

CONCESSIONARY TRAVEL FOR THE OVER 60'S AND THE DISABLED UPDATE ON THE NEW NATIONAL SCHEME

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Since 1 April 2008, people aged 60 and over and the disabled have been statutorily entitled to free off-peak travel on registered bus services anywhere in England.
- 1.2 On 5 December 2007, the Cabinet received a report on the forthcoming introduction of the new scheme and resolved that:
 - (a) the updated information in relation to the new free travel scheme be noted;
 - (b) the new scheme be applied during off-peak periods; and
 - (c) appropriate financial provision be made in the Council's expenditure plans.
- 1.3 The Cabinet will recall that the decision to apply the scheme during off-peak periods was made primarily because of the severe shortfall in government funding and possible sustainability benefits. Concessionary travel is very costly for this District because of the high numbers of elderly and disabled residents and visitors.
- 1.4 This report updates Cabinet on the implementation process, the initial reaction to the new scheme and the latest financial position.

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW SCHEME

- 2.1 In the last year, the number of residents with free bus passes increased by 18.9 percent from 24,846 to 29,543.
- 2.2 This significant growth occurred primarily because of the change from local free travel to free travel anywhere in England and the increased publicity.
- 2.3 Interestingly, still only roughly one-half of residents eligible for free passes have applied for them.
- 2.4 The gross budget for reimbursement of bus operators increased from £895K in 2007/08 to £1,935K in 2008/09. When Cabinet last considered this issue, it did not know the level of government funding that would be available towards the implementation.
- 2.5 Nearly all residents received their free passes prior to 1 April and were able to use them from the implementation date. This was a considerable achievement. The bus operators agreed to accept the old countywide passes until 30 May, just in case there was some delay in the delivery of some new passes.

- 2.6 The number of passes (smartcards) issued in late March can be analysed as follows:

	<u>2008</u>
Aged 60+	25986
Aged 60+ disabled	1430
Under age 60 disabled	2127
Total	29543

- 2.7 A number of residents have made contact thanking the Council for the new passes and giving them the opportunity to travel free anywhere in England.

3. OFF-PEAK TRAVEL

- 3.1 However, as expected there has been some inevitable adverse reaction to the move from all-day free travel (which previously applied in our District as part of the former countywide scheme) to off-peak free travel (which is an integral part of the Government's new statutory minimum scheme).
- 3.2 The Cabinet will recall that there was a reluctance to move to off-peak free travel in the District and this decision was made partly because of the substantial anticipated shortfall in funding from the Government, which was based on off-peak travel and generally considered totally inadequate for our District (see part 8 below).
- 3.3 The statutory time period now starts at 0930 and ends at 2300 on normal weekdays and applies at any time on Saturdays, Sundays and Public Holidays. The later start date of 0930 on weekdays has led to the adverse comments from our residents. Bus drivers strictly adhere to the 0930 starting time.
- 3.4 Under the new scheme, it is possible to apply enhanced travel times (such as all-day or 0900 start time) to our eligible residents only, because the passes contain the council logo. However, in practice, our consultants previously advised us that any enhancement might apply to other journeys that start in our District. This might be detected by some routine survey work undertaken by the countywide consultants, but can only be eliminated by the use of automated smartcard readers. Other councils that provide a local all day enhancement tend to do so for residents only.
- 3.5 Most buses do not have automated readers yet and it may be some years before they do so. Eligible residents usually just flash their passes on boarding the bus. There is a reliance on drivers' awareness of the rules applying in different council areas.
- 3.6 Many eligible residents can probably opt to travel after 0930 on weekdays, but there is some inevitable reluctance by individuals to change long-standing personal routines. There have also been some genuine difficulties and concerns expressed, about the 0930 starting time, since the new scheme came into force, including:
- (a) From disabled workers who start work before 0930. The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) has made representations

asking the Council to reconsider the decision to move to off-peak travel for blind and partially sighted people (See part 6 below) and other representations have been made on behalf of other disabled residents.

- (b) From residents in parts of the District served by only two buses each day, one of which leaves before 0930.
 - (c) From residents who make early morning medical appointments (e.g. in hospitals).
- 3.7 The Council cannot apply all-day free travel just in individual cases of genuine difficulty. It has to have a policy that applies to set categories of pass holders, which are separately identifiable by bus drivers. If Cabinet decided to permit all day free travel for certain groups, new passes would have to be issued to those groups, containing a special all-day symbol and operators would have to be notified.
- 3.8 The other councils in Hampshire had not all decided their local policy when Cabinet last considered this issue. Several have since decided to enhance the new national scheme for all day free travel, but the larger authorities that get significant numbers of visitors have not done so. Portsmouth and Havant have a 9.30 am start time, but Southampton and Winchester have a 9.00 am start time.
- 3.9 The additional cost of providing all day free travel for all our residents (for journeys that start in our District) is approximately £35K per annum. Although this is a significant sum, other savings have recently been identified in other concessionary travel budgets (see 4.5 below).

4. WHOLLY DISCRETIONARY SCHEME

- 4.1 The Council still provides a wholly discretionary scheme for the over 60's that receive means-related benefits, the disabled and those with mobility difficulties.
- 4.2 Under the discretionary scheme, eligible residents can choose to receive £40 of local vouchers for use in taxis and community transport (including care groups), instead of the national free bus pass.
- 4.3 Some local authorities have dispensed with or reduced eligibility to their local schemes because of the introduction of the new national scheme.
- 4.4 The Council's local scheme is still very popular indeed, especially for those residents unable to use buses.
- 4.5 3630 residents receive the local travel vouchers and the budget for 2008/09 is £145K. However, the final outturn figures for 2007/08, which have recently become available and are shown in the Provisional Final Accounts and Financial Monitoring Report elsewhere on the agenda, show expenditure of £92K. This is only one element of the concessionary travel budget, but the saving is expected to continue.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The provision of free travel on all registered bus services in England for the over 60's and the disabled has significant environmental and sustainability benefits.

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The introduction of the new national scheme is part of the Government's wider recognition of the importance of public transport for older and disabled people, and the role access to transport has to play in improving social inclusion and maintaining well-being. There has been nearly 20 percent growth in the number of residents taking up the new concession, which suggests that many additional needs are being met. However, there is some adverse impact because of the 0930 start time. An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and will be available through the Council's website.
- 6.2 As previously mentioned the RNIB has asked the Council to reconsider the decision to move to off peak travel for blind and partially sighted people. The RNIB have reminded the Council that the Disability Discrimination Act requires public authorities to have 'due regard to promote equality' of opportunity between disabled persons and other persons and to take steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, even where that involves treating disabled persons more favourably than other persons.

7. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no known crime and disorder implications arising directly from the new scheme.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 In early February 2009 the amount of Government grant was confirmed as £493K for 2008/09, which was the maximum sum that the Council could have expected to receive. The negotiations with bus operators over the reimbursement rates for 2008/2009 have only recently started and may take some time to settle.
- 8.2 The net overall budget for 2008/09 increased by £500K compared to the original budget for 2007/08. £300K of this is the best estimate of the additional cost for the national scheme (i.e. additional costs of £793K offset by the specific grant of £493K).
- 8.3 The budget is based on estimates provided by the countywide travel consultants, assuming anticipated growth in travel and outcome of the negotiations with bus operators.
- 8.4 As previously mentioned the additional cost of providing all day free travel for our residents (for journeys that start in our District) is approximately £35K per annum. If all day free travel is provided, there is some risk that drivers may inadvertently

allow some visitors to travel all day too, however, there would be no need to issue new passes. Obviously, bus operators and eligible residents would need to be informed of any change.

9. PORTFOLIO HOLDERS COMMENTS

9.1 The Portfolio Holder is pleased to see that the very latest financial assessment of the costs to the Council of operating the concessionary fare scheme is more favourable than originally anticipated. This has allowed us to re-consider extending the statutory off-peak scheme to an all-day operation for our qualifying residents who commence their journeys in our District. This will be particularly welcomed by disabled or over-60 residents who have a need to travel to work before 9.30 am, and I am glad to recommend that we bring this provision into practice in the very near future.

10. CONCLUSION

10.1 The new scheme was introduced effectively in the District and virtually all residents received their passes, before the commencement date.

10.2 There has been significant growth in the numbers of passes issued and some residents have expressed their gratitude for the new all England passes. However, there has been some inevitable adverse reaction to the move from all-day to off-peak free travel and there are undoubtedly some genuine cases of difficulty. The Council must have 'due regard to equality outcomes' when making decisions.

10.3 The overall financial position, which has regard to actual travel patterns, is still very unclear and may remain so for some time. However, savings have recently been identified elsewhere in the concessionary travel budget and in view of this Members may restore all day free travel for all over 60's and the disabled.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1 It is recommended that Cabinet consider this report and:

- (a) approves **all-day** free travel for the over 60's and disabled residents (i.e. for journeys that start in the District). The change from off-peak to all day to be implemented as soon as practicable.
- (b) further reviews the concessionary travel scheme (including the wholly discretionary scheme) at a later date, once the overall financial position is clearer.

For Further Information Please Contact:

Glynne Miles
Head of Customer Services
Tel: (023) 8028 5730
E-mail: glynne.miles@nfdc.gov.uk

Background Papers:

Report C to Cabinet 5 December 2007