

CABINET– 6 FEBRUARY 2012

DEMAND-RESPONSIVE TRANSPORT PROVISION IN OXFORDSHIRE FOR DISABLED AND MOBILITY-IMPAIRED PEOPLE

Report by Deputy Director of Environment & Economy (Highways & Transport)

Introduction

1. This report invites the Cabinet to consider recommendations for the creation of, and future funding for, a unified Oxfordshire pre-booked transport service for disabled and mobility-impaired residents replacing the existing separate “Octabus” and “Cherwell” dial-a-ride services.
2. The current contractual and funding arrangements for both the Octabus and Cherwell schemes come to an end on 31 March 2012. This has created an opportunity to take a holistic view of provision in the county, and to seek to create a unified replacement service, with opportunities for individual district councils to opt-in and provide additional top-up funding for their local area if they wish.

History and Context

3. Provision of a Dial-a-Ride service is not a statutory duty and provision varies widely around the country. Oxfordshire County Council, in partnership with district councils (other than South Oxfordshire) has historically supported two dial-a-ride services that provide pre-booked door-to-door transport using fully accessible vehicles for people with mobility impairments who could not easily use conventional public transport.
4. The two schemes that currently receive funding are:
 - The Octabus dial-a-ride, which operates in the areas covered by Oxford City Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, and West Oxfordshire District Council.
 - Cherwell Dial-a-Ride, which operates in the area covered by that District Council.
5. There is no current provision in South Oxfordshire. However, South Oxfordshire District Council has participated in the review process which has led to this report.
6. A briefing on dial-a-ride services in general, and the client base which they typically serve, is offered as Annex 1 to this report.

Funding

7. In recent times tighter financial circumstances have unfortunately resulted in the position where existing services are no longer viable. The District Councils are having to make significant cuts or to cease funding, with only West Oxfordshire indicating an ability to retain a similar level of funding to that currently contributed. A review has therefore been undertaken to consider how to ensure that as much of the service as possible is protected, and that the new provision covers the whole county.
8. In order to maximise value for money the service review resulted in a process of competitive tender for a county-wide service, based only on financial contributions from the County Council but with opportunities for individual district councils to opt in and provide additional top-up funding for their local area if they wish.
9. This report makes recommendations for how the funding available from the County Council will be spent on a consistent level of service across the whole of Oxfordshire. It is for individual district councils to determine what, if any, funding they wish to provide to enable the service to be topped up locally.
10. The means of delivery will be by the letting of a contract for twelve months and for which we have found a choice of provider through a competitive tendering process.
11. It is intended that the longer-term future of transport provision will be guided by the outcome of the Transport for the Community Strategy that is currently being developed by the County Council. Accordingly, the proposed new arrangements have been seen as an interim measure, applicable for the year to 31 March 2013 only.
12. It is intended that the impact of the changes in service delivery that will follow acceptance of the recommendations in this report will be assessed after six months, and that future arrangements may be reviewed once that assessment has been made. A Service & Community Impact Assessment has been undertaken and is appended as Annex 3. This recognises that, whilst there is a more geographic spread in provision, there remains a limited understanding of specific need amongst the target communities. A needs-analysis will be conducted by the lead officer for the project, in conjunction with those district councils who participate in the funding and provision of the new service, and revisions to the service may be made if the analysis suggests that this is appropriate.

Exempt Information

13. Annex 4 should be considered in exempt session because its discussion in public might lead to the disclosure to members of the public present of information relating to the financial and business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) as a result of

discussions between Oxfordshire County Council and/or other local authorities and organisations.

14. The tender prices reported separately in Supplementary Annex 4 must be treated as strictly confidential since they relate to the financial and business affairs of the operators. All prices must be treated as strictly confidential until such time as the Decision Meeting decides whether or not to provide financial support for the service. Revealing operators' prices before then would prejudice the County Council's position if tenders or propositions had to be sought again for the service. Prices remain confidential after the date of this meeting for 10 days (until 16 February) under the objection period specified in the Public Contract Regulations 2006.

Current services:

Octabus Dial-a-Ride

15. The Octabus Dial-a-Ride service began in April 2005, replacing services previously provided by Oxfordshire Community & Voluntary Action (OCVA). The County Council participates in a formal Consortium with Oxford City Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council, which has let a contract for dial-a-ride services in the Octabus area, paid for by pooling resources from each of the 'subscribing' local authorities in agreed proportions.
16. Under the current funding agreement Oxfordshire County Council pays 52% of the costs of the contract (£132,589.89 in 2011/12), Oxford City Council 24% (£61,195.33), and Vale of White Horse DC and West Oxfordshire DC 12% each (£30,597.67).
17. The service is provided on Mondays to Fridays between the hours of 9am and 5pm, deploying two buses in Oxford City and one each in the other two districts.

Cherwell Dial-a-Ride

18. The Cherwell Dial-a-Ride service began in 1992. This service has been predominantly funded by Cherwell District Council, with the County Council participating as a junior partner, providing funding for specific elements of the service, these being a bus on the Thursday "Banbury Urban" service; the Friday "Kidlington Urban" service, and a 'match-funding' contribution towards the 'Kidlington Rural' and 'Bicester Rural' services.
19. Under the current funding arrangements Oxfordshire County Council pays £26,364.27 for the above service elements, with Cherwell DC paying some £187,500 to provide the rest.
20. The service is provided in the form of six sub-regional services on Mondays to Fridays between the hours of 9am and 5pm, deploying between five and

seven buses per day across the Cherwell district. This is therefore a much more extensive level of service provision than exists in the Octabus area.

South Oxfordshire

21. For the last few years the County Council has entered into arrangements to provide dial-a-ride services on a partnership basis, requiring the funding and participation of district councils in sharing provision of such services. Since South Oxfordshire District Council has chosen not to participate in such dial-a-ride arrangements there has consequently been no dial-a-ride service in that part of Oxfordshire. This has led to adverse comment from disabled and mobility-impaired residents in that area, as well as from groups representing disabled people, such as Oxfordshire Unlimited.

A unified Oxfordshire transport service for disabled people

22. The termination of current dial-a-ride arrangements, and the uncertainties over future funding support from district councils, offered the opportunity for the creation of something new. The present level of dial-a-ride service is also very variable between one district council area and another. A new, more unified service is possible, providing a more equalised level of provision across the whole of the county.
23. It is proposed that the County Council will fund a common level of service across the whole of Oxfordshire, re-deploying its funding which is currently used to support both the Octabus and Cherwell dial-a-rides. To meet the recommended level of common service provision, it will be necessary to use the existing budget of £158,954.16 and in addition draw additional support from the Department for Transport's "Supporting Community Transport Fund" grant. This is discussed further under Staff and Financial Implications.
24. In order to maximise value for money and opportunities for flexibility of funding from district councils, the tendering process asked for bids on varying levels of service in terms of the number of buses operating across Oxfordshire and the times of day of operation.
25. District Councils may 'top-up' their common service either by (a) providing a service on an additional day per week; or (b) provide additional capacity through an extra vehicle per day; or (c) any combination of two or more of these 'top-up' elements according to their local priorities and available budget.

District Council participation

26. The district councils will each be making their own decisions of future funding for dial-a-ride. The final shape of the dial-a-ride service will not be known until all of the local authorities have made their decisions. However, the Cabinet needs only determine the level of common service which the County Council will fund. A recommendation to this effect is shown in Exempt Annex 4.

Consultations

27. For this review a joint consultation has been carried out in conjunction with all of the City and District Councils, encompassing all members of both of the existing schemes (some 2,000 individuals), all Parish Councils, as well as Oxfordshire Unlimited and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. Specific responses are summarised in Annex 2 and copies of all consultation responses have been deposited in the Members' Resource Centre. Some 618 responses were received from dial-a-ride scheme members.

Equalities Impact Assessment

A Service and Community Impact Assessment was undertaken as part of the review process which led to this report, and this is appended to the report as Annex 3.

Service usage

28. Details of patronage figures, journey patterns, membership profile, and the results of user surveying are all contained in various background documents, available in the Members' Resource Centre. Some key points are also summarised in Annex 2 to this report.

Staff and Financial Implications

29. It is believed that the provisions of TUPE will apply to any transfer of operations which arises as a result of the decision on the award of contract to the winning bidder. These are discussed in more detail in Exempt Annex 4. The Highways & Transport service will be able to contain these costs within its budget.
30. Funding equal to that currently spent on the two existing schemes is available within the Public Transport budget and would provide for a common level of service up to and including Baseline Option 3 (i.e. a service in each district three days per week, between 10am and 3.30pm). However, it is recommended that this be enhanced so as to provide a five-days-per-week service (Baseline Option 5) in all parts of the County, and to extend the day to 9am to 5pm (Top-Up options 1 and 2).
31. Recently government has made available some additional one-off funding for community transport services in the form of a "Supporting Community Transport Fund" grant from the Department for Transport. Cabinet is recommended to use some of this fund to enhance the budget available for dial-a-ride services, by providing a further £106,067.84.

RECOMMENDATION

32. The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED

- (a) to adopt Baseline Option 5 (one bus per district 5 days per week), with such top-up option as necessary to provide for a 9am to 5pm day, as the appropriate level of service to be provided by the County Council;
- (b) to agree to fund Baseline level 5, at 9am to 5pm, across the county by using County Council resources, and £106,067.84 of additional funding from the "Supporting Community Transport Fund" grant;
- (c) to award a one year contract to Tender A from 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013;
- (d) to agree that any district council should be expected to pay the entire contract costs of any further 'top-up' service provision which that Authority requires in its area.

STEVE HOWELL

Deputy Director of Environment & Economy (Highways & Transport)

Background papers: Compilation of spreadsheets and graphs showing patronage, concessionary fares re-imburement, contract costs-apportionment, cost per passenger journey for each district.
(For other background correspondence please refer to contact officer)

Contact Officer: Neil Timberlake. Tel: Oxford 815585

December 2011

Background briefing on community transport and dial-a-ride services

33. The terms “Community Transport” and “Dial-a-Ride” are often used interchangeably. Whilst there may very often be overlap between the two forms of provision, it is important to understand the distinction.
34. Community Transport is taken as referring to transport provision which is undertaken by locally-organised, very often volunteer-led associations, acting for the good of their local community, and usually without a view to a profit.
35. Community Transport services may take the form of organised lift-giving or car-sharing schemes, or provide a car scheme whereby eligible users without alternative means of transport telephone an organiser, who will seek to meet this travel need from amongst a pool of volunteer drivers, who use their own cars to provide the journey. There are a number of such schemes in Oxfordshire, the largest of which are provided by Volunteer Link-Up (west Oxon) based in Witney, and Wantage Independent Advice Centre.
36. Community Transport services may also take the form of regular scheduled minibus services, much like a mainstream bus service and open to anyone to use. With such schemes there is no need to pre-book; one simply waits at a designated roadside bus stop and waits for the timetabled departure. Examples of such schemes in Oxfordshire include Stanford-in-the-Vale Community Bus, and Faringdon Community Bus.
37. Dial-a-Ride services, such as the current Octabus and Cherwell schemes, are pre-booked, demand-responsive public transport services. Typically, the intended user will telephone a dedicated call centre and ‘book’ a journey for a specific date and time and will (if there is capacity and the booking is accepted) be collected from an agreed and pre-determined location (which may be outside the home of the service user) and taken to their destination within the scheme’s operating area.
38. Such schemes may be provided by volunteer-led associations, but are very often organised and funded by local authorities, and operated by commercial organisations under a Service Level Agreement or a contract.
39. Dial-a-Ride services may go by a variety of names, for example other generic names such as Ring-a-Ride or Access Bus, or by a specific brand name which may refer to the operating area (e.g. Swindon Dial-a-Ride; West Midlands Ring and Ride) or may be less prosaic (e.g. Woking Bustler; Kent Karrier).
40. Some dial-a-ride services are open to all potential users. Such services may represent an innovative form of general public transport for a given locality or travel corridor, perhaps in a rural area where patterns of population are

relatively sparse and a conventional timetabled bus service running along a fixed route is not considered appropriate or sustainable.

41. Other dial-a-ride schemes take advantage of provisions in the Transport Act 1985 that enable a form of public transport service to be provided exempt from the normal Public Service Vehicle (PSV) operator and driver licensing requirements. Such schemes are operated under what are referred to as Section 19 permits (so called because they are operated under provisions laid out in Section 19 of the Act).
42. Section 19 permits are issued only to bodies which are concerned with education, religion, social welfare, recreation, or other activities of benefit to the community. Permits may be issued by the Traffic Commissioners or by other bodies designated by the Secretary of State.
43. Section 19 permit schemes are not open to use by the general public, but are restricted to the use by specific categories of person as designated in the Permit. Typically, these would include disabled or mobility-impaired people who are not able to use, or who find it particularly difficult to use, conventional public transport. The existing dial-a-ride schemes in Oxfordshire are designed to serve the needs of this particular clientele.
44. Community Transport schemes which act like mainstream timetabled bus services and which can carry anybody who presents themselves for a journey are generally operated under what are referred to as Section 22 permits (so called because they are operated under provisions originally laid out in Section 22 of the 1985 Transport Act). For many years one of the primary restrictions under which such schemes operated was that the drivers of such services had to be volunteers and could not be paid for their time or services rendered. This restriction was abolished by the Local Transport Act 2008.
45. The Oxfordshire transport provision which is the subject of this report is designed to serve the needs of disabled and mobility-impaired residents who cannot use, or who find it difficult to use, the mainstream Oxfordshire bus network. As such, it provides a valuable means of independent travel for people who can no longer be served by commercial or subsidised buses, and for whom there is no community transport provision. This may be of particular value to disabled or mobility-impaired residents who may use wheelchairs, as local car schemes using volunteers' own cars will be unlikely to be adapted to serve the travel needs of wheelchair users.
46. Users of both current dial-a-ride schemes have to be pre-registered members of the appropriate scheme. Octabus members have each paid a one-off fee of £5 to join, whereas Cherwell scheme members have been enrolled free of charge. Unfortunately neither scheme has a 'self-cleaning' database of members. The Cherwell scheme reports over 2,000 members in total, and Octabus over 800, but many of the people listed as members of either scheme may have died, or moved, or no longer be capable of using the service. There is no means (other than very time-consuming, labour-

intensive, and possibly intrusive methods) of knowing which 'members' fall into these categories.

47. Accordingly it is proposed that the new unified scheme which is designed to replace the existing dial-a-rides in April 2012 will require users to re-register and to pay an annual fee of £5. This will create a new database of eligible members, and the requirement to pay a small annual fee will ensure that the database becomes 'self-cleaning'.
48. It is proposed that the members on the existing dial-a-ride databases be proactively written to in February 2012, with details of the new scheme, and enclosing an application form to be completed and returned to the winning bidder. It is hoped and expected that this will enable a smooth transition to the new arrangements to be made from 1 April 2012.
49. This will be important too because the existing operator of one of the current dial-a-ride services jealously guards its membership database and is thought to be unlikely to make it available to the new service provider, citing the Data Protection Act as the reason. It will be necessary to secure this operator's co-operation in writing to its existing scheme members about the new arrangements. When the consultation surveying referred to in Annex 2 was undertaken, the dial-a-ride operator refused to provide mailing labels of its members, and it was necessary instead to enter into an arrangement whereby the dial-a-ride operator sent the consultation questionnaire out itself, with the County Council reimbursing the costs of doing so. It is likely that a similar arrangement will be necessary in February 2012.
50. Finally, it is important to note that dial-a-ride provision is not a statutory duty of County Councils. Levels of provision, and the basis upon which such provision as exists is provided, vary widely around the country. Some are funded by the relevant County Council, whereas in some areas it is the local district council which provides the funding. In some areas, provision is either entirely non-existent, or is provided solely on a volunteer-led and volunteer-funded basis.

Consultations

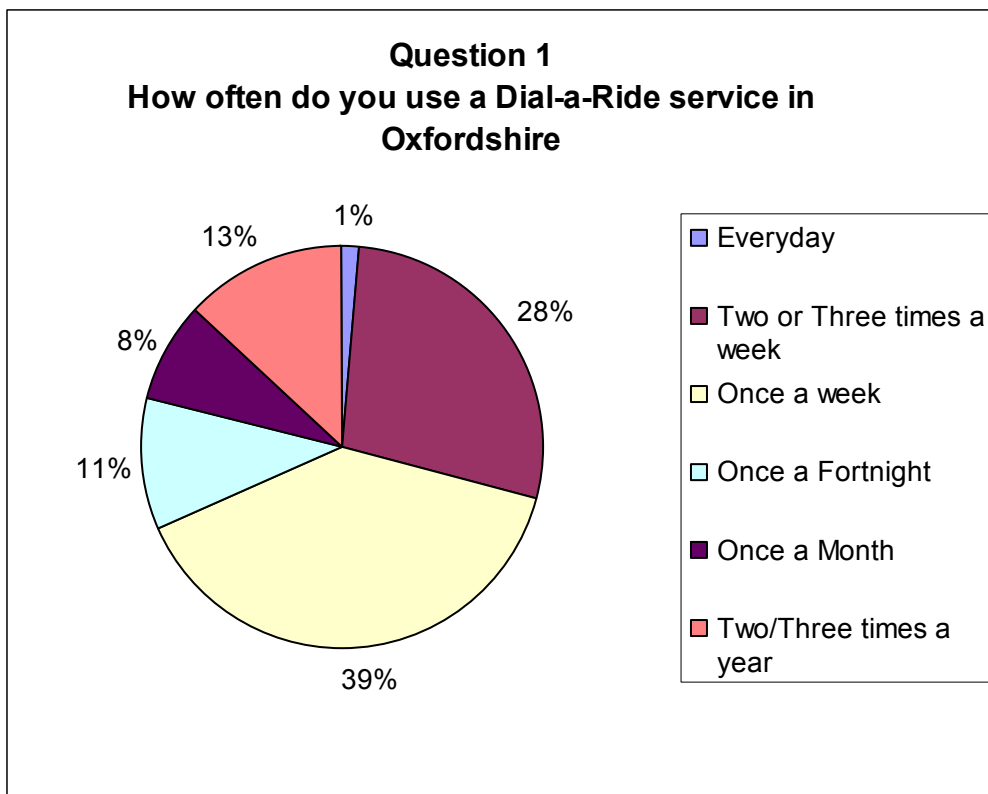
51. For this review a joint consultation has been carried out in conjunction with all of the City and District Councils, encompassing all members of both of the existing schemes (some 2,000 individuals), all Parish Councils, as well as Oxfordshire Unlimited and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council.
52. Some 618 responses were received from dial-a-ride scheme members in the form of survey responses before the consultation deadline. An analysis of these responses appears below.
53. In addition, replies to the consultation letters sent to parish councils and other stakeholders were received from approximately 30 sources (including seven by the e-portal), including the parish or town councils of Bucknell, Witney, Horton, Forest Hill with Shotover, Deddington, Crowmarsh, Benton, Freeland, Ewelme, Swerford, Black Bourton, Baulking, Benson, Thame, Wendlebury, Launton, Fritwell, Middleton Stoney, Claydon with Clattercote, Souldern, Wallingford, Goring, Finstock, Barford St. John & St. Michael, Checkendon, Stoke Row, Highmoor, Nuffield, Bix & Assenden, and Bicester.
54. In addition, there were telephoned messages of support for the continuation of the dial-a-ride service from over a dozen members of the public, and a petition signed by 69 “users and supporters of Bicester Dial-a-Ride service” was received by post, alongside numerous other letters from members of the public.
55. By far the majority of responses received were supportive of the dial-a-ride and wished to see it continue largely or wholly unchanged. Some respondents suggested that passengers ought to be asked to pay a contribution towards the costs, in the form of either a voluntary payment, or by the removal of the concessionary fares eligibility which the service presently enjoys. Some wondered if it might be possible to secure sponsorship of the service from local supermarkets or other businesses.
56. Full details of all responses are available in the Members’ Resource Centre.

Usage of the service

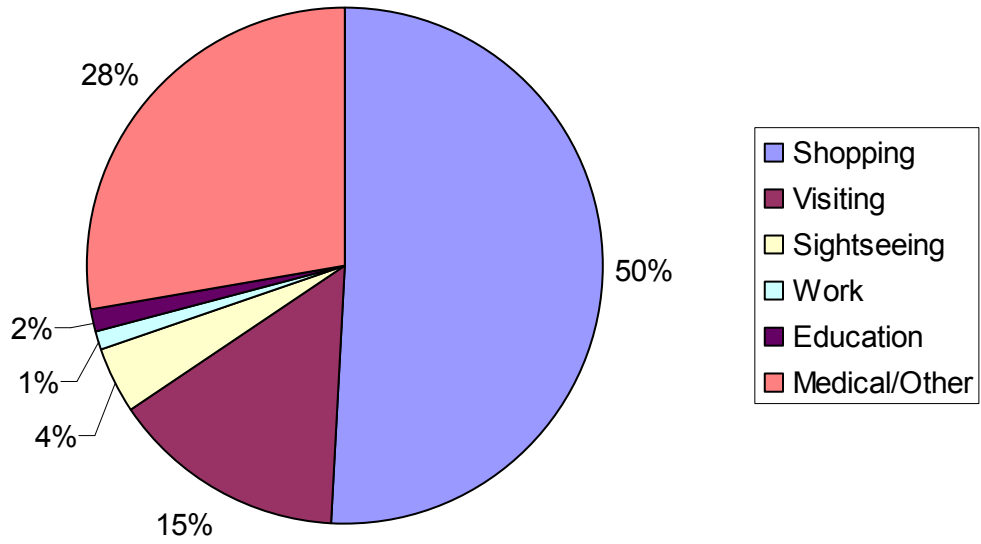
57. Some 16,000 passenger journeys per year are currently made on the Oxford City service, averaging some 61 passenger journeys per day, and utilising two minibuses. The available capacity of the service is fully utilised, and there remains unmet need which is presently turned away.
58. Some 8,000 passenger journeys per year are currently made on the Vale service, averaging some 31 passenger journeys per day, and utilising one minibus. The available capacity of the service is fully utilised, with most journeys focussed on Abingdon (to the exclusion of potential demand elsewhere in the District).
59. A little under 5,000 passenger journeys per year are currently made on the West service, averaging some 18 / 19 passenger journeys per day, and utilising one minibus. There remains under-utilised capacity on this service, with scope to grow patronage. However, a number of measures have been tried to secure wider

awareness of and use of the West Oxon Octabus service over the last seven years, with limited success. Despite these initiatives, the West minibus remains the lowest-used part of the Octabus service.

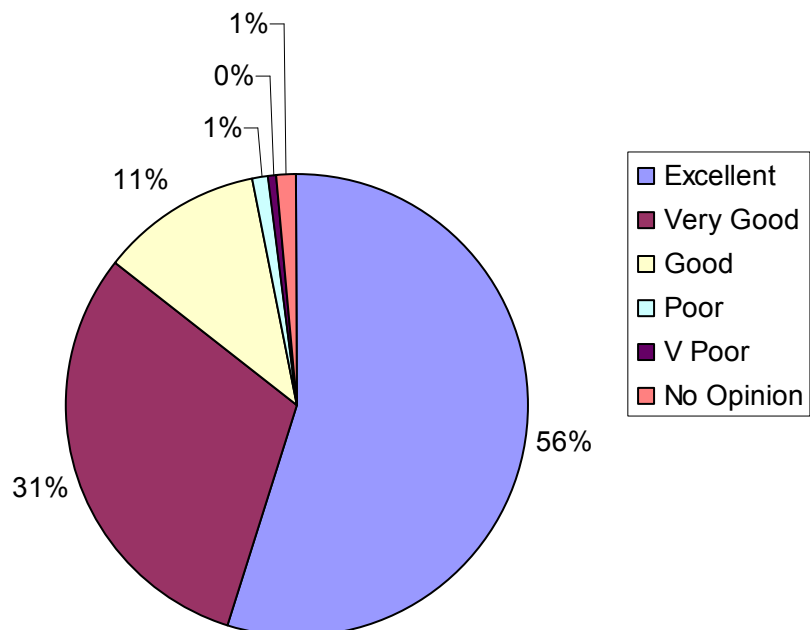
- 60. A little over 36,000 passenger journeys were made on the Cherwell Dial-a-Ride in 2010 (the last year for which complete figures are available), averaging some 139 passenger journeys per day. The Cherwell Dial-a-Ride utilises between five and seven minibuses per day, so the average number of passenger journeys per minibus can be calculated as approximately 23, which is a little less than achieved by the City and Vale Octabus services.
- 61. Cherwell district has clearly been historically the district with the greatest provision of dial-a-ride services, and the greatest use. The reduction in overall funding for dial-a-ride in this district, and the likely reduction in the level of service provided, will be likely to be most manifest in this part of the county.
- 62. The analysis of survey results is shown below. These include the combined responses from current Cherwell AND Octabus scheme users:

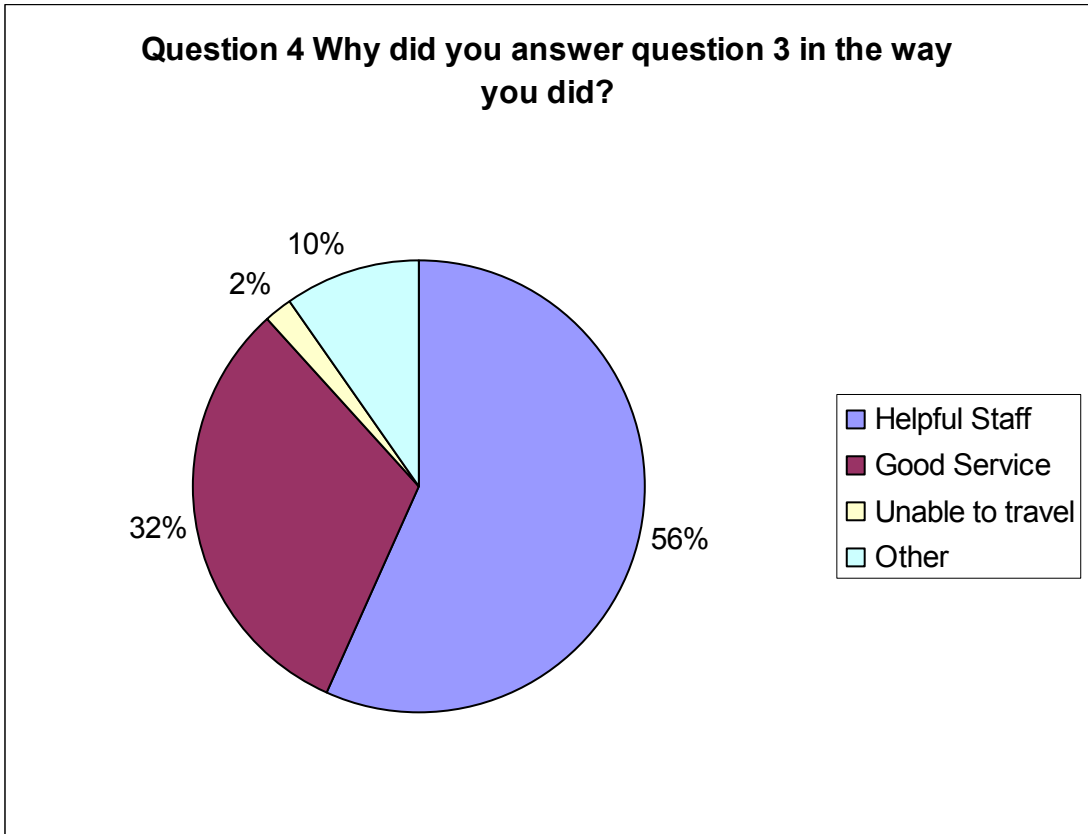


Question 2
What are your reasons for using this service?

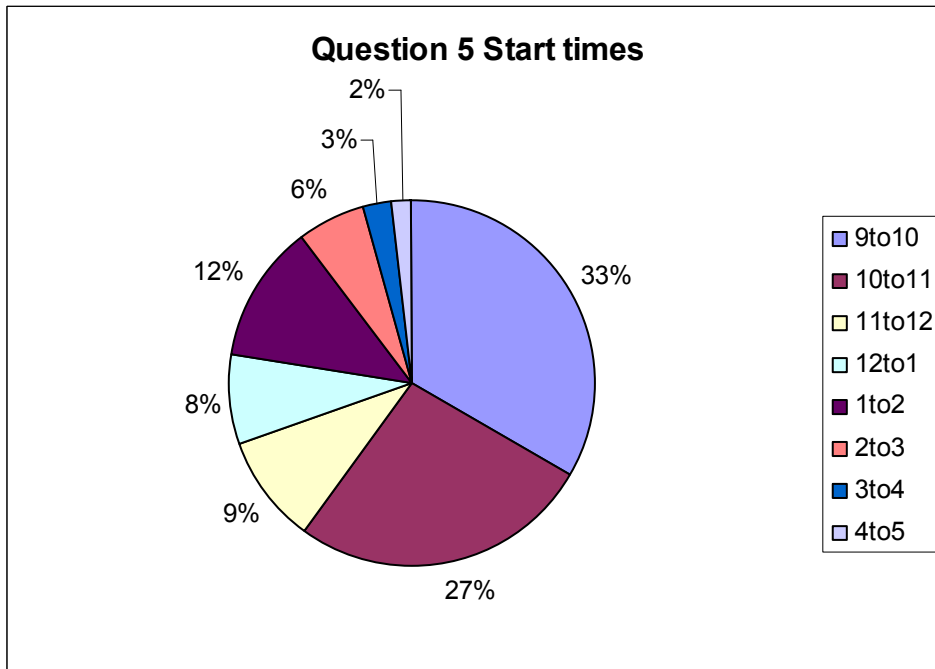


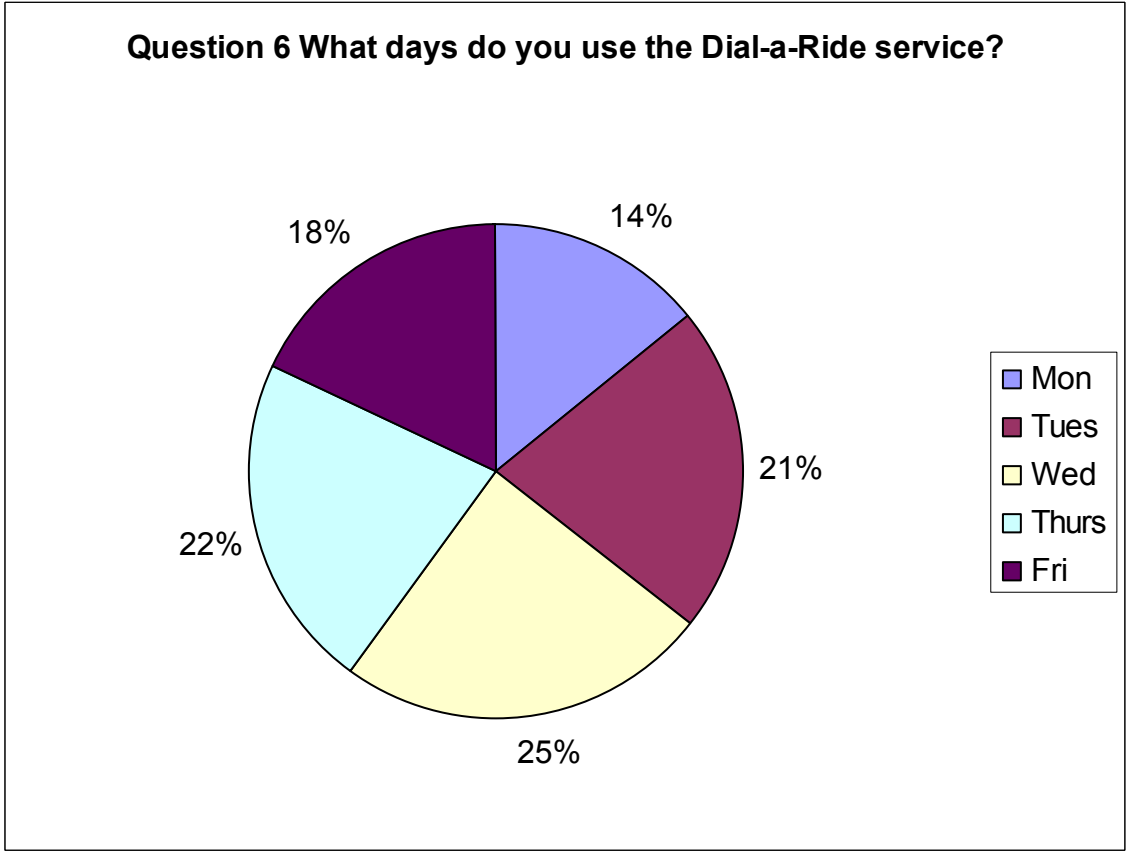
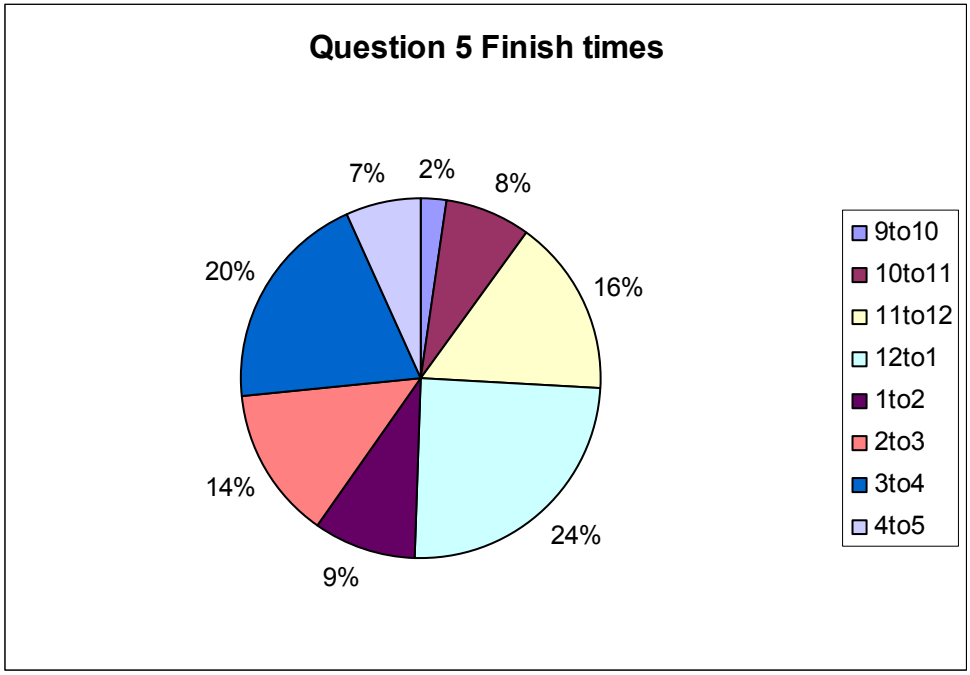
Question 3
How do you rate the overall quality of the service



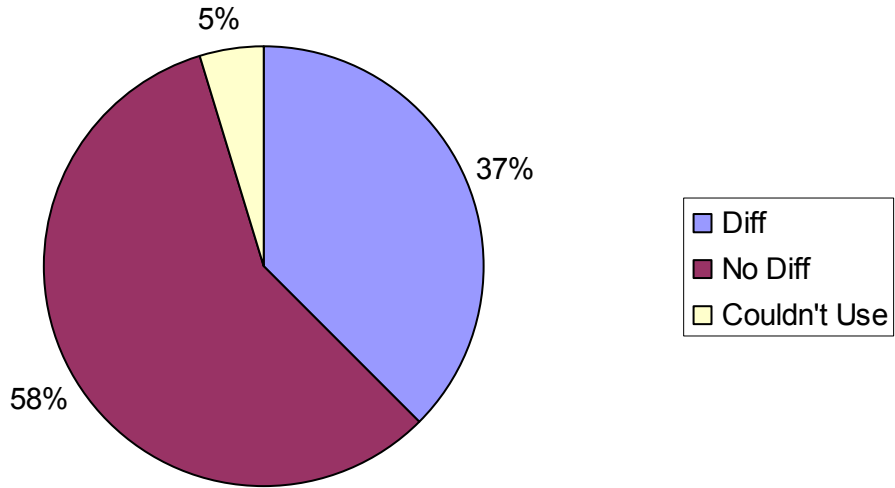


For question 5, dial-a-ride users were asked at what time they usually started and finished their journeys.

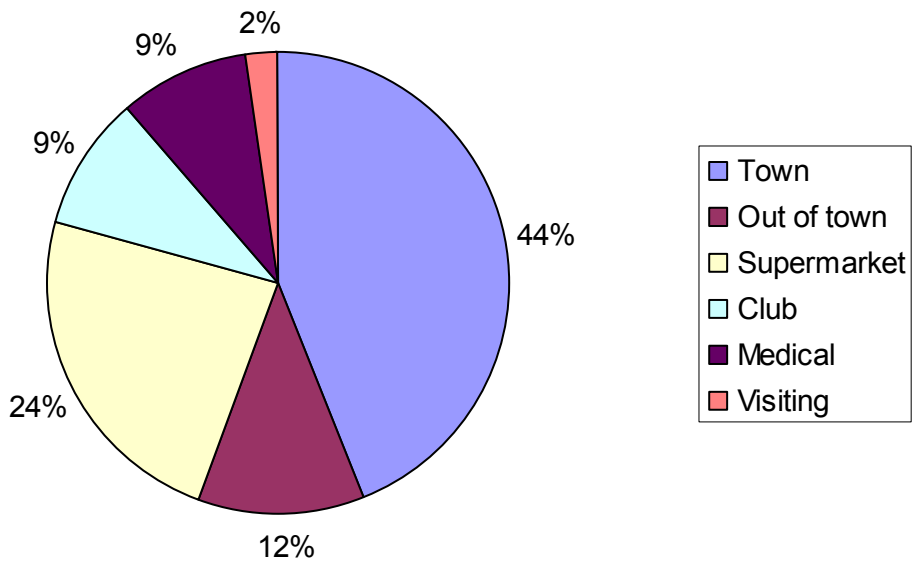




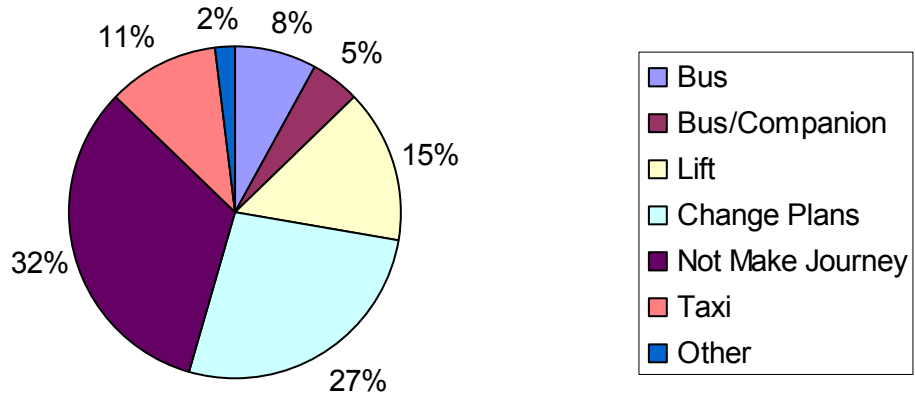
Question 7 If the start and finish times of the Dial-a-Ride service were reduced how would this affect the journeys that you currently undertake?



Question 8 Where do you currently travel to using the Dial-a-Ride service?



Question 10 If the Dial-a-Ride was not available which option best describes what you would do





Service & Community Impact Assessment

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY

DEMAND-RESPONSIVE TRANSPORT PROVISION IN OXFORDSHIRE FOR DISABLED AND MOBILITY-IMPAIRED PEOPLE

Lead Officer: Neil Timberlake

Purpose of the Assessment: This document is an equality assessment of the impact of the proposed changes to Demand-Responsive Transport Provision for Disabled, Elderly and Mobility-Impaired People on the communities of Oxfordshire, with particular reference to groups of people who share protected characteristics.

Section 149 of the Equalities Act 2010 (“the 2010 Act”) imposes a duty on the Council to give due regard to three needs in exercising its functions. This proposal is such a function. The three needs are:

- the need to eliminate any conduct which is prohibited by or under the 2010 Act;
- the need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share any of the protected characteristics listed in section 149(7); and
- the need to foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not.

Complying with section 149 may involve treating some people more favourably than others, but only to the extent that that does not amount to conduct which is otherwise unlawful under the new Act.

The need to advance equality of opportunity involves having due regard to the need to:

- remove or minimise disadvantages which are connected to a relevant protected characteristic and which are suffered by persons who share that characteristic,
- take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and which are different from the needs other people, and
- encourage those who share a relevant characteristic to take part in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such people is disproportionately low.
- Steps to meet the needs of disabled people which are different from the needs of people who are not disabled include steps to take account of a person’s disabilities.

The need to foster good relations between different groups involves having due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

Compliance with these duties may involve treating some persons more favourably than others; but that does not permit conduct which would otherwise be prohibited by the 2010 Act.

These protected characteristics are:

- Age (people of different age groups)
- Disability (e.g. physical or sensory impairments, long-term illnesses and conditions, hidden impairments such as a heart condition, frailty, learning disabilities or mental health problems)
- Gender (men/women) and Gender Reassignment
- Ethnicity (including Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic groups, Gypsies & Travellers)
- Religion/belief (different faiths, including people with no religion or belief)
- Sexual orientation
- Marriage/civil partnerships
- Pregnancy & Maternity

This proposal is a new policy approach to the delivery of dial-a-ride services, replacing the existing funding models used to provide such services in partnership with district councils.

Summary: This new policy aims to provide a new common level of dial-a-ride service provision across Oxfordshire, funded by the County Council. It will offer a service to some new communities not currently provided for, whilst potentially reducing the level of service provision in some others. Levels of County Council funding for this service are proposed to increase, although levels of funding from District Councils could reduce significantly meaning there will be an overall reduction in the level of service offered in some areas of the County.

This new policy recognises that, whilst there is a more geographic spread of service delivery in what is proposed, there remains a limited understanding of specific need amongst the target communities. It also recognises that the ultimate pattern of service delivery will be dependent on the decision to be made by each of the district councils as to whether (and to what extent) they choose to participate in funding and to 'top-up' the service level to be provided by the County Council. This assessment will accordingly be reviewed on a six-month basis by Neil Timberlake and will be updated as the policy is implemented and feedback is received.

The objective of the County Council is to secure the provision of a new unified county-wide service, to a common standard, and to continue to offer district councils the opportunity to participate and to fund specific enhancements to the service in their area.

In developing a common level of service provision across Oxfordshire, the proposals could result in a reduction in service in some areas. This SCIA has identified a risk that reductions in dial-a-ride transport as a result of reductions or cessation of financial support from one or more district councils could adversely impact disabled

and mobility-impaired individuals in Oxfordshire. This would result from a loss of capacity compared to the current service, which is likely to impact most in the Cherwell and Oxford City districts.

The proposals would result in a wholly new provision of dial-a-ride facilities in South Oxfordshire district, to the benefit of disabled and mobility-impaired residents there.

Introduction: DEMAND-RESPONSIVE TRANSPORT PROVISION IN OXFORDSHIRE FOR DISABLED AND MOBILITY-IMPAIRED PEOPLE

This review and re-tendering process relates to the provision of 'public transport' pre-booked door-to-door services for disabled, elderly and mobility-impaired people in Oxfordshire. The qualifying description 'public transport' is intended to distinguish this provision from that offered by the County Council in support of Social & Community Services, Special Educational Needs, or other forms of similar provision. The demand-responsive transport under review here is a non-statutory public transport service for those people who, because of their disability or other mobility impairment either cannot use or who find it very difficult to use conventional bus services.

The current contractual and funding arrangements for both the Octabus and Cherwell schemes come to an end on 31 March 2012. This has created an opportunity to take a holistic view of provision in the county, and to seek to create a unified replacement service.

In addition, the funding models supporting both schemes have been rendered incapable of continuation as a result of financial pressures placed on local authorities by the current economic situation, and a consequent review of spending priorities undertaken by the various district councils

Proposals

Elected members will be invited to consider recommendations for the creation of, and future funding for, a unified Oxfordshire pre-booked transport service for disabled and mobility-impaired residents. This will replace the existing, separate Octabus and Cherwell dial-a-ride services. Oxfordshire County Council has historically supported a number of dial-a-ride services which provide pre-booked door-to-door transport using fully accessible vehicles for people with mobility impairments who could not easily use conventional public transport.

Although the level of County Council funding for the scheme is proposed to increase, there is a very clear risk of reductions in district council funding and a consequent diminution in the volume of service available to users. If this were to happen then there would be greater dependence on volunteer-led community transport provision (where it exists), such as local car schemes. This risk is more properly a matter for the individual district councils to address, where reductions in or termination of their funding is proposed, but this SCIA nevertheless reflects upon the risks and impacts of such a change.

The service is expected to remain eligible for free travel to holders of English National Concessionary Travel Scheme passes, at least until 31 March 2013. A carer or assistant who is required to travel with a service user who cannot travel unaccompanied will continue to be carried free of charge in any event. Fares for the very small number of non pass-holders will be kept at a maximum of £3 for any single journey.

The new service will deliver a demand responsive public transport capacity to South Oxfordshire District Council's area for the first time (apart from a short-lived experimental service, funded by central government Rural Bus Challenge grant) between late 2004 and January 2006). This represents a very positive benefit to disabled and aged residents in this part of Oxfordshire.

Officers are conscious that there will be a number of potential users of this service currently unknown to us and therefore not consulted. However, effort will be made to direct information and publicity regarding the proposed new service into those communities not currently served, through engagement with groups such as Age UK, local Access Forums, parish councils and other suitable outlets. Potential users who become users of the new service will have an opportunity to be consulted upon later through the six-month review which is proposed. We have sought to reach out to current non-users through engagement with Oxfordshire Unlimited (the county's Council-funded but independent consultative group representing disabled and mobility-impaired people). In developing the proposed service we have also drawn upon officer experience of managing the delivery of the current dial-a-ride services, and of the former experimental South Oxfordshire Dial-a-Ride which operated between September 2004 and January 2006.

District Council funding

Officers have also been keen to continue to secure district council funding and participation in this form of public transport provision. Accordingly, the tender for the new service has been written in such a way as to permit any of the district councils to 'top-up' the level of demand-responsive provision in their area, any 'top-up' provision being funded entirely by the relevant district council.

District Councils may 'top-up' their baseline service according to their local priorities and available budget, either by

- (a) providing a service on an additional day per week; or
- (b) providing additional capacity through an extra vehicle per day; or
- (c) any combination of two or more of these 'top-up' elements.

Reduced capacity in Oxford City and Cherwell districts:

At present, Oxford City users benefit from a two-bus operation, compared to one bus each in West Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts. This City service is nevertheless over-subscribed, with a number of journey requests routinely not able to be met. The service in Cherwell district is provided with between five and seven buses per day, depending on the day of the week (reflecting different sub-regional patterns of service currently in that district).

Clearly a reduction from this level of provision to a baseline of one bus per day per district, would considerably restrict the number of journey requests that can be met, and would have a strong negative impact on service users. However, data gathered through consultation surveys with current users (Question 1) shows that 79% of dial-a-ride users travel on the service once a week or less frequently, and that only 1% of users travel on the service every day.

Responses to Question 10 of the survey showed that if dial-a-ride were not available then 32% of users would not make their usual journey, but that the remaining 68% would find a means of accommodating the loss of dial-a-ride.

Taken together, the findings of the consultative survey suggest that what is proposed will continue to provide for the basic needs of service users, but that a reduction in capacity in the service will diminish the choice that users will have in terms of finding an available time-slot to optimally serve their needs. However, a full EQIA will be undertaken once the final district council funding position is known, and the final shape of the service is determined.

Risks	Mitigation
Reduction in DaR service to some district areas in order to provide a uniform baseline service in unserved areas of county	<p>A cross authority working group has ensured that DCs are invited to 'top-up' a baseline service, and we are being proactive in encouraging them to do so</p> <p>Alternative Community Transport schemes such as car share schemes have been alerted/ consulted on this proposal and are aware that there may be an increased demand within their communities.</p>
People may not be aware of alternative transport options available to them, or feel confident enough to use them	<p>For people who feel they could (with some experience) use a standard easy access low floor bus, 'Travel with Confidence' training is offered via OCC's specialist travel planning service called OxTAIL.</p> <p>Consultation has shown that a modal shift can follow service reduction.</p>

Alternative approaches

Consideration was given to the possible extension of the service to weekday evenings, or weekends. However, earlier user consultations have shown that weekday evening services were not favoured by users (55% of respondents saying that they would NOT use a service at this time, and a further 16.9% would use it only "very occasionally), and that providing a service at weekends delivered no significant benefits to users.

Accordingly the focus has been to secure the maximum provision during weekdays within available budgets.

Another alternative approach might have been for the County Council to provide different levels of service in each district, rather than a uniform 'baseline' of provision across the county. This might have avoided the potential impact of what could be a significant reduction in service level in Cherwell district (and to a lesser degree in Oxford City). However, the total cost of providing a service comparable to the current patterns would have been some £470,000 per annum, which far exceeds the current and proposed levels of funding from the County Council. In the present financial climate, this was considered impracticable, and could only have been achieved at the expense of significant reductions in the budgets of other Council services.

Impact on customers:

The policy has an impact related to age and disability, gender, pregnancy and maternity, and religion or belief. These are discussed below:

Age and disability:

This dial-a-ride service is designed for disabled and mobility-impaired people. Mobility impairment will often be as a result of frailty or physical weakness, and this is often as a result of old age. It is projected that the numbers of frail elderly people in Oxfordshire will rise in line with general demographic trends. In addition, the number of people claiming Disability Living Allowance is on the rise and is likely to continue rising as the county's population ages. This will put additional pressure on dial-a-ride capacity in future, or on volunteer-led community transport provision where dial-a-ride is unable to meet the volume of need.

The service is designed to improve the independent mobility and life-opportunities for people in these categories, and as such provides a positively discriminatory enhanced service for eligible users. It provides door-to-door transport, usually to/from their residential address, and offers journeys to anywhere within their resident district council area, and to other locations anywhere in Oxfordshire subject to available capacity.

The dial-a-ride service does not currently permit journeys to/from hospital appointments (although hospital visiting is within scope) or for journeys to/from County Council-sponsored day centres. The reason for these specific limitations is that there is already other statutory transport provision in place to meet these needs, and it has been felt important to preserve available capacity of this public transport dial-a-ride so as to be able to meet the multiplicity of needs which it alone can serve.

Risks	Mitigation
Reduction in DaR service to some district areas in order to provide a uniform baseline service in unserved areas of county	A cross authority working group has A cross authority working group has ensured that DCs are invited to 'top-up' a baseline service, and we are being proactive in encouraging them to do so

	<p>Alternative Community Transport schemes such as car share schemes have been alerted/ consulted on this proposal and are aware that there may be an increased demand within their communities.</p> <p>For people who feel they could (with some experience) use a standard easy access low floor bus 'Travel with Confidence' training is offered via OCC's specialist travel planning service called OxTAIL.</p> <p>Consultation has shown that a modal shift can follow service reduction.</p>
Potential drop in service standard as a result of contract transition to a new provider	All drivers/ staff under the new contract will be required to attend extensive training on Disability Equality, Manual Handling & back-care etc
New staff many not have experience of customers needs.	All staff will be required to receive training
Provisions targeted at disabled and older people may not be delivered to young people and children	The service is booked on a first come first served basis so application is the same for every applicant
New provider contracts may lead to a reduction in service use/ lack of customer knowledge	All existing DaR customers will receive a letter advising of the provider change and offering new contacts details. The new DaR service will be advertised and promoted in new areas OxTAIL will advise of changes.
The rising number of people claiming Disability Living Allowance will put DaR services under increasing pressure as the population ages	Services will be monitored to note unmet demand. This information will be shared with district and county officers via a cross authority working group. All local authorities will have the potential to increase resources via this tendered contract.
DaR does not permit journeys to and from hospital appointments or day centres	Transport is already provided for these purposes by other statutory providers. This preserves available capacity to meet the many other needs.
One vehicle per district may be insufficient for need	District councils are welcome to extend OCC baseline provisions by adding 'top-up' funding/ resources Service extensions may be added at any time with this new contract. Service monitoring will continue and be shared with district councils
A shortfall in services may fall to both City and Cherwell district areas as one of the present two buses is diverted to provide a service to South Oxon.	The design of this tendered funding process allows for district authorities to enhance or 'top-up' core provisions
People with limited hearing cannot use the phone booking system	Online booking will offer an alternative method.

Gender, Pregnancy and maternity:

Since the service is provided for people who cannot use or who find it difficult to use conventional public transport, it is possible that pregnant women, and women with small children, in some circumstances could be eligible to use the proposed scheme for a short period. Decisions as to the provision of dial-a-ride could potentially impact on such people therefore to a limited degree.

It could also be argued that the policy has impacts related to gender, as there are more women than men in Oxfordshire (and this is increasingly the case as people get older).

Risks	Mitigation
Women may be more disadvantaged by changes in service provision	There is no bias in the provision of this service. It is booked on a first come first served principle.
Women may feel uncomfortable using the service if all the drivers are male and/or they have specific support requirements	Staff managing and delivering this service will be of either sex allowing flexibility All staff will be provided with training.
It is possible that pregnant women and people with small children would seek to use the DaR service which could disadvantage other users	Service monitoring will be made seeking potential conflict of users. However the first come first served booking system will offer fairness/ no selection process

Religion or belief:

Current dial-a-ride services, and that proposed to replace them, are focussed on Monday-to-Friday provision. It is possible that people whose faith and beliefs require them to participate in religious observance on such days could use the dial-a-ride service to access places of communal worship. However a person whose main focus of religious participation is satisfied on Saturdays or Sundays would not be able to access such facilities using the dial-a-ride.

No targeted consultation was done in relation to religion or belief. However, dial-a-ride journey data and customer surveys showed virtually no use of DAR was related to religious observance (only 8 users mentioned it as a reason for currently using the DAR, and it was mentioned as a possible reason for wishing to travel at weekends by only 19 users). Some volunteer-led car schemes may be able to meet needs for journeys to places of worship at weekends (details of which are available through the County Council's OxTAIL travel advice line), and it is believed that many faith communities will be likely themselves to have in place arrangements to bring disabled or mobility-impaired worshippers to such weekend gatherings.

Risks	Mitigation
Absence of a DaR service at weekends and evenings could prevent people practicing some faiths or beliefs whilst others have a service	Consultation with existing DaR users shows little demand for service to religious observance. beyond core days for services. It is possible however that enhancements D/Cs might make could extend services in to evenings and weekends Volunteer led community car schemes and local networks- accessed via OxTAIL travel advice line can advise alternate solutions.
DaR staff not sensitive to perceived barriers/ not understand belief behaviours	Staff will receive equality & diversity based training

Other protected groups

It is not believed that this policy has any impact on gender re-assignment, race, marriage and civil partnership or sexual orientation.

Impact on providers:

This service is designed specifically for disabled and mobility-impaired travellers, and as such forms the core of the tender specification and of the proposed agreement with the winning bidder. The successful bidder will also be expected to uphold the Council's responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010.

In considering and developing these proposals, the Council has pro-actively consulted with ALL users of the existing two dial-a-ride services, and with all parish councils in Oxfordshire, and with Oxfordshire Unlimited (the county's independent but Council-funded consultative body representing disabled and mobility-impaired citizens).

Neil Timberlake
Lead Officer