

Response from Councillor Alan Amos, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways to the Scrutiny Task Group Report on Bus and Community Transport Provision.

The Cabinet Member notes the report of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group on Bus and Community Transport Provision and would like to thank them for their balanced and comprehensive report, and for their interest in this very important subject.

The Committee can be assured that this will be a very useful document in informing the wider Transport Review which is now under way, as we will be looking into the total provision of bus services across the whole County Council.

I have deliberately not responded to each and every point in the Task Group's Report as the whole point of the Transport Review is to look at all of these issues in greater depth and it would be inappropriate of the Cabinet Member to be seen to have pre-empted the outcome of the wider Review by expressing opinions before seeing the research and recommendations that the Transport Review will be making. However, the Task Group's report will be useful and helpful in informing the wider Transport Review on those issues it has looked at.

I have made comments about aspects of the report and these are shown against the paragraph number from the Scrutiny Report.

Bus Services and how the Council supports services

13 The Transport Review is looking at the totality of Transport provided by Worcestershire County Council, currently at a cost of some £22m. This will include Home to School transport and SEND expenditure where we are looking to remove any duplication and see how the same level of service can be provided in a more efficient and logical manner.

20 I welcome the Task Group's discussion in paragraph 22 about the interlinkage between bus services and how interdependent they often are. It is always necessary to consider the knock on consequences of the reduction of one service on other routes and this will certainly be a significant issue for the wider Review to investigate. I welcome the Task Group's comments in paragraph 18 about the relevance and viability of bus subsidy criteria. Clearly, this is a changing situation and the criteria should be regularly reviewed to remain relevant and viable.

29 *Gaps identified in the current provision – main themes from survey feedback*

The Task Group has rightly referred to the need for accessible bus services for older people and this will be something the Review will certainly be considering.

30. *Problems identified with current services – main themes*

I fully concur with the Task Group's comments about the importance of bus reliability and punctuality and it is essential that we work together to considerably reduce the levels of delays and cancellations in services. I strongly support the reference to the issue of social isolation for older and vulnerable people and this will be a significant issue for the

Review to take on board. There is no doubt that there are groups of people who rely disproportionately on buses to maintain a healthy and productive lifestyle.

I welcome the reference to signage and timetables at bus stops, an issue we have been working on for some time, and I look forward to a much greater roll out of Real Time Information boards at more bus stops. However, the reality is that the majority of these are likely to be in urban areas given the exigencies of technology.

On the question of council subsidies, I accept that there is an issue more with rural areas given that there are a disproportionately large number of concessionary and elderly passengers who use buses in these areas. There will be a delicate balance for the Review to weigh up.

31 *Groups who would use bus services if they were available/accessible*

The Task Group refers to a spiral of decline when bus services are cut and the effect on remaining bus routes. This refers to my earlier comments on this subject and there is a comparison with airlines that use hubs with feeder flights linking into the more long haul routes, and this is a point well taken.

32. *Bus Providers*

On the question of bus providers, the Task Group makes a number of helpful comments, for example about the need to ensure good communication between Highways and the bus companies about both planned and unexpected roadworks, which clearly has a significant impact on reliability.

51. *Roadworks and Bus Lanes*

I totally support the Task Group's view that unexpected roadworks and some abuse of some bus lanes are having a significant impact on bus reliability. Consequently, the Review will look at the need for any refinement in the permit scheme with a view to improving communication where utility works are planned on bus routes.

53. *Community Transport*

Again, I would fully endorse the Task Group's comments when it refers to "helping to improve the public's understanding of Community Transport schemes and how to access them with additional publicity

Recommendation 1

Worcestershire County Council should take a long-term, strategic approach to public transport

That a long term proactive strategic approach to public transport issues should be agreed, underpinned by Officer capacity and Member involvement. This approach will involve working in partnership with the District Councils and needs to:

- **Reflect the desire to grow public transport provision to meet future as well as current need**
- **Address the issue of social isolation across the County**
- **Ensure that residents with disabilities or mobility issues are helped to live independent lives**
- **Have a positive impact on environmental issues**
- **Seek to reduce congestion, for example in Evesham**
- **Take advantage of opportunities available through the planning process including S106 and CIL**
- **Where a development is planned above 50 houses, a contribution should be routinely considered towards public transport**
- **Contribute to the mental and physical health of all age groups**
- **Review the County Council's current spend on public transport and how it can be used more effectively (not including rail)**

In response to the recommendation, I fully endorse the Task Group's aspiration to increase public transport and usage and to explore, through the planning process, whether there are opportunities to attract more Section 106 monies to support this. There is merit in the suggestion that a contribution should be considered more routinely towards public transport.

Recommendation 2: Review Bus Subsidy Criteria

That the criteria used when the Council allocates bus subsidies be reviewed with a view to:

- **Ensuring that the Council is not subsidising failure or excessive profits**
- **Ensuring that a minimum baseline daily timetabled service is provided to all Towns and larger villages (the equivalent of a Category 1 village in the SWDP)**
- **Joining up policies to ensure that there is a focus on:**
 - **rural social isolation, rather than deprivation, in rural areas**
 - **deprivation and social isolation in urban areas**

My opening comments refer, that it would be inappropriate for the Cabinet Member to be seen to have pre-empted the outcome of the wider Review by expressing opinions before seeing the research and recommendations that the Transport Review will be making.

Recommendation 3: Confidence in the Brand

Confidence in the infrastructure and brand of Worcestershire's bus services needs to be addressed by improving quality issues including:

- **Improved marketing and publicity**
- **Ensuring timetabling information is accurate, reliable and readily available, and explores partnership approaches to funding**
- **Modernising the service, including the expansion of contactless payment**

- **The practical issues concerning buses, bus stops, partnership working in relation to bus shelters, reliability of drivers, accessibility etc. – these areas were raised through feedback and should be discussed with the bus companies and the County Council and actioned as a matter of priority.**

These issues go hand in hand with the underpinning principle, in the Foreword and Recommendation 1, of working differently to grow awareness of the brand and usage.

I totally endorse the Task Group's comments about the need to ensure that timetable information is accurate, reliable and readily available and that there is scope for greater partnership working with bus companies on this issue.

The Task Group's comments about bus stops and bus shelters and reliability of drivers are all issues that the Bus Review will consider.

Recommendation 4: Working With Bus Operators

That the Council ensures effective liaison with bus providers and appropriate action on the following:

- **That in the Council's liaison with bus providers, attempts be made to address some of the major concerns with services/routes raised in the feedback**
- **Opportunities be explored for using the school transport buses more effectively in the 10am to 2pm slot, in order to provide a service to meet the needs of socially isolated communities**
- **Ensuring that the permits to contractors are altered to ensure that they are required to notify bus companies of any disruption to bus routes in advance of the work**
- **Seek enforcement of bus routes to ease the pressure on bus journeys at times of peak congestion**
- **If a bus company is considering removing a commercial service, discussions take place, at the earliest opportunity, with the Officers and local Councillors for the areas affected, so that alternative, innovative solutions and public/private partnerships including financial incentives, can be investigated, with a view to sustaining and growing the usage.**

I see merit in the Task Group's proposal that bus companies are informed of any likely disruption to bus routes, following allocation of roadwork permits.

The Transport Review will also be looking at the Task Group's suggestion to seek better enforcement of bus routes and we will be discussing this with the Districts who are the parking enforcement Authorities. This will place greater importance and resources into dealing with parking congestion and thus address the impact that this has on bus reliability.

Recommendation 5: Governance and Tendering

- **That the Council should, as part of its governance and tendering processes, ensure the transparency and accountability of the allocation of subsidies should be further improved.**
- **The Council should ensure that the skills of negotiators are sufficient to ascertain the degree of profit the provider is achieving due to Council subsidies.**

My opening comments refer, that it would be inappropriate for the Cabinet Member to be seen to have pre-empted the outcome of the wider Review by expressing opinions before seeing the research and recommendations that the Transport Review will be making.

Recommendation 6: Community Transport

In respect of the work of Community Transport schemes, the Council should:

- **Continue to work closely with Community Transport providers as they carry out their valuable work and offer any appropriate assistance with co-ordination and publicity issues to encourage and ensure more widespread use of the service**
- **Offer support if CT schemes consider operating a car share scheme such as Cornwall Connect, which has a safeguarding and legal framework, with approximately 4000 users and is supportive of access to college for 16-19 age group, access to work and tourism**
- **Continue to offer financial support to CT schemes in the form of subsidies and ensure that CT schemes are made aware of any transport contracts that they could tender for**
- **Ensure that the annual grant payments to CT providers (current year £90,000) be accompanied by a requirement for minimum standards to benefit its users, such as adequate website/flyer communications**

I welcome the Task Group's comments about Community Transport and the Review will be looking at simplifying and rationalising all the various types so that services become more acceptable and understandable to users. Perhaps a more centralised system with greater publicity and marketing would assist this service, which is only likely to grow in the future. Consequently, I fully endorse the Task Group's comments in paragraph 40 when it refers to "the varied delivery of Community Transport by individual operators and a lack of public understanding about what the Community Transport schemes offer were seen as a deterrent to some potential users"

Recommendation 7: Concessionary Fares Budget

Scrutiny members should meet with Members of Parliament to ask them to support amending the Concessionary Fares scheme to avoid unintended consequences.

My opening comments refer, that it would be inappropriate for the Cabinet Member to be seen to have pre-empted the outcome of the wider Review by expressing opinions before seeing the research and recommendations that the Transport Review will be making.

I look forward to working with the Scrutiny Committee in dealing with the above issues as we go forward, in particular to consider how we address the fundamental issue of encouraging greater use of public transport to ensure that passenger numbers grow rather than get stuck in the spiral of decline. The Transport Review will be a long term strategic analysis of all the factors involved in bus transport throughout the County, with a view to putting our bus services on a more secure and stable foundation. I am pleased to see that that is the principal objective of the Task Group