

**Report to:** Economy, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Committee

**Date of meeting:** 16 March 2016

**By:** Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

**Title:** Reformulated Supported Bus Network Mitigating Measures

**Purpose:** To review the mitigation measures undertaken for the reformulated supported bus network agreed by Cabinet in December 2014

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**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- (1) Note the implementation of the reformulated supported bus network in conjunction with the priorities set out in the Public Transport Strategy Commissioning Strategy; and**
  - (2) Note the progress made in mitigating the effects of the reformulated supported bus network on local communities.**
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## **1 Background Information**

1.1 The Economy, Transport and Environment (ETE) Scrutiny Committee on 12 December 2014 considered a report by the Director of Communities, Economy and Transport on East Sussex County Council's proposed Public Transport Strategic Commissioning Strategy (the Strategy) and the accompanying reformulated supported bus network (RSBN). This was ahead of the Cabinet meeting on 16 December 2014 which agreed the proposed Strategy and implementation of a revised bus network from April 2015. See Appendix 1 for further information.

1.2 The revised Strategy sets out how the County Council secures the best outcomes for East Sussex residents, through the understanding of need, matching supply with need, and making the most effective use of all available resources. The report presented in December 2014 and the appendices which accompanied it explained the background and development of the Strategy.

1.3 A wide range of data was reviewed in developing the Strategy to provide a clearer understanding of the travel needs of residents and communities across East Sussex. The findings from a 12 week public consultation between July and September 2014 added to this understanding. The Strategy's strategic outcomes and hierarchy resulted in a revised bus network designed to meet the needs identified as part of this strategic commissioning process, these being:

- "Our Vision" - To ensure the integrated bus network in East Sussex is sustainable and meets the needs of our residents; and
- Priorities:
  - Priority 1 – Enable children eligible for statutory free home to school transport to travel to the nearest suitable school or college
  - Priority 2 – Enable residents to get to work at key centres during peak times
  - Priority 3 – Enable residents to access essential services during the day on a minimum of two days per week
  - Priority 4 – Enable children who are not eligible for statutory free home to school transport to travel to the nearest available school or college

1.4 Feedback to the public consultation showed considerable opposition at the time to the implementation of the Strategy and revised bus network. This feedback and concerns expressed by Councillors were mainly in relation to the reduction in frequency of subsidised services as it was felt that a reduction in options to travel by bus would not offer the level of service the community would like. It was felt that reductions could affect quality of life, ability to attend medical appointments and impact on the vulnerable.

1.5 The report to the ETE Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet in December 2014 explained that during the development of the Strategy, consideration had been given to alternative models of service delivery. The report further highlighted that the impact on some service users would be reduced in the proposed revised bus network by the commercialisation of 23 services, and the proposed award of a number of alternative tender submissions. However, the Strategy and revised bus network agreed by Cabinet did include the withdrawal of some highly subsidised routes as well as a small number of evening and Sunday services.

1.6 Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) were carried out given the nature of the Strategy and the revised bus network proposals and the potential to impact upon those with protected characteristics (most notably individuals who are elderly and/or have a disability and/or live in a rural area). As part of the EqIA process an assessment of potential mitigations was undertaken.

1.7 One of the key mitigation measures to reduce the impact of the proposals for those with protected characteristics was the implementation of revised dial-a-ride services. For those dial-a-ride services that received financial support from the Council, it was agreed to provide funding to ensure at least a three day per week service with some actually being offered for 4-6 days following successful discussion with the service providers.

1.8 As further mitigation it was agreed that the County Council would work with Borough, District, Town or Parish councils to identify potential sources of funding or set up alternative travel solutions such as Wheels2Work and car share schemes and to actively promote these or any alternative travel solutions such as walking and cycling. We undertook to liaise with other relevant parties including other County Council departments, the NHS, Clinical Commissioning Groups and developers to identify and implement alternative solutions.

1.9 A communications plan was developed to ensure that as wide an audience as possible was aware when the strategy was formally adopted and what this meant for the community. It would also ensure that they were aware of any agreed changes to the supported bus network and when these will be implemented.

1.10 Each EqIA requires the mitigation measures and their effectiveness to be monitored. In doing so we have analysed all correspondence received about the Strategy and revised bus network and undertaken on-bus surveys on supported bus routes to monitor how any changes are impacting on bus passengers.

## **2 Supporting Information**

### **2.1 Reformulated Supported Bus Network Outcomes**

2.1.1 Significant further mitigation has been achieved following the Cabinet decision in December 2014, both in the lead up to the revised bus network and subsequently. 101 supported bus services operated before the introduction of the revised bus network and the changes agreed by Cabinet retained a service on 90 of them. Financial support was withdrawn from 2 Saturday services and 7 evening and Sunday services that did not meet the strategic priorities set out in the Strategic Commissioning Strategy and from 2 services with a high passenger subsidy. As a result of further positive engagement with bus operators and other partners, the actual number of services withdrawn has been limited to only 6; the 2 services with the high passenger subsidy, 1 Saturday service and 3 evening services. As a result, 95 of the original 101 supported bus services have continued to operate following the introduction of the new bus network in April 2015.

2.1.2 Two of the services retained are Sunday services in Hastings, as a result of a funding contribution from the parking surplus agreed by the Hastings Parking Board. One Saturday early evening service was taken on commercially along with one Sunday service. The operator's decision to take on this Sunday service was the result of officers working with the South Downs National Park Authority to secure promotional support from their Local Sustainable Transport Fund.

2.1.3 Other improvements have been achieved to the revised bus network agreed by Cabinet. Nine supported services were expected to have been reduced to either two days or three days a week during off-peak times. Only five services were actually reduced to these levels when the new network was introduced in April 2015. Some operators in their tender submissions included offers to provide improved services at no additional cost, over and above the level specified.

2.1.4 Most of the improvements to days of bus service operation, along with other frequency enhancements, resulted from positive engagement with operators of commercial and supported bus services. Further information on the services changed can be found in Appendix 6.

## 2.2 Communications Plan

2.2.1 There was extensive media coverage following Cabinet's decision. Briefing notes and publicity material about the changes were provided to bus operators, Councillors, other local councils and other key outlets including schools, colleges and medical surgeries. This included detailed information to explain how the new bus network affected each district. The County Council's website was utilised to allow service users to access an updated interactive bus map ahead of the changes in April 2015. A new East Sussex Public Transport Map was printed and distributed at the end of March 2015. In addition, information was provided on alternative solutions to address travel needs. The website displays a directory of community transport schemes running in areas of the county. See Appendix 2.

## 2.3 Customer Feedback

2.3.1 The Transport Hub Team has analysed the correspondence received about the Strategy and revised bus network following the Cabinet decision in December 2014. A total of 330 items of correspondence were recorded up until the middle of February 2016, including correspondence received directly via phone, email, post, on-bus survey feedback forms or via other departments and the Contact Centre. (Multiple items of correspondence relating to the same correspondent about a specific issue were recorded as a single correspondence item). Items such as concerns over late running buses are considered to be operational issues so have been excluded from this figure.

2.3.2 330 items of correspondence equates to 2% of the estimated 14,900 weekly number of people travelling on supported bus services. The volume of correspondence received is relatively small, which would suggest that the effectiveness of the communications plan in explaining the background to the Strategy and the likely future shape of the supported bus network. 87 of the 330 items were requests for further information about the Strategy or the revised bus network, 70% of which were received in March and April 2015 around the time the detail of the new supported bus services, including individual route timetables, was made public.

2.3.3 32 items of correspondence were compliments about the outcome or implementation. The remaining 211 items were complaints; 29 of these were concerns regarding the level of fares increases and the other 182 related to concerns over the level of service provision in the new network. 71 of the service related complaints are considered to now have been resolved through further mitigating actions. The remaining 111 complaints are considered not to have been resolved and relate to mainly individual service concerns.

2.3.4 Only 9 services generated 7 or more complaints for each service of which all apart from Heathfield school service 267/268/269 (for the imposition of a 30% fares increase) were with regard to reductions in the days of the week or frequencies. The highest number of complaints was 17 for Newhaven town service 145 (where the frequency was reduced from hourly to 2 hourly). Complaints relating to 2 of these 9 services are considered to have been resolved following mitigating interventions.

2.3.5 Since November 2015 complaints about the revised bus network have reduced to less than ten per month, most of which are from 'Have Your Say' forms. These Freepost comment forms are offered to passengers during the on-bus surveys who wish to comment about bus services. More information on the results of customer feedback is provided in Appendix 3.

2.3.6 On-bus surveys have now been undertaken on the revised bus network to understand how passenger use has changed. This has revealed that the number of passengers making shopping and medical trips has reduced slightly more than had been predicted on half the services surveyed. Service 123 (Newhaven-Lewes) had the biggest reduction from prediction in both trip categories, with 67 fewer shopping trips and 10 fewer medical trips. Compared to predictions, the total for all services surveyed showed 31 fewer shopping trips and 16 fewer medical trips. Tables can be viewed in Appendices 3 and 5.

## 2.4 Financial Analysis

2.4.1 The financial and commercial performance of supported services is regularly monitored to confirm that expenditure continues to represent value for money in the context of available budgets. The average subsidy per passenger for the revised bus network is £0.75, compared to the figure of £0.81 for the supported network before April 2015. However there are four services in excess of £5 of which three are dial-a-ride services and the other is the Ticehurst-Wadhurst rail link. A table showing subsidy per passenger for each service is in Appendix 4.

2.4.2 The high cost per passenger reflects the inevitably low utilisation associated with this type of service but dial-a-ride is considered to be important in mitigating the affects of the Strategy and revised bus network. The Eastbourne and Polegate dial-a-ride service has the highest subsidy per passenger at £18.04 and is considered to be poor value for money. The average number of passengers per day is 8. The operator's bookings log indicates on average 4 are shopping trips, 3 are social and 1 is a medical trip. The operator has implemented a plan to boost service usage over the next six months. It should be noted that there were no reductions in daytime bus services resulting from the revised bus network in the area served by the Eastbourne and Polegate dial-a-ride at the time it operates, which may account for its very low level of use. Unless usage of the service increases significantly it is recommended that steps are taken to reduce costs, possibly by reducing the service to two days a week or removing the service altogether.

2.4.3 The saving to East Sussex County Council from implementing the Strategy and revised bus network is £1.36m in 2015/16. This has contributed significantly to achieving the Departmental £2.23m savings target for transport services during the Reconciling, Policy, Performance and Resources process approved in February 2013. In conjunction with savings to concessionary fares payments and Transport Hub Team costs, this will produce the saving required of £1.66m in 2015/16.

### **3. Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations**

3.1 The new Public Transport Strategic Commissioning Strategy and reformulated supported bus network has been successfully implemented and delivered savings of £1.36m. This will have had some negative impact on service users, however the mitigation measures put in place have reduced this impact.

3.2 Negotiations with operators throughout the course of the commissioning process have focussed on solutions for service users. This has led to new ways of addressing service needs, using information gained from service monitoring, user feedback and pro-active engagement with local communities. The relatively low volume of complaints received would indicate that a significant level of mitigation has been achieved.

3.3 Monitoring of services and correspondence will continue to be undertaken over the length of the Strategy. Discussions with the operators of contracted services and partnership working with commercial bus operators, to identify further improvements for service users and better value for council tax payers, are ongoing as an integral part of the strategy.

3.4 Scrutiny Committee is recommended to note the successful introduction of the revised bus network and the mitigation measures put in place to reduce the impact of the changes on users of the service. The Transport Hub will continue to work in collaboration with local communities, partners and service providers to ensure we are making the best use of our resources to meet the needs of our communities.

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#### LOCAL MEMBERS

All

#### BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None