

Funding for Supported Bus Services

2020/21

The Department of Transport (DfT) have awarded West Berkshire Council £108,507 to support local bus services in 2020-21. The original intention was to improve current supported bus services; restore lost bus services; and support new bus services or extension to current bus services. The DfT have since changed the criteria, and the funding can now also be used to assist bus services where costs now exceed income as a result of Covid-19.

It is a requirement of the funding that the Council publishes how it intends to use the funding, and the following document explains this. The majority of the following indicates ideas considered before Covid-19 impacted us all so greatly.

The Council have assessed a number of potential options for this funding, but the final decision on priorities will need to be made by the Council's appropriate Governance Board as the funding is insufficient for everything proposed. As a result we are not yet able to identify how the funding will be used, however we are considering funding across all categories.

Improving current supported services

We are considering extending service 5 (Brightwalton to Newbury) to operate additionally during the school holidays, as well as providing limited Saturday services on Connect routes (5a Brightwalton to Newbury; 5c Beedon to Newbury); 41 Bradfield Southend to Thatcham; 44 Beenham to Thatcham).

Restoring lost bus services

We are considering introducing a new peak-hour service between Newbury and Harwell, as well as restoring evening services between Thatcham and Newbury.

Introducing new bus services or extensions to existing services

We are considering extending the first bus from Lambourn to Swindon to start from Newbury, and the last bus returning to Newbury; providing more peak-hour journeys between Aldermaston Rail Station and AWE; a schoolday bus from Newbury / Thatcham to Compton; and a limited Sunday service around Newbury.

In addition to the above, we will be considering enhanced promotion of bus services and an improved range of ticketing.

However as a result of the Covid-19, there has been a notable reduction in passengers travelling on existing local bus services and some services have had to reduce frequencies or be suspended entirely. It is expected to be a considerable period of time before these services return to normal, and therefore it may not be the appropriate time to improve the bus network. Furthermore, the funding is time limited, and may be required to maintain existing services. If any new, or enhanced services are introduced, this will not be until at least Autumn 2020. We intend to use the funding for approximately one year to allow for a review of the services, their longer-term sustainability and/or additional ongoing funding availability.

How do plans meet the needs of local communities?

The Council's [Local Transport Plan](#) helps us to identify and prioritise the transport needs of the district, and is underpinned by the [Passenger Transport Strategy](#) which details the Council's approach to funding of supported services and our assistance towards commercial operations.

In accordance with this strategy, West Berkshire Council's Transport Services Team identified a number of initial proposals (including those detailed above) on how the funding could be used. In February 2020, these were circulated to local MPs, Councillors and other officers, inviting comments on these and/or any additional proposals and to also seek details of the aspirations of any residents who they may have been contacted by.

Support was widely given for the proposals and rural connectivity was a key priority raised. Support was also given for introducing services outside core office hours to increase opportunities for people to travel for leisure reasons.

In addition to the initial proposals suggested above, requests through this consultation were raised for:

- Seeking bids from local operators specifying what additional routes and frequencies they could supply.
- Provision of additional conventional bus services:
 - Thatcham - Newbury (routed via Hambridge Lane and Hambridge Road to serve the employment areas and Newbury Racecourse Station)
 - Lambourn - Hungerford
 - Burghfield Common and Mortimer - Newbury
 - Cold Ash – Thatcham - Newbury
 - Hermitage – Newbury (although some local services already exist)
 - Winterbourne – Newbury.
- Shared taxi services to serve some of the smaller villages (although these may be better served through a bid for the Rural Mobility Fund).
- Improvements to Newbury Wharf bus station (although these would most likely be capital projects and therefore ineligible for funding through this grant).

These requests will be added to the list of proposals and considered in full. A report will be brought before the Council's appropriate Governance Board to agree which of the officer, Member, MP and resident proposals (along with any specific requests received in 2020/21 to assist with the retention or restoration of commercial services in West Berkshire impacted by Covid-19) are eligible and practical to proceed with and then prioritise the available funding towards these.

To assist with this, consideration with each proposal will be given to:

- Whether it meets the funding criteria of improving current local bus services, restoring lost bus routes, supporting new bus services or extensions to current services.
- Whether it increases the bus mileage operated and bus passenger journeys within the local authority's area.
- How it aligns with the Council's Passenger Transport Strategy.

- The cost of the service.
- The ease of implementation.
- The sustainability of the service (if additional grant support is not available in future financial years).
- Evidence of resident demand for the service.
- The additional benefits provided to residents (e.g. improved access to services, additional vehicle capacity, service frequency etc).
- Whether the Council will be successful in bidding for Rural Mobility Funding and this may be better used to provide more flexible support in the specific geographical areas of identified resident need.
- Operator support for the service.
- Third party (e.g. other local authority) consents.

The Council also widely consulted on public transport (bus) provision across West Berkshire in 2016 (as part of 2016/17 budget proposals) and comments from residents were invited, received, collated and analysed at that time; this analysis will be used to identify demand for services. Feedback from the public consultation in 2016 was also received from Parish and Town Councils, Councillors, unions and local groups/organisations (e.g. schools, businesses, community transport operators, resident associations).

Local business travel plans have also been considered to help identify demand for specific proposals.

Existing local bus operators have also been contacted for feedback on specific proposals.

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