concentration of health facilities in that area. We aim to build on the principles of joint working being established in this area to look more widely at access to health throughout the county, and to develop joint policies on location of, transport to, and information about social and healthcare facilities.

Partnership Working

7.20 The county council supports bus provision in a number of ways other than for general services. This includes special provision for journeys to school and transport for social and healthcare journeys. The health service also provides parallel transport services for some people to access their services. There is scope for looking at these different services in an integrated fashion to

see if there are opportunities to provide a more cost effective service. There are contractual and legal barriers which would need to be overcome, so this may be a medium- rather than short-term ambition, but there could be significant benefits to be gained from a system based on individual choice rather than the current universal service.

Disability

7.21 It is estimated that one in four people in the UK either has a disability or is close to someone with one. Although less than five percent of disabled people use a wheelchair, over fifteen million people in the UK have "hidden" disabilities such as sensory difficulties, cognitive impairments or mental health issues. There are also temporary disabilities such as having a broken leg.

7.22 Oxfordshire County Council has wide ranging responsibilities for improving access for people with disabilities. In close consultation with representative individuals, groups and disability and equality advisers, it aims to ensure that footway provision, parking, bus stops and other highway measures take full account of the needs of all people irrespective of movement or sensory ability. Officers work closely with bus and rail operators and assist taxi operators to encourage the best and most integrated provision of public transport and infrastructure.

7.23 Measures to assist people with disabilities will also benefit other users, such as people with pushchairs, shoppers, older people and the young. This is the case with wheelchair spaces on buses and trains, and with some of the multi-user trails developed, e.g. parts of the National Cycle Network.

Inclusive transport

7.24 As the population of Oxfordshire ages, so the proportion and number of people with some kind of disability is also projected to increase. The move towards enabling more disabled and older people to live independently rather than in residential care homes will also require a more inclusive transport system.

7.25 The provision and management of parking are important in enabling people to access their homes, places of work and education, shops and other facilities. In many areas the demand for parking exceeds the space available and it is necessary to prioritise, for example, the needs of local residents over commuters and short term parking for customers visiting shops and businesses

over longer term parking. Pricing policies and restrictions to on-street parking can also help to maintain accessibility by other modes of transport than the car, protecting the interests of pedestrians, cyclists and bus users. Parking policy is particularly important for disabled people, whether as drivers needing priority parking places, as users of the footway where obstruction by inappropriately parked vehicles is a hazard or as bus users needing close and level access onto the bus which can be impeded by parking at bus stops.

Principles of consultation

7.26 In order to address these challenges, Oxfordshire County Council will follow two important principles on all schemes. The first of these is that consultation with disabled people and their representatives should take place from the earliest stage in the development of schemes and initiatives so that nothing has been pre-determined. The second principle is that Oxfordshire County Council should secure high level disability awareness training for all appropriate staff.

7.27 It is important to address the way facilities reserved for disabled people are managed so that the benefits of their provision are not eroded in practice. This includes inappropriate use of disabled parking bays, parking at bus stops that prevents buses from pulling in next to the kerb and parking on the footway.

Scheme development

7.28 When planning new schemes and improvements to existing facilities, we will consult local access groups, with *Transport For All* (the independent but council-funded body representing disabled and mobility-impaired people throughout Oxfordshire in relation to transport issues) and with individuals. We will also, when necessary, seek expert advice to ensure that the final outcome is a satisfactory and useable facility for everyone. It will prioritise the provision of the following features to help disabled people move around the built environment safely and independently:

* Level or flush crossing points (dropped kerbs)
* Tactile paving surfaces
* Raised kerbs at bus stops
* Signalised crossings (including rotating cone devices)
* Colour/tonal contrasted marking of street furniture and railings
* Segregation between pedestrian and cycle facilities

where practicable
* Accessible information provision
* Accessible walks
* Parking facilities
* Real time information
* Bus driver disability awareness training
* Inclusive bus stop infrastructure

7.21 New approaches to the street environment also have major implications for people with disabilities. These include the concept of "shared space" where motorists, pedestrians and cyclists share the highway without the traditional distinction between the road and the footway with their respective priority for different classes of user. The aim is for pedestrians and motorists to make eye contact and "negotiate" the space showing consideration for each other.

7.22 This can benefit wheelchair users, giving them more of the freedom that those able to walk can enjoy. However, shared space and particularly shared surfaces can present problems for blind and partially sighted people, who can not make eye contact with motorists and who often rely on kerbs and separate footways to navigate through the street environment; some people with learning difficulties can also be adversely affected. All of these factors will be taken into account when shared space solutions are being considered for any improvement.

7.23 Many disabled people have long experience of poor access to places, whether buildings such as stations or streets and footways, and also to vehicles. This may be poor physical access or they may have encountered unhelpful and even hostile attitudes from other people. In addition to making the transport system more accessible and inclusive, it is also important that OCC encourages and supports people with various disabilities in making use of accessible facilities. (This has parallels in the way that, for example, OCC promotes cycling in addition to investing in the cycle network). This support could take the form of promotional activity, practical help advice and even travel buddy schemes where people can be accompanied when trying out a new journey for the first time.

Taxi and Private Hire Vehicles

7.23 Taxis and private hire vehicles play a dual role in the overall transport mix. While they are often substitutes for private cars they

complement public transport allowing access to services outside the bus network or at times when no buses are available.

7.24 Hackney carriages are licensed to pick up passengers off the street who hail for their service. Private hire vehicles are unable to ply for hire, individuals must pre-book with their operators prior to travel. Private hire vehicles are often less distinguishable from general traffic than hackney carriages.

Current Situation

7.25 Over the last ten years the number of licensed hackney carriage and private hire vehicles has risen across four of Oxfordshire's five districts. The Vale of White Horse has had a reduction in the number of private hire vehicle licences since 2001.

7.26 Oxfordshire's five district councils are responsible for licensing hackney carriage and private hire vehicles, driver licensing and providing taxi ranks. Each of the district councils has in place their own local hackney carriage and private hire vehicle driver, vehicle and operator policies.

7.27 It is likely that the number of licensed hackney carriages and private hire vehicles in Oxfordshire will rise steadily in the next twenty years. Areas that feature growth areas such as Bicester, Didcot and Wantage/Grove may experience a greater increase in taxis and private hire vehicles given the high number of new houses planned for these towns.

Taxibus Services

7.28 A taxibus service, funded by Chiltern Railways, operates in Bicester. This provides a timetabled service to Bicester North Station to connect with trains to London Marylebone during the morning and late afternoon peak period. Outside of the peak periods this converts to a taxibus service, where passengers can telephone in advance and request a vehicle from anywhere in the Bicester urban area. This provides a cheap and effective alternative to driving to Bicester North Station. The Cotswold Line Railbus C1 also operates a timetable at peak times and as a demand responsive taxibus service during the off-peak linking the villages of Leafield, Ramsden and Finstock with Charlbury Station.

Challenges

7.29 Congestion and air pollution - Taxis and private hire vehicles can have a role in reducing private car journeys and thus road congestion. However, they can create more trips particularly when undertaking 'dead- runs' when accessing passenger origins and returning back to taxi ranks and offices. These additional trips can consequently add to traffic congestion issues, especially within Oxford. An increase in the number of licensed hackney carriages and private hire vehicles will give rise to more vehicle movements. Oxfordshire County Council will work with the licensing authorities to encourage the adoption of lower emission and lower carbon vehicles, especially in areas with identified air quality problems.

7.30 Potential strains on taxi rank provision - Future availability of road space for taxi ranks may become an issue for hackney carriages and licensing authorities, particularly within Oxford. This can lead to subsequent overspill problems with hackney carriages and potential civil parking offences. At the same time it can create a competitive disadvantage for hackney carriages against private hire vehicles. Oxfordshire County Council will work with the licensing authorities to better match supply with demand to address any issues that arise from overspill from taxi ranks.

7.31 Conflicts with cyclists in bus priority lanes - The use of bus lanes by taxis and private hire vehicles can cause some conflicts with cyclists through intimidation and perceived risk, especially when attempting to overtake cyclists. Taxis and private hire vehicles are narrower than buses and so drivers may be more tempted to overtake cyclists. Many bus lanes in Oxford are of the minimum authorised width.

7.32 Disabled Access - Taxis are often an important link for people with mobility and sensory disabilities who find it difficult to use conventional public transport. We will encourage the licensing authorities to ensure that fully accessible vehicles are available, and that drivers take part in disability awareness training.

Waterways

7.32 Although important for leisure and tourism, the direct use of waterways for mainstream transport activities is, and is likely to remain, limited. However the towpaths which run alongside the waterways can play an important role in the overall rights of way network for the area and, particularly where waterways run through towns, can act as attractive alternative for motorised travel.

Waterways network

7.33 Oxfordshire features two main navigable waterways, the River Thames and the Oxford Canal, along with a series of other smaller watercourses and streams, such as the Cherwell, Windrush and Thame. Waterways are recognised in national planning policy guidance (e.g. PPG 13) as important resources for nature conservation, transport and sport and recreation.

7.34 The Oxford Canal extends approximately 77 miles, linking Oxford with Coventry, via Banbury and Rugby. The canal joins onto the River Thames in Oxford. The Thames stretches roughly 215 miles from its head near Kemble in Gloucestershire to the Thames Estuary east of London. It passes through and around several Oxfordshire towns and villages, including Oxford, Abingdon, Wallingford and Henley-on-Thames.

7.35 Besides water craft the Oxford Canal is also popular with pedestrians and other users such as cyclists who use the towpath for routine journeys and for leisure and recreational purposes. Oxfordshire County Council expects that the levels of boat use on the county's waterways and use of the connecting infrastructure (e.g. tow paths) will continue to rise steadily over the next 20 years as more individuals use the towpaths for routine journeys, to enjoy the industrial heritage of waterways or as part of short domestic breaks.

Network availability of towpaths and public rights of way

7.36 Physical availability of waterway infrastructure, particularly towpaths, banks, bridges and public rights of way remain an ongoing challenge. The nature of these networks and their location make them susceptible to seasonal, random, natural and man-made intervention which can limit their availability to users. Interventions may include flooding, vegetation overgrowth, closures or obstruction of pathways or bridges from maintenance activity or fallen trees. Likewise weather factors can influence the use of these networks. Future impacts of climate change are likely to exacerbate issues around the network.

Impacts on the waterway environment and wildlife

7.37 Recreational and everyday activities that are generated by waterways, such as boat use, punting and angling, horse riding, walking and cycling can damage waterway environments and

wildlife. A wide combination of factors such as the physical presence of individuals, noise generated from boat engines, water currents created by boat propellers, littering and harmful pollutants entering waterways may disturb amphibian, fish and bird species that inhabit these areas, while further damaging the natural surrounding environment.

Network accessibility & promotion

7.38 The need to provide Oxfordshire residents, boat users and visitors with easily obtainable and reliable information on the coverage and access points of the waterway networks, including small craft access points, tow paths, and connecting cycle tracks and public rights of way is a challenge for the county and its partners. A key barrier that holds back growth in the shared use of waterway networks is insufficient knowledge and awareness of their existence.

Conflicts between different user groups

7.39 The shared use of towpaths by anglers, moored craft and other stationary users with cyclists, walkers and equestrians can create conflicts within and between these groups. Fishing rods, mooring pegs and other items on the path may represent hazards to all type of users. Vulnerable pedestrians such as the elderly and those with visual impairments may be anxious over the proximity of these items plus horses and fast moving cyclists. Likewise, cyclists can be caught off guard by the presence of pedestrians or horses and so may need to carry out sharp manoeuvres to pass by safely. Horses too, can become distressed by the presence of pedestrians, dogs and highly visible cyclists, which in turn may cause potentially hazardous reactions that could endanger the rider and other pathway users.

Preservation of waterway infrastructure & heritage

7.40 Much of Oxfordshire's canal estate, including supporting infrastructure and buildings, is over 200 years old and is a key component of the region and country's industrial heritage. Protecting this heritage, while also allowing for its enjoyment from a recreational and tourism perspective, along with encouraging commercial and residential development as part of wider regeneration efforts is an ongoing challenge. Oxfordshire County Council and its waterway partners will need to strike a balance between the conservation of waterway heritage and optimising its tourism and regeneration potential.