

Local Members' Interest
N/A

Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee – 18 December 2014

Improving Connectivity in Staffordshire

Recommendations

1. The Committee notes the progress that has been made on reviewing our transport commissioning activity over the last 15 months.
2. The Committee considers the effectiveness of the workstreams currently underway to improve the public transport network in Staffordshire
3. The Committee considers the potential future direction of the authority's transport offer to eligible persons.

Report of Mark Winnington Cabinet Member for Economy and Infrastructure

Summary

Improving connectivity in Staffordshire is a key element to ensure that the County Council's ambitions of a prosperous County are realised. The authority currently spends some £27.4m each year (excluding bespoke adult transport) either on public or bespoke transport networks connecting people to businesses, key public services, retail, leisure and education opportunities.

Over the last 15 months a considerable amount of work has been undertaken, working with public transport operators, to review and shape our transport commissioning activity in line with our agreed vision and principles.

This report outlines the progress that is being made to grow a sustainable and commercially viable public bus network which will help to maintain and improve connectivity in the County.

Report

Background

In 2012 the authority embarked on a comprehensive 'one council' review of transport procurement. The purpose of the review was to ensure that strategic commissioning in this area helped create a Connected Staffordshire and that a focus was given to the County Council's three priority outcomes for local people, namely:

- Be able to access more good jobs and feel the benefits of economic growth
- Be healthier and more independent
- Feel safer, happier and more supported in and by their community

At the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on the 17 October 2013, Members learnt and welcomed the County Council's new vision and approach for the commissioning of transport solutions to connect people to businesses, key public services, retail and education opportunities.

Members also learnt that two major workstreams had commenced namely: Network Redesign and Independent Travel Training.

Progress on Transport Commissioning Activity over the last 15 months

Network Redesign

The majority (some 80%) of the bus network in Staffordshire is provided by public transport operators on a commercial basis. The authority provides funding for a bus network which cannot be provided on a commercial basis and this mainly provides connectivity in the rural areas but also in some of the urban areas in the evenings and weekends.

Working closely with public transport operators, the following 'whole area' reviews of the commercial and supported public transport have taken place during the last 15 months:

- September 2013 – Staffordshire Moorlands Network
- September 2013 - Cannock
- April 2014 – Stone, Uttoxeter, Burton upon Trent (rural) Network
- September 2014 – Tamworth Network

These reviews have coincided with the end date of the existing supported service public transport contracts and routes and patronage numbers on supported routes have been analysed to ensure value for money for the public purse.

As part of the Stone, Uttoxeter and Burton on Trent review, an additional demand responsive public transport service was introduced in April 2014 to provide new and enhanced connectivity to East Staffordshire rural communities not on the core public transport network. This service known as the Needwood Forest Connect complements the existing South Staffordshire and Moorland Connects demand responsive services. After 8 months of operation patronage figures indicate that there is currently a subsidy of around £14 per trip. This is higher than our other demand responsive services but patronage figures are still growing so it is expected that the subsidy per trip will reduce.

Other network changes in each area have been introduced following consultation with users, parish councils and local members. It should be recognised that it is not always possible to satisfy each individual travel demand. The success of the supported bus network should be judged on usage and to this end regular monitoring of passenger data takes place; all contracts are kept under review to ensure that subsidy costs per passenger and total contract costs are sustainable.

In addition to changes made in the areas noted above other changes have taken place to draw down Section 106 monies (developer funding) to improve connectivity for specific communities. Wherever possible this funding has been used to pump prime new bus services, e.g. the recently introduced service 34 between Cannock and Hednesford via Lakeside, with the aim that they will be commercially viable at the end of the funding period.

As part of the whole area bus network reviews, some 1400 pupils who are entitled to free transport, have been transferred from bespoke transport to the public transport network. This transfer commenced at the start of the 2013 autumn term and has been managed in phases at the start of subsequent school terms. A further transfer is envisaged in January 2015 bringing total numbers of entitled pupils on the public transport network to over 1500. Additional transfers will occur when the opportunity arises although these are now likely to be low in number.

It is important to note that this change, which is in line with the long established home to school transport policy, has taken place in dialogue with the public transport operators who have in some cases had to alter routes, timetables and capacity. These changes have brought the following benefits:

- Public Transport Network adjusted to improve connectivity to education opportunities resulting in more flexible travel opportunities for entitled pupils.
- Non entitled pupils benefit from the improved public transport connectivity using the Young Person Staffordshire Card and at a lower cost than the purchase of a vacant seat on a bespoke coach
- Increased independence and individual responsibility.
- Improved health benefits.
- Additional free travel opportunities included in pupils' passes purchased by the authority.
- Greater visibility on public transport punctuality and reliability
- Increased capacity on some routes to allow for additional passenger numbers.
- Reduced numbers of vehicles resulting in less congestion at the school gate and less carbon emissions
- Strengthening of viability of commercial routes.
- Reduced subsidy per passenger on some supported public transport routes
- Cost savings to the authority

Before any changes took place, discussions were held with school staff to advise of changes to the transport provision. In most cases transfers were relatively smooth although at a number of sites adjustments and initial close monitoring were required to ensure that the new arrangements operated and delivered as planned. In no cases have travel offers reverted to bespoke coaches which accords with one of the agreed six principles which states that public transport is now established as our core transport offer.

Independent Travel Training

As part of the 'one council' transport review it was recognised that the existing transport commissioning activity was not promoting and enabling independence. This was true for a number of user groups including those with special educational needs (SEN). Over the last 15 months independent travel training (ITT) has taken place on a voluntary basis with some 30 pupils trained with extended training plans in place. There have been a number of successes with SEN pupils transferring to public transport on a voluntary basis, often making use of the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS). The training has provided life long skills and in many cases improved confidence and independence of individuals.

In addition to ITT work continues in parallel to expand the usage of Personal Travel Budgets, (PTBs), which enables mileage payments to be made to parents/guardians to transport their children to school who otherwise would be travelling on bespoke contracted services.

Further work now needs to be under taken to consider whether ITT and PTBs should form the authority's core travel assistance offer when considering travel requirements of individuals and the views of members on this matter would be welcomed.

Partnership Working and Future Planned Activity

As stated some 80% of the bus network in Staffordshire is provided on a commercial basis. Close dialogue with all public transport operators is essential and regular meetings take place to discuss matters of mutual interest. It is pleasing to note that the main operator in Staffordshire, Arriva, has invested some £6m in new buses over the last 15 months. This includes the introduction of Sapphire Services on their commercial routes from Tamworth to Birmingham and Cannock to Walsall. Together with investment recently made by First in the north the County it has proved possible for operators to cascade vehicles to other Staffordshire routes thereby reducing the average age of the bus fleet in Staffordshire. This has obvious benefits for service reliability by reducing breakdowns, improving service punctuality and overall improved service delivery for customers.

As well as continuing to monitor and if necessary adjust all supported bus routes, during 2015 whole area reviews of the supported bus network are planned for:

Burton on Trent (Urban) – September 2015
Stafford – September 2015

These reviews will seek the views of the relevant local members and users and aim to ensure that all services commissioned are sustainable in the long term.

In addition new bus services to serve the I54 site will commence, subject to agreement, in April 2015 to provide connectivity between Stafford, Cannock and surrounding areas to the main I54 employment site and onwards to Wolverhampton. Attempts have been made to utilise joint I54 and Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust resources to improve services from Cannock to Wolverhampton. Unfortunately the Trust's timeframes and commitments did not allow delivery of joint funding opportunities. Discussions will however continue with the Royal Wolverhampton and other Trusts to explore joint working and funding opportunities.

As part of the Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF) monies were secured to introduce wifi on buses and real-time bus information in the Stafford and the Newcastle areas. Information screens at key bus stops have been installed over the last 6 months in these urban areas showing scheduled timetable information and the live information will be introduced shortly. This live bus information will also be available on the web and via mobile devices providing greater certainty for existing users and an incentive to encourage modal shift. Real time information has increased public transport patronage where it has been introduced and this should help to sustain both commercial and supported bus services.

As part of the greater dialogue taking place with bus operators discussions have been held on the possibility of introducing a Voluntary Quality Network Partnership (VQNP) in the urban areas of Staffordshire. The core aim of the partnership will be to increase patronage on the bus network, helping to maintain existing bus services and reducing traffic congestion through facilitated joint operator and Authority working. Such discussions between operators, unless facilitated by the Authority, would not be feasible within the current Competition Act.

It is hoped that a VQNP will be launched in the Burton on Trent area early in 2015. Bus services in the urban area are mainly provided on a commercial basis by three bus operators. By working together it is planned to market the bus services in Burton as a network rather than 3 independent operator networks. Initially it is planned to provide a multi operator hospital ticket, real-time bus information and improved roadside information at key bus stops. Service standards will be monitored by the authority and bus punctuality improvement plans will be in place with the aim of ensuring that bus reliability is improved. A further VQNP may be introduced in Stafford in 2015 to coincide with the opening of the Riverside retail site. It is hoped that this will see a new two way bus corridor introduced through the centre of Stafford via Earl Street which will allow an increase in bus frequency on a number of the routes. This is currently being discussed with the main operator and will be subject to public consultation if the proposals proceed.

Link to Strategic Plan

The work over the last 15 months to review our transport commissioning activity links to two of the three priority outcomes, namely;

- Be able to access more good jobs and feel the benefits of economic growth
- Be healthier and more independent

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Appendices/Background papers

Improving Staffordshire's Public Transport Network - Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee - 17 October 2013

Community Impact Assessment - Full Assessment

Name of Policy/Project/Proposal
Staffordshire Transport Review
Responsible officer
Clive Thomson, Commissioner for Transport and the Connected County
Commencement date & expected duration
September 2013 ongoing

1. What is the starting point for this proposal?

To review current transport policies, processes and procurement so that the current 'as is' position is fully understood.

To confirm and clarify that our current strategic commissioning activity is aligned with our priority outcomes.

2. What was the insight behind the proposal?

Insight has been obtained from members, partners and the public via meetings and formal surveys.

Meetings with bus operators have taken place to establish views and confirm that our strategy is aligned with potential delivery partners.

3. Finding out what people need

Transport planning is a complex area and the transport review needs to be seen in the context of all travel movements in Staffordshire. Currently only approximately 7% of travel is by public bus. The review has considered opportunities to provide enhanced connectivity to allow for new travel connections and assist with more sustainable travel opportunities.

Detailed consultation has taken place with communities prior to the introduction of new supported bus services.

4. Responding to issues identified

The review has aimed to align future strategic transport commissioning with our three priority outcomes. It is recognised that as work on the network redesign progresses we need to be flexible to accommodate issues as they arise.

5. What is the final proposal and what is it to achieve

The aim of the Transport Review is to achieve our vision for transport namely:

A sustainable and commercially viable public transport system that enables people to access services and activities, including learning and work, at a time and place convenient to them. Empowering people to live independently, improving outcomes for individuals and communities, and driving economic prosperity and innovation through improved connections.

6. How will we know we have been successful?

The success of the project will be measured via an increase in bus patronage on an enhanced Staffordshire public bus network, an increase in enabling travel independence via appropriate training and improved consultation and communication feedback.