
Save the ReadiBus Petition

Committee considering report:	Executive
Date of Committee:	6 July 2023
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Denise Gaines
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	22 June 2023
Report Author:	Jon Winstanley
Forward Plan Ref:	EX4340

1 Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To report on the receipt of a 1208 signature petition entitled 'Save the ReadiBus', which calls on the Administration to 'review their decision on funding the ReadiBus service; making sure that this important community service remains available for those who need it, when they need it, for the long term'.
- 1.2 The Council provides funding for community bus services operating in the district, which is distributed based on operating costs, allowing enhanced basic payments for different vehicle types operated, the types of customers served, with the predominant factor being passenger journeys from the previous year. The Council has approved funding for this to continue in 2023/24, as part of the budget set on the 2nd March 2023.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 It is proposed that Executive note the request detailed within the petition, and approve the removal of the confidentiality clause from the service level agreement (SLA) with community transport operators.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	None as a result of this recommendation.
Human Resource:	None as a result of this recommendation.
Legal:	The confidentiality clause which will be removed from the SLA is a standard clause. This can be removed from the SLA

	without adversely impacting the overall operation of the agreement.			
Risk Management:	None as a result of this recommendation.			
Property:	None as a result of this recommendation.			
Policy:	N/A			
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		A full equality impact assessment was undertaken as part of the previous decision to reduce community transport grant funding.
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		There will be no impact as a result of the recommendation of this report.
Environmental Impact:		X		None as a result of this recommendation.
Health Impact:		X		None as a result of this recommendation.
ICT Impact:		X		None as a result of this recommendation.
Digital Services Impact:		X		None as a result of this recommendation.

Council Strategy Priorities:		X		N/A
Core Business:		X		N/A
Data Impact:		X		N/A
Consultation and Engagement:	WBC Transport Team. WBC Legal Services.			

4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 A petition was presented to the Council's Executive by Cllr Lee Dillon at its meeting on 12 January 2023 entitled 'Save the Readibus'. The petition is signed by 1208 signatories and calls upon '*the administration of West Berkshire Council to review their decision on funding the Readibus service; making sure that this important community service remains available for those who need it, for the long term.*'
- 4.2 Readibus is one of 14 community transport operators active in West Berkshire. The current level of grant funding for community transport operators is approximately £55,000. This is divided amongst the various community transport groups using a formula based approach linked to the number of passenger journeys in the previous financial year.
- 4.3 In recent years community transport operators have been asked to sign a service level agreement if they are in receipt of grant funding in excess of £5,000. This is to ensure the Council grant funding is used appropriately.
- 4.4 Readibus felt that a particular clause in the service level agreement (clause 21.2) imposed a restriction on freedom of speech and refused to sign the SLA. The clause was a standard confidentiality clause that the Council included in SLA's, but Readibus objected to this and ultimately determined not to sign the agreement. This decision meant that there was a cap of £5,000 on the funding that could be allocated to Readibus.
- 4.5 The SLA has been reviewed, and it is proposed that the confidentiality clause be removed from the SLA for grants being awarded during 2023/24. This should remove the perceived barrier to Readibus signing the agreement, which would enable Readibus to receive funding in accordance with the Council's formula based approach.

5 Supporting Information

Introduction

- 5.1 A petition was presented to the Council's Executive by Cllr Lee Dillon on 12 January 2023 entitled 'Save the Readibus'. The petition requested '*the administration of West*

Berkshire Council to review their decision on funding the Readibus service; making sure that this important community service remains available for those who need it, for the long term' The petition had received the support of 1208 signatories.

Background

- 5.2 In the 2019/20 financial year West Berkshire Council reduced its revenue grant funding for Community Transport operators from £90,790 in the previous year to £55,280, a reduction of 39%. This was approved at full Council in March 2019. The annual grant funding to community transport operators has remained constant since 2019/20. It should be noted that additional capital funding was made available for community transport operators at this time, and this is discussed further below.
- 5.3 In parallel with this reduction in funding a revision was made in how the community transport grants were calculated. The new model took into account operating costs, enhanced basic payments for different vehicle types operated, and payments to reflect the types of customers served. The remainder of the funding is distributed on the basis of passenger journeys from the previous year.
- 5.4 Readibus is one of 14 community transport operators active in West Berkshire. In 2018/19 Readibus received a grant of £45,761 which reduced to £14,580 in 2019/20. In recent years community transport operators have been asked to sign a service level agreement if they are in receipt of grant funding in excess of £5,000. This is to ensure the Council grant funding is used appropriately. Readibus felt that a particular clause in the service level agreement (clause 21.2) imposed a restriction on freedom of speech, and they therefore refused to sign the SLA.
- 5.5 The clause was a standard confidentiality clause that the Council included in SLA's. However Readibus objected to this and made a commercial decision at the time not to sign the agreement, which meant that they could not benefit from the total funding that may otherwise have been available..
- 5.6 Several attempts were made to agree a revised form of wording of clause 21.2 that Readibus would find acceptable, but no agreement was reached. Readibus' grant contribution has therefore been capped at £5,000 since 2020.
- 5.7 Over 70,000 single passenger journeys were completed by community transport operators in West Berkshire in 2018/19. In the two years following the grant reduction in 2019/20, the Council has been contacted by around 30 Readibus customers concerned about transport provision and the community transport team has in the main been able to find alternative provision with other community transport operators.
- 5.8 Since the reduction in revenue funding for community transport in 2019/20, West Berkshire Council has also been made available an annual capital grant of £50,000 for community transport operators to supplement the reduction in funding. This money has been instrumental in supporting initiatives such as:
- Allowing groups to replacing older vehicles, reducing ongoing maintenance costs and providing a more attractive offer to users.
 - Upgrading existing vehicles.

- Allowing for investment in additional new vehicles to expand service provision.

5.9 The operators have been able to use our funding for these investments to obtain additional funding from Greenham Trust.

5.10 Last year, the funding was used to support Downlands Volunteer Group's desire for a wheelchair-accessible electric minibus. Downlands have never before been able to offer trips for wheelchair-bound passengers, and the vehicle will also improve accessibility for those with other mobility difficulties. They will be the first community transport group in Berkshire with a zero-emission minibus, and one of only a small handful of groups to have achieved this across the UK.

5.11 Previous year's funding has been used to assist Volunteer Centre West Berkshire (VCWB) to purchase a vehicle to expand their offering to passengers in the Newbury and Thatcham areas. They launched a 'book-a-bus' dial-a-ride service but usage was relatively low, and the resources are now being used more generally to provide additional essential trips, including shopping.

Proposals

5.12 It is proposed that the Council continues to work with the sector to enhance provision through use of capital grant and joint bids for infrastructure for demand responsive services.

5.13 It is proposed that the service level agreement (SLA) with community transport operators be amended to remove the confidentiality clause. This should remove the basis of the objection which Readibus stated prevented them from signing the service level agreement.

6 Other options considered

6.1 Not to change the service level agreement. This is not recommended for the reasons detailed in the report.

7 Conclusion

7.1 The level of revenue funding, supplemented by capital grants, is appropriate to the level of service needed and provided by the Community Transport sector.

7.2 The amendment of the standard SLA to delete the confidentiality clause, should remove the objection that Readibus had to the terms of the agreement. This will enable Readibus to receive future grant funding in accordance with the Council's formula based approach.

8 Appendices

None

Subject to Call-In:Yes: No: The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval Delays in implementation could have serious financial implications for the Council Delays in implementation could compromise the Council's position Considered or reviewed by Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee or associated Task Groups within preceding six months Item is Urgent Key Decision Report is to note only **Officer details:**

Name: Jon Winstanley
Job Title: Service Director Environment
Tel No: 01635 519087
E-mail: jon.winstanley@westberks.gov.uk
