

Budget Proposals 2024/25: Reduce contributions to community transport

Consultation Summary Report

Why did we consult?

The council is facing unprecedented financial pressures. From historically high inflation increasing contract costs, to rising housing costs and through to large increases in cost and demand in supporting our most vulnerable residents with social care, the council has some major cost increases.

In 2024/25, we need to find £14.2 million in savings or income generation. This figure is based on the assumption that Council Tax increases by 4.99% overall in line with previous government referendum limits. We have identified £12.2 million worth of savings and income generation, of which approximately £1.75 million comes from proposals that require public consultation.

Through extensive internal discussions and meetings with our service providers, we've identified 10 proposals.

For more information please visit <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/balancing-our-budget>

Approach

We published all the public facing proposals on our website on 27 November 2023 with feedback requested by midnight on 11 January 2024.

Respondents were directed to a central index pageⁱ, which outlined the overall background to the exercise, and provided links to each of the individual proposals on our Consultation and Engagement Hubⁱⁱ.

Each individual page included further details on the specifics of what the proposal contained and what we thought the impact might be, along with any other elements we'd considered. Feedback was then invited through an online survey, and hard copies of the proposal documents and surveys were made available on request.

Each community transport group was contacted to give them an indication of the likely impact on their individual grants, to raise awareness of the consultation and to encourage them to respond. The budget savings poster was also emailed to doctor's surgeries.

As well as publishing the consultations on our website, we also emailed members of the West Berkshire Community Panel (around 2,500 people), local stakeholder charities, representative groups and partner organisations notifying them of the exercise and inviting their contributions. Service Directors contacted those organisations directly affected prior to them being made publicly available.

Finally, we issued a press release on 28 November 2023, and further publicised our consultations through our social media accounts and residents' e-newsletters. We also placed posters in our main offices and other council properties e.g. libraries and

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family hubs and made them available to WBC Councillors to put up in the wards/parishes.

Proposal Background

Community transport is a not-for-profit local passenger transport service, which is often, but not always, run by volunteers. There are 14 community transport operators in West Berkshire, collectively providing minibuss and car scheme operations to residents across the district.

12 of these operators apply for annual revenue grant funding from West Berkshire Council. The available annual revenue grant is distributed by formula to operators, with each one receiving an initial base payment reflecting their operating model. The remainder of the grant is distributed based upon the number of single passenger journeys provided by the operators in the previous year. In 2022/23, the number of single passenger journeys was 34,229.

Since 2019/20, the total available revenue grant has been set at £55,280 per year. Capital community transport grant funding of £50,000 is also made available on alternate years to assist operators with capital assets, including vehicles, and is due in 2024/25.

All grants issued over £5,000 are accompanied by a Service Level Agreement, which sets out the expectations between the service provider and the council and describes the services to be delivered.

Legislation Requirements

Local authorities don't have a statutory duty with regard to providing, or funding, community transport. Nevertheless, they do have a duty under section 63(1)(a) of the Transport Act 1985 to:

"...secure the provision of such public passenger transport services as the council consider it appropriate to secure to meet any public transport requirements within the county which would not in their view be met apart from any action taken by them for that purpose".

Proposal Details

To reduce the annual funding for community transport operator revenue grants by £10,000, from £55,280 to £45,280 from 2024/25.

The available community transport capital grant is unaffected by this proposal.

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Consultation Response

Number of Responses

In total, 84 responses were received through the survey, although 13 were clearly aimed at 'restructure funding for Adult Social Care transport services' and have therefore been included in within the paperwork for that proposal. We also received direct responses from Reading West & Mid Berkshire CLP and Newbury CLP and Tilehurst Parish Council. We received no petitions.

Summary of Main Points

There appeared to be confusion between this proposal and that to restructure funding for Adult Social Care (ASC) transport services, with at least 13 responses relating to the ASC proposal. Because the proposals are different, comments specifically relating the ASC transport have been excluded as they are not relevant to the funding of community transport. Some respondents also appeared to confuse community transport with rural bus services.

The main point raised was that this proposal would impact the more vulnerable residents of West Berkshire – the elderly, disabled, and those living in rural areas. Reduced access to transport could lead to more isolation.

It has been suggested that this reduction could be made up by community transport providers seeking contributions from other parties, or that users could pay more. The Council could even review how it spreads the funding amongst the groups. It was noted that this affects only low numbers in comparison to the population of West Berkshire.

The alternative view is that a funding reduction could lead at least one provider to stop operations, and that the level of savings sought from this proposal is insignificant compared to the £14.2m required, but it could have huge implications for those affected.

It is noted that only a relatively small percentage of service users have responded to the survey.

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Summary of Responses by Question

1. Which of the following best describe you? Please select all that apply.

	Number	Percentage
A user of the service	13	18.31
A resident of West Berkshire	62	87.32
A visitor to West Berkshire	0	0
A West Berkshire business owner	1	1.41
Employed by a West Berkshire business	7	9.86
Employed by West Berkshire Council	4	5.63
A Parish/Town Councillor	2	2.82
A District Councillor	0	0
A partner organisation	2	2.82
A West Berkshire Council service provider	0	0
Other	10	14.08

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal to reduce the annual funding for community transport operator revenue grants by £10,000 from £55,280 to £45,280 from 2024/25?

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	10	15.15
Agree	9	13.64
Neither agree nor disagree	8	12.12
Disagree	14	21.21
Strongly disagree	25	37.88

A few comments were in support of the proposal. Users should pay for the service. Alternative funding sources should be sought, e.g. the NHS should be paying transport costs for some users. A £10,000 reduction is better than total removal. It is not a statutory service. Bus services should be improved.

Many comments though were against the proposal. These focussed on the users, and how without this support they could become isolated or miss access to vital services. It was also noted that the small saving proposed is insignificant in the savings being sought but could have huge implications for those affected. It was also noted that this reduction could lead to reduced reimbursement of

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volunteer expenses, which would lead to a reduction in volunteers. It was even suggested that the service needs to be expanded and improved.

3. What do you think we should be aware of in terms of how this proposal might impact people? For example, do you think it will affect particular individuals more than others?

Most comments referred to the elderly and disabled as already identified in the Equality Impact Assessment. There was also a suggestion that rural dwellers may be more adversely affected than those in the urban areas. It was noted that this affects only low numbers in comparison to the population of West Berkshire.

4. If the decision is taken to proceed with this proposal, do you have any suggestions for how we can reduce the impact on those affected? If so, please provide details.

Suggestions included the groups seeking alternative funding, and the users (who are able) contributing more for use of the service. Remaining Council funding could be tailored more to individual groups based on their customer needs. One volunteer car scheme requested the cut be made for only one year otherwise they would not be able to survive. Finally it was suggested that bus services could be improved, perhaps by more use of on-demand bus services.

5. Do you have any suggestions on how we might save money or increase income, either in this service, or elsewhere in the council? If so, please provide details.

In relation to community transport, user donations could be increased, additional funding sought from parish councils, grants sought for environmentally friendly vehicles, or all this funding should be put into better bus services. One suggestion was that Council boundaries be realigned so that Tilehurst residents become part of Reading council.

General options for saving money: Reduce staffing costs (management, staff, agency staff, contractors, consultants, dealing with underperforming staff and sickness, administration). Reduce councillor expenses. Sharing resources with other councils. Remove funding for fringe groups. Stop vanity projects (cycle lanes, Net Zero initiatives, pedestrian zones, speed limit reductions). Reduce costs for environmental services (weed spraying, HWRC hours). Other suggestions were to shop local, reduce support to social activities, and to remove security at a traveller camp.

Options for income: Increase council tax. Adequate government funding. Increase fees for large developers. Encourage increased compost through free garden waste collections to be able to sell on. Means-test free bus passes.

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6. **If you, your community group, or organisation think you might be able to help reduce the impact of this proposal, if the decision is taken to proceed with it, please provide your contact details below.**

8 responses were received.

7. **Any further comments?**

Many responses repeated earlier comments. There was a final plea that this will increase social isolation, and that the service is a lifeline for many older and disabled residents. Labour responded that “it is ironic that the Lib Dem administration should be proposing these measures when they previously campaigned against cuts to the funding of ReadiBus”.

Officer conclusion and recommendation can be found in the associated Overview of Responses and Recommendations document.

Peter Walker
Service Lead – Highways & Transport Innovation
Environment Department
16 January 2024

Please note: *In order to allow everyone who wished the opportunity to contribute, feedback was not sampled. Therefore this wasn't a quantitative, statistically valid exercise. It was neither the premise, purpose, nor within the capability of the exercise, to determine the overall community's level of support, or views on the proposals, with any degree of confidence.*

The feedback captured therefore should be seen in the context of 'those who responded', rather than reflective of the wider community.

i <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/balancing-our-budget>

ii <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/consultations>