

Appendix A

Report to Cabinet and Scrutiny Board 3

The report from Scrutiny Board 3 – Select Committee format – was discussed at the Cabinet meeting on 4th October 2017 and the recommendations were considered. There was one recommendation (No. 6) for the Cabinet Member for City Services portfolio which reads:

“Recommended that the Cabinet Member for City Services undertake a review of Council Vehicle usage, particularly during school hours, to see whether the vehicles could be used to support for transport requirements of volunteers, ill and elderly people in the city.”

Cllr Jayne Innes, Cabinet Member for City Services, recommended that I as her Deputy Cabinet Member should lead on this and Cabinet agreed.

For that purpose, in November I met with Mr Andrew Walster, Director, Streetscene and Regulatory Services to discuss the matter. Then in December I met with Mr Chris Coyle, Integrated Transport Manager, who manages the Council’s vehicle fleet in Whitley Depot.

Mr Coyle provided details of how the minibuses are allocated 46 different routes which all support internal provision. This includes home to school, looked after children, adults with learning difficulties and older people. 27 routes are dedicated school runs which operate between 7.30am and 9.45am, and 2.30pm and 4.45pm. 5 runs support colleges on a mix of 30 hour and 37 hour contracts. 14 runs support those with learning difficulties and older, 3 of these are on 37 hour contracts with the remainder working either 27.5 or 32 hours. These runs support two centres, usually undertaking a learning difficulty run first, which is followed by a day care run for older people. In addition to the set runs, there is various ad-hoc work which is arranged with schools and colleges during periods of vehicle availability.

I decided to see personally how the operation actually works. So I arranged to go on Route No 11 on 7th February 2018. It was a good opportunity for me to see how people with special needs or vulnerable people are supported by the Council’s caring staff. The shift started early in the morning to pick up children from their homes and then to drop them off at school where school staff were waiting for them. I was pleased to see how the staff supported children from the point when they were picked up to when they were dropped at school. These children have various kind of needs and some with difficult behaviour and the driver and the escort are were so caring with lots of patience to support the children.

After dropping the children in school the same bus and same staff went to pick up various adults from their homes and then dropped them at a day care centre. The staff earned a lot of respect from me from the way they transport people with good professional care. During my visit I could not see any time which could be used differently to support more people before the end of the shift on route No. 11.

I looked at the details of the various routes and discussed with Chris Coyle about the small gap during day time in between the shifts of the routes during which the

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vehicles are not used. The vehicles deployed on dedicated school runs might be available between 10am and 2.15pm. Of the remainder, those working 27.5 or 32 hours might be available from 11am to 2.15pm. There were some vacancies mentioned on the sheet which make it even more difficult to use the small window of time for any other purpose. Even so, I asked the manager if there is any possibility to use those slots for any other purpose, such as to support some outside organisations to transport people.

I was advised that to operate a bus service, an organisation would either need to possess a Passenger Operator Licence and operate under its conditions, or a community bus permit which entitles us to operate on a not for profit basis and provide services to schools etc. Currently the Council operates under the permit system and although we do possess a passenger operator licence, our vehicles are not registered to operate in this way.

If we were to utilise an operator licence which would allow us to provide services for profit (e.g. by entering into a contract with outside organisations), the largest implication is with driving licences as additional qualifications would be required. In addition to this, all the vehicles would need to be re-registered which would change their taxation class, resulting in higher costs.

If we wanted to use the vehicles which are available during the day, we would need to be providing the services to groups on a not for profit basis. I have been advised that the service would welcome such opportunities, particularly from organisations with links to the authority similar to the existing day care, adult education or schools provision.

There is a further concern when considering operations outside the permit system where we might consider profit making activities. The Department for Transport have recently released a proposal for change with the use of the permit system. Within this there is detail which suggests that if we were to offer any services which might fall under 'Operator Licencing rules' i.e. profit making, then all of the service provision should be treated the same, and that the permit would no longer be valid. This would have major cost implications for service provision for both the authority and the market in general. This proposal has recently been released for consultation.

As it stands, I do not see any big extra capacity for using the vehicles for any other purpose such as supporting the other people outside what the Council's current remit is and already doing.

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