

ITEM No ...3.....

REPORT TO: CITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE – 25 OCTOBER 2021
REPORT ON: SUPPORTED (UNREGISTERED) MINIBUS SERVICES REVIEW
REPORT BY: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CITY DEVELOPMENT
REPORT NO: 278-2021

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides a review of the performance and value of the five supported (unregistered) minibus services funded by Dundee City Council and recommends changes to the number of services provided.

2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Committee:
- a approve the permanent cessation of the three Blether Bus services on the basis of low patronage levels and corresponding value for money; and
 - b note that the Out & About and Shoppers Bus services will be retained and will be fully reintroduced when a sustained period of reduced COVID-19 transmission is achieved nationally.

3 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 Should the three Blether Bus services be permanently withdrawn, officers from City Development and Children and Families Service will work together to adapt the additional transport resource capacity to meet future demand for school transport, and reduce Children and Families Service expenditure incurred. When this review has been completed, the revenue savings are estimated to be in the region of £54,600 per annum.

4 BACKGROUND

- 4.1 In March 2018 the Lochee Blether Bus and Cleppie Blether Bus services were launched. The Out & About (day trip) service, provided in partnership with Dundee Community Transport commenced operation in November 2018. In August 2019, these services were further supplemented with the addition of the Balgay Blether Bus. These four minibus services complemented the longer established Shoppers Bus which has operated for over a decade.
- 4.2 The introduction of these services followed a review of community transport provision and sought to maximise utilisation of the Council's minibus fleet and drivers.
- 4.3 All minibus services were suspended at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and have not restarted.

5 BLETHER BUS PATRONAGE LEVELS

- 5.1 The Lochee and Cleppie Blether Bus services were operated for two years between March 2018 and March 2020. During this period both services have received similar patronage levels with a weekly average of 66 and 67 passenger trips respectively.
- 5.2 The Balgay Blether Bus operated for seven months between August 2019 and March 2020. During this period the average patronage level was 22 passenger trips per week.

6 SHOPPER BUS AND OUT & ABOUT PATRONAGE LEVELS

- 6.1 The Shoppers Service would operate on weekdays rotating between sheltered housing complexes. Records from 2019 shows that an average of 180 passenger trips are made on the Shoppers Bus per week – making this service the most well used of the five supported (unregistered) minibus services.
- 6.2 The Out & About service is a joint initiative with Dundee Community Transport (DCT). DCT organise the outings/day trips and publicise their availability to older people living in the community and take bookings from individual users. Dundee City Council provide the minibus and driver. The service operates on weekdays and most outings have between 12 and 15 participants. Over the course of the 17 months in operation between November 2018 and March 2020, patronage levels have steadily increased, with an average of 124 journeys being made each week. In August 2021, during the school holidays, a small number of Out & About trips were operated with usage recorded at pre-pandemic levels.

7 UTILISATION ALTERNATIVES

- 7.1 The minibus services were introduced to provide additional transport options to the community, utilising vehicles and drivers that were available to the Council on a largely cost-neutral basis. Prior to these changes, minibuses and drivers allocated to these new services had not been effectively deployed between morning and afternoon school transport journeys.
- 7.2 Subsequent reviews undertaken by the Fleet Manager have identified alternative activities that could be undertaken to maximise use of the Council's minibus and driver resource. The changing provision of school education and the increasing number of off-site activities and shared learning (e.g. Dundee City Campus and the additional number of Enhanced Support Areas) provides further opportunity for deployment of the Council's minibus fleet during the day.
- 7.3 Following a reduction in resource requirement to provide home to school transport journeys, the school transport fleet will be reduced with the removal a hired minibus. This reduction in core resourcing will remove the capacity to deliver one of the Blether Buses. With regard to the remaining two Blether Buses, should these services cease the minibuses will be released for other activities. City Development and Children and Children and Families Service officers will jointly assess future requirements for passenger transport during school hours and deploy the minibuses to meet these demands.
- 7.4 There is a significant disparity between patronage of the Balgay Blether Bus (introduced August 2019) and the Lochee and Cleppie Blether Bus Services (introduced March 2018). It is noted that the Lochee and Cleppie Blether Buses averaged 64 and 58 passengers per week respectively during their first six months of operation. The average weekly patronage data of each minibus service and associated passenger journey subsidy costs are detailed in Table 1.

Service	Weekly Average Passenger Trips	Typical number of daily users	Passenger Journey Subsidy Cost
Shoppers Bus	180	20-30	£1.94
Out & About Bus	124	12-15	£2.82
Lochee Blether Bus	66	6-8	£5.26
Cleppie Blether Bus	67	6-8	£5.26
Balgay Blether Bus	22	2-3	£15.91

Table 1 – Value for Money Performance Summary

- 7.5 In terms of value for money comparability the average subsidy cost of registered supported bus services in Dundee is £1.10 per passenger journey. To minimise potential for complex procedural requirements associated with fare collection and operation of registered services, a decision was taken not to register the Blether Bus services with the Office of the Traffic Commissioner. Patronage of the Blether Bus services in their first two years of operation indicates that the income potential from participating in the national concessionary travel

scheme would be limited and would not achieve the level of fares reimbursement required to merit the Blether Bus services being registered for this purpose.

- 7.6 The five supported (unregistered) minibus services are funded from the City Development revenue budget. Each discrete service has a budget allocation of £18,200 with a combined allocation of £91,000 per annum.

8 SERVICE REINTRODUCTION GUIDELINES

- 8.1 The minibus services described in this report were suspended in March 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The suspension has continued due to public health concerns associated with mixed groups of vulnerable customers and vehicles being shared between school and community transport. Further, physical distancing rules made minibus-based community transport services largely unviable between March 2020 and August 2021. More recent relaxations on physical distancing rules have offered some potential to recommence minibus services with appropriate mitigations in place.
- 8.2 Utilising Scottish Government funding the Dundee City Council minibus fleet has been retrofitted with hand sanitisers and demisters in order to mitigate the risk of community transmission. New cleaning protocols have also been introduced. This has been in line with Scottish Government guidance for public service vehicles.
- 8.3 At present transmission rates continue at a high level and it would not be appropriate from a public safety and community health perspective to reinstate services using the shared minibus model until a sustained downwards trend in the transmission rate is achieved. Dundee City Council will continue to monitor the COVID-19 statistics and forthcoming Scottish Government guidance pertaining to public transport to inform the timing of a potential service reintroduction.

9 CONCLUSION

- 9.1 The provision of supported (unregistered) minibus services is not a statutory service obligation and the Council can decide whether to remove these services and associated revenue budget allocations.
- 9.2 Due to the continuing cycle of COVID-19 re-emergence, coupled with the mixed user groups, it is recommended that a precautionary approach be pursued and community transport minibus services are not fully reintroduced until a sustained period of reduced COVID-19 transmission is achieved nationally.
- 9.3 It is noted that there is a significant variance between the value for money performance of the five minibus services provided. At the higher cost end, the Balgay Blether Bus has a subsidy of £15.91 per passenger journey and had typically just two to three unique passengers using the service each day. The Lochee and Cleppie Blether Bus, offer similar levels of subsidy value at £5.26 per trip and are typically used by between six and eight unique passengers each day. The Out & About service comes in at around £2.82 per journey (£5.64 per round trip) although there are other costs (DCT costs) associated with this service that are not met from a City Development budget. The best performing service in terms of patronage is the shopper service with a subsidy requirement of £1.94 per passenger journey and between 20 and 30 different passengers using the service each day.
- 9.4 Council officers have previously considered the operation of an in-house Demand Responsive Transport service using Council minibuses but the administration of such a scheme was not considered viable given the staffing and financial resources required.
- 9.5 Alternative transport provision for the Blether Bus user group includes the commercial and supported public bus network, albeit with potentially reduced convenience and accessibility. Also available is the Community Cars service, managed by Dundee Community Transport, which connects volunteer drivers and people with restricted mobility who require a door to door transport service. There may be more potential for expanding the role of the third sector in delivering transport services and Dundee City Council would welcome approaches from any

organisations with the ambition and capacity to be a transport provider. The Council would work actively with them to explore funding opportunities that may become available to support such an initiative.

10 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

10.1 This report has been subject of an assessment of any impacts on Equality and Diversity, Fairness and Poverty, Environment and Corporate Risk. A copy of the integrated Impact Assessment is available on the council's website at www.dundee.gov.uk/ia

11 CONSULTATIONS

11.1 The Council Management Team have been consulted in the preparation of this report and are in agreement with its content.

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1 None.

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