

ENVIRONMENT & RURAL AREA SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Environment & Rural Area Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 25th January, 2011 at 3.00 p.m. in the Civic Offices, Telford, Shropshire

PRESENT: Councillors T.J. Hope (Chairman), R.K.Austin, R. Aveley, R.E. Groom, C.F. Smith; and Mrs L Baker-Oliver (Co-optee)

ERASC-8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

R.T. Kiernan

ERASC-9 MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 15th September 2010 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman and the notes of the meetings of the Working Group held on 29th October and 10th January 2010 be received for noting.

ERASC-10 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

ERASC-11 SERVICE & FINANCIAL PLANNING 2011/12 - 2013/14 – ENVIRONMENT & RURAL AREA

Councillor A.Lawrence (Cabinet Member for Environment & Rural Area) was invited to present the Cabinet's budget proposals in relation to the Council priority for Environment & Rural Area. He stated that it was going to be a difficult budget with a number of budget pressures as well as the reductions in grant from the Government. However, it was intended to seek ways of doing 'more for less', together with maximising savings across the Authority.

The Chairman reported that a number of questions/lines of enquiry had arisen from the seminar/workshop held on 4 January, and those were circulated along with the programme for the re-structuring of the organisation services across the Council.

Those questions were as follows, together with the responses obtained from relevant officers in appropriate Service Areas.

Q	Provide more information on cuts to rural transport. What services will be reduced or cut and in which areas, what alternative provision will there be?
A	For 2011/12 it is proposed that a total of £362.5k could be saved from existing transport budgets through the following measures: - 1. £200k relates to achieving the full year effect of savings proposals introduced in 2010/11 relating to the Council's Transport Review – this

included putting in place a new taxi framework to get better value when we transport children and adults around the borough for social care and education. The saving also includes the changes during 2010/11 that have been made to the way Travelink is managed to deliver around £75k in savings.

2. **£65k** is the expected annual saving from **changes to the subsidised bus routes** provided in the borough that was approved by Cabinet in October 2010 with service changes implemented in November 2010. The Council has worked to minimise the impact of any changes and most areas have retained services with the local operator taking on services commercially. The focus for efficiencies was on those routes that were carrying fewest passengers and therefore subsidy levels can be high.
3. **£97.5k** – This is a proposal to remodel a number of demand responsive transport services including Wrekin Connect, Twister, Dial-a-Ride and the Voluntary Car Scheme.
 - a. The **Wrekin Connect Community Transport** service for the western area of the borough would be revised. This would mean that we would provide regular services connecting a number of rural settlements to Wellington, with services operating Monday to Friday, rather than just one or two days a week at present. Similar changes have been made to the Newport Town Wrekin Connect services which have saved the Council money, but have provided a better service to residents used by more passengers as it is available more regularly. The reconfiguration of the Wrekin Connect service has yet to be confirmed, so the routes of services are not known, however it is likely that some small settlements would not be served by a service. In reconfiguring the service the same principles would be used as with the Newport Town services where the areas that no longer receive a service would be in areas where services are currently not used or are least well used. This proposal delivers limited savings but based around the experience in Newport would significantly increase the level of service for the majority of users whilst reducing the cost per passenger of the service.
 - b. **Twister & Taxi Tokens** – the Council has operated the Twister Demand Responsive Transport service (i.e. people phone to book transport rather than it operating to a timetable) in the rural area as a pilot for the last few years. The service has a small number of regular users (around 45) and costs around £16k per year to run. To date the service has provided around 870 passenger trips, of which around 50% have been to two users. The cost of council funding per passenger trip is around £20, compared to levels of around £1 per passenger trip for subsidised bus routes. It is intended that the revised Wrekin Connect service will provide a better transport service for more people in the rural area. On bus consultation with users of the Twister service is being undertaken before the budget is finalised.
 - c. In addition it is also intended that the National Taxi Tokens scheme that the Council operates will also be revised. People who meet the disability eligibility criteria for a concessionary bus pass, can opt not to take a bus pass and have taxi tokens instead. This option is chosen by people who cannot use a bus or do not have access to a bus service. At present people who choose taxi tokens get £16 per year to put towards the cost of taxi fares. It is proposed as part of these

	<p>changes that taxi token entitlement will be restricted to eligible people living in the rural area but with an increased token allowance of £30 per year. In the urban area people will have access to Dial-a-Ride services if they cannot access normal timetabled public transport to ensure that there is form of transport provision to meet their needs. These changes are expected to save the Council £7,300 per year of which £5,800 would be reinvested to fund the increase in taxi token allowance and to reduce the registration costs of Dial a Ride.</p> <p>d. Dial-a-Ride and Voluntary Car Scheme – We are proposing to review the way the Dial-a-Ride service is managed between the Council and CVS as it is believed it can be managed more cost effectively. Dial-a-Ride is available in the urban area for people who choose not to have a concessionary bus pass and meet the disability eligibility criteria. At present the booking of journeys is managed by CVS whilst the service is provided by the Council. In the rural area for people who cannot access conventional transport CVS also operate a Voluntary Car scheme, where people can be transported by volunteer drivers. At present the Council subsidises 45% of the cost of these trips (person pays 22p per mile and Council pays 18p per mile; total cost is 40p per mile). As part of the savings proposals it is intended that the subsidy of 18p per mile for the Voluntary Car scheme will be withdrawn. Through changes to the management/ administration of Dial-a-Ride between the Council and CVS and removing the subsidy to the Voluntary Car scheme it is expected that £80k per year can be saved. Meetings have started with CVS to discuss how changes could be implemented. As part of the changes to Dial-a-Ride it is intended to consider reducing or removing the registration costs of Dial-a-Ride (currently £2 per user to register).</p>
Q	How much will the Rights of Way maintenance budget be reduced and what will this mean?
A	<p>The Rights of Way revenue budget would be reduced by £8k from £22k to £14k. This budget is used to fund reactive maintenance (i.e. vegetation trimming, minor footway repairs) and the legal costs in progressing diversion, creation and modification orders on the borough's Rights of Way network.</p> <p>A capital improvement programme for Rights of Way would still exist to fund improvements to the network and the bids will be supported for grant funding to deliver improvements wherever possible (e.g. the team have supported a third party bid to deliver the Wrekin Trundle a proposed multi-user route near the Wrekin). To minimise the impact of budget reductions on the level of maintenance options to establish community groups to undertake low level maintenance (e.g. vegetation trimming). This has previously been discussed with the PCT with the opportunity of creating a 'Green Gym' type scheme which encourages people to participate in a form of physical activity as part of the preventative health agenda. Such as project my be appropriate for the £2m of funding allocated to joint health based projects between the PCT and the Council.</p> <p>In the absence of any alternative means of undertaking low level maintenance the reduction in budget would mean that the Council's ability to undertake minor repairs or progress legal orders associated with the Rights of Way network would be reduced.</p>
Q	Concessionary travel: How has the figure of £184k for the extra half hour concessionary travel been arrived at?

A	<p>The figure of £184k savings for concessionary travel is comprised of two elements:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. £86k through removal of a budget for demographic growth – this is funding that has been allocated to absorb any increases in the number of people who are eligible for a concessionary pass registering for and using a pass, or through people who already have a pass using it more. Over the last few years of operating the national concessionary travel scheme the level of uptake and use has been less than expected. The removal of this budget has no direct impact on service users. If the numbers of people registering for a concessionary pass or the number of journeys that pass holders make increases significantly it would become a budget pressure for the Council. 2. £98k of savings would be achieved through reverting back to the statutory concessionary travel scheme (i.e. removing the 9.00a.m. – 9.30a.m. discretionary extension to the concessionary travel scheme). In switching back to the statutory scheme it would mean that passes cannot be used on buses until 9.30a.m. At present there are around 104,000 concessionary travel trips made between 9.00 a.m. and 9.30 a.m. each year. The Council has to cover the full cost of journeys made outside the times of the national concessionary travel scheme; this means that every concessionary travel journey before 9.30a.m. costs the Council approximately £1. Most local transport authorities are reverting back to the national concessionary travel scheme and removing and extension to the times. The proposal has been briefed to the Transport Action Group of the Senior Citizens' Forum – the main concern has been access to the hospital. The bus operators have advised that it would not be possible to administer a scheme that only permits trips to the hospital before 9.30a.m.
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During the ensuing robust debate, a number of comments were expressed by Members, including

- A general understanding, by Members, of the circumstances under which the current level of savings had to be made by the Council.
- Whether the taxi drivers had been consulted regarding the proposals to revise the Taxi Token system, as it was viewed that not all taxi drivers welcomed the use of the tokens.
- Members commended the use of the Rural Forum to channel comments on rural issues in the Borough
- Some concern was expressed regarding the RoW Modification Orders reduced funding, as in recent times much headway had been achieved via Legal Services to reduce the backlog of pending applications.
- Members emphasised the importance of the Boroughs' Rights of Way network with potential liaison with a Bio-Diversity Group together with local Town & Parish Councils
- Members expressed some concern at the effect of the measures regarding concessionary travel upon the vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community.
- Concern was expressed regarding the removal of certain bus services – Service from Hadley to Oakengates – Service 25 not calling at PRH Hospital – Service to Horsehay was considered poor. But, In response, it was pointed out the Arriva would only continue a service if proved commercially viable
- Cllr Groom enquired as to the nature of a "Waste Bulk Station" and officers stated that supporting information, including the recent Cabinet report

recommending its approval, together with the nature of the business case for the proposal, would be provided to Cllr Groom following the meeting

- Concern of the policy of charges for replacement refuse bins – particularly an issue when the loss is caused by the refuse bin falling into the refuse collection vehicle during emptying – therefore at no fault to the resident.
- Supermarkets should be requested to provide the recycling bins on their car parks not the Council
- The “quality” of road repairs was questioned
- The consequential effect of suggested savings proposals upon other services was questioned particularly to those residents who did not have access to a computer at home to get “on-line” information.
- Concern regarding the potential increased risks of suggested reductions to inspections of Spoil Mounds in the Borough
- Similar concern was expressed regarding the proposed reduced level of inspections of pools and reservoirs
- The use of reserves and balances for potential increased levels of winter maintenance/flooding was questioned

In conclusion the Committee recognised, acknowledged and appreciated the budget circumstances and the need for savings to be made.

The Scrutiny Manager stated that the views of the Committee would be conveyed to the Efficient & Community Focused Council Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on the following Monday.

The meeting ended at 4.43 p.m.

Chairman:

Date: