

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

25 SEPTEMBER 2023

DEMAND RESPONSIVE TRANSPORT AND COMMUNITY TRANSPORT UPDATE

Summary

1. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport and the Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations have been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on issues relating to Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and Community Transport. The Community Transport Development Officer and the Chair of the Worcestershire Community Transport Consortium will also be in attendance.

Demand Responsive Transport

2. Worcestershire on Demand (WOD) is Worcestershire County Council's DRT operation that provides an alternative to traditional fixed bus services and is part of Worcestershire's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP).
3. WOD was initially launched as a pilot in Bromsgrove Town to provide better links to the Bus and Train Station. Following the pilot, all DRT service Zones will operate under the "Worcestershire On Demand" brand. A second pilot has been rolled out in Malvern and provides residents with better transport links and access to key points of interest; they will be able to make more frequent journeys and to new destinations.

What is WOD?

4. WOD is a new flexible way to travel by bus. Unlike a traditional bus service, WOD does not have a fixed route or follow a timetable. Instead, the buses can travel anywhere between bus stops and designated points within the operating zones.
5. When using WOD, the customer can choose the time that they would like to travel by booking a journey through the easy-to-use WOD App which is free to download from the Apple and Google Play store.
6. For those customers unable to download the App or in need of help, the Highways Control Centre can be contacted by calling 01905 846180 (*available between 0900 hrs and 1700 hrs only*).
7. When customers are ready to travel, they book the bus to pick them up from a convenient bus stop or designated point within the operating zone. Smart technology will match the journey with other customers travelling in the same direction and they can be picked up along the way.
8. Journeys can be booked 'on demand' as required or in advance booking if travelling in the next five days. When making an on-demand booking, it is

estimated that it could take anywhere between 5 and 60 minutes for the bus to reach the bus stop or designated pick-up point if spaces are available, so customers should take this into consideration.

Malvern DRT Pilot Zone

9. During the initial phase of the Malvern Pilot, two vehicles will be operated. One vehicle will be operated by LMS Travel and one jointly by Malvern Community Action and Worcester Wheels.
10. Unlike the Bromsgrove zone, where journeys are only permitted within the zone area, testing is taking place with the Malvern DRT to see whether it is possible to include key “points of interest” both inside and outside of the Zone and if so, how they can be incorporated to meet the requirements of the customers and the likely impact on the daily operations of the buses.
11. Existing public transport infrastructure has been used as it is known that this provides safe pick up/drop off locations. Additional safe virtual stops are currently being reviewed that will expand the options for customers.
12. Following the launch, consideration will be given to how other fixed local bus services can be integrated into the application so that customers are able to access more information about services that are available.

Data

13. The following key data has been obtained regarding the operation of WOD since July 2021:
 - The Council has received a total of circa 154,000 transport enquiries via the app and has been able to offer 74% of these as journeys.
 - The remaining 26% of enquiries did not receive a transport offer.
 - 36.7% (54,784) of initial enquiries resulted in journeys made.
 - The average customer satisfaction initial feedback provides a rating for the service of 4.7 out of 5 (4,287 ratings given)
 - To date, the app has been downloaded 3,912 times by passengers.
 - 2,748 people who have downloaded the app have subsequently requested a journey.

Community Transport in Worcestershire

14. Community Transport (CT) services cover all of Worcestershire and enables those without or unable to access other forms of transport to make journeys to a variety of destinations, including, hospitals, GP surgeries, dentists, opticians, the shops, library and to social clubs and activities.
15. There are fourteen main schemes in Worcestershire, set out below. They use a combination of volunteers driving their own cars, community buses, dial-a-ride minibuses and MPVs to provide these journeys. Several use paid drivers for minibuses.

- CT Wyre Forest,
- Wyre Forest Dial-a-Ride,
- Bluwave CT,
- Bromsgrove Urban and Rural Transport (BURT),
- Droitwich RCVS,
- Evesham Volunteer Centre,
- Community Action Malvern and District,
- Malvern Dial-a-Ride,
- Pershore Volunteer Centre,
- Tenbury Transport Trust,
- Teme Wheels,
- Upton Community Care,
- Worcester Wheels
- Redditch Dial-a-Ride.

16. CT schemes are always involved when demand is demonstrated for new Community Bus routes or where a local bus service may be reduced or withdrawn. The Community Transport Officer will work with the Community Transport Operator, local councillors, District and Parish Councils and local groups. CT operators have an excellent track record in 'stepping up' when asked and provide a range of tailored services as and when required. Current Community Bus routes can be found at www.worcestershire.gov.uk/transport-types/bus-travel and CT schemes can be viewed at www.communitytravel.org.uk

Strategic Grant Partnership

17. 11 schemes form the Strategic Grant Partnership which is administered by Pershore Volunteer Centre (VC) and is a County Council contract with current funding of £90,000 for each of its two years, 2022-2024 until 31 March 2024.
18. The Grant is paid quarterly and Pershore VC is allocated 5% to cover administration and reporting. Each Community Transport Partner Scheme is allocated a set amount each quarter based on whether they operate a car scheme only or a car scheme and minibuses (Community Buses and Dial A Rides). The remainder is calculated on the number of journeys each has provided in the previous quarter.
19. CT partners work with the County Council and are regarded as an important part of the passenger transport network. The Community Transport Officer (CTO) regularly meets with scheme organisers and has quarterly review meetings with the Grant Lead body.

Journeys

20. For Strategic Grant partners, during the year ending 31 March 2023, 79,902 single passenger journeys were provided. Of these, approx. 45,000 were provided in a car and the remainder by minibuses.
21. The annual total for journeys from April 2021 to March 2022 inclusive was 59,000 (there has been a 36% increase in 2022-23).

22. Total journeys by *all* schemes, 2022-23, were approximately 108,000.
23. Total journeys for Strategic Grant partners in Q1 2023 (April, May, June) were 21,200 (27,000 for all schemes) up by 7% on Q1 2022.
24. Compared to the previous year, this year is on target to see an overall increase of 18.5% for journeys to hospitals for appointments, 10.6% to GP surgeries, 301.5% for hospital visiting and 9% to clubs and Day Centres.
25. For the Strategic Grant partners, 1,601 new clients registered with CT schemes in 2022-23, an increase of 18% on the previous year. The majority of these clients have limited mobility and a significant number were rurally isolated; some were both. Mileage driven in 2022-23 was just under 612,000 miles, an increase of 15.5% on the previous year.

Volunteers

26. Community Transport Strategic Grant partner schemes have just over 300 volunteer drivers and approximately 70 administration volunteers. There are around another 40 driving for the other schemes. Volunteer levels have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and this is always a challenge across all schemes. Volunteer recruitment is a constant requirement, and it is particularly important to balance the number of volunteers available to drive with the number of journeys being requested.

Issues for consideration and future challenges

27. As mentioned earlier, the current Strategic Grant contract comes to an end on 31 March 2024, and future funding options will therefore need to be considered.
28. There has been significant growth in journeys to hospital appointments and for patients discharged from hospitals. CT journeys have also increased to out-of-county hospitals which take longer, cost more and tie-up a driver for a greater period than if the appointments were more local. The CTO is in regular discussion with the NHS about how these journeys can be provided as efficiently and effectively as possible.
29. 2 schemes are using Electric vehicles (EVs), which can be challenging, particularly if operating in a more rural area. There are no plans for additional EVs at this time.
30. Loneliness and Isolation is a major issue and CT continues to help provide journeys to enable house-bound people to access a variety of settings including to social clubs and activities. Social Prescribers are fully aware of the network and can advise patients that the services are available.
31. Most Community Bus routes are well-established but often rely on varied and short-term funding. County and Parish Councillors have and are currently providing funding to support several community buses (CBs) and the Schemes also rely on crowdfunding. This reliance can make long term viability and development problematic.

32. Difficulty in recruiting the number of volunteer drivers needed to meet the demand is challenging. Each scheme advertises extensively in their own areas and the Worcestershire CT Consortium supports publicity and targeted recruitment. Social media is also used throughout the county.
33. The new pilot DRT service in Malvern Hills district has two Community Transport operators, following a competitive tender process. This demonstrates the willingness of CT providers to take on new challenges and contribute to a more accessible passenger transport service. The two schemes have extended and adapted their operations to use new (to them) technology to provide this. They are keen to see it succeed and will do all they can to provide a friendly, competent, and supportive service to the general public.
34. CT schemes are looking to improve their booking and scheduling systems to ensure that they 'move with the times' and discussions are underway regarding appropriate software which will help them to do this. This is being done in consultation with the Council.

Purpose of the meeting

35. The Panel is asked to:

- consider and comment on the information provided
- determine whether any further information or scrutiny on a particular topic is required
- agree any comments to highlight to the Cabinet Member.

Contact Points

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

[Agenda and Minutes for Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 7th October, 2022.](#)

[All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.](#)