



To: Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3)

Date: 11 January 2023

Subject: School bus services update

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 This note provides an update on the future of several dedicated school bus services. It follows discussions at a previous meeting of this Board on 12 October 2022.
- 1.2 This note provides an update on the future of both groups of services.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Board are requested to:
 - 1) Note the contents of this report and the expected continuation of the eight services previously considered at risk of withdrawal.
 - 2) Identify any additional recommendations for the appropriate Cabinet Member.

3 Background and Information

- 3.1 While there are a number of dedicated school bus services operating across the city, eight specific routes were identified at the October meeting as being at risk of being withdrawn in the future. These are divided into two groups:
- 3.2 Three routes (numbers 53, 54 and 55) serving West Coventry Academy. These routes are operated by National Express on a commercial basis. At the time of the October Board meeting, National Express had indicated that they were considering withdrawing these services, as part of a wider review of the bus network
- 3.3 Five routes (numbers S40, S46, S48, S49 and S50) serving Bishop Ullathorne. These routes are funded by Coventry City Council. At the time of the October Board meeting, no funding had been allocated to continue these services beyond the end of 2022/23 academic year.

4 Wider context – bus services in Coventry

- 4.1 Most of Coventry's bus network (including most dedicated school bus services) operates on a commercial basis.

- 4.2 Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) has overall statutory responsibility for the city's bus network and works closely with bus operators. In addition, TfWM also directly funds some services, where these are socially important but would not be commercially viable.
- 4.3 Bus patronage has fallen significantly following the Covid-19 pandemic. As of October 2022, they were around 87% of pre-Covid levels.
- 4.4 As well as lower passenger numbers, bus operators are also experiencing rising costs (particularly fuel costs) and driver shortages. The latter is an industry-wide issue which has caused a significant worsening of reliability.
- 4.5 In the context of the above, TfWM has been working with operators to carry out a review of the bus network. This was previously discussed at the October meeting of this Board, where it was recognised that the frequency and/or hours of operation of some services would be reduced, while others may be withdrawn entirely, from January 2023.

5 National Express commercially operated routes

- 5.1 As part of the bus network review referred to above, National Express initially indicated that they intended to withdraw a total of 15 dedicated school bus services across the West Midlands. These services previously operated on a commercial basis (i.e. without any funding from either TfWM or individual local authorities) and included three routes in Coventry. These were the 53, 54 and 55, serving West Coventry Academy.
- 5.2 Both Coventry City Council and TfWM expressed concern about the potential withdrawal of these services. In particular, it was noted that, although alternative routes are available for many of the children who currently rely on these services, these would be unlikely to have sufficient capacity to accommodate this number of additional passengers.
- 5.3 Following further discussions between TfWM and National Express, TfWM have now advised us that National Express have been able to retain these routes. Therefore, the bus network review will not now directly affect any dedicated school bus routes in Coventry.

6 Coventry City Council funded routes

- 6.1 Separately to the above, Coventry City Council has been funding a small number of dedicated school bus services since the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year.
- 6.2 The Council stepped in to support these services when the previous operator, Travel De Courcey, entered administration. Initially a total of 14 routes, serving 6 schools were affected.
- 6.3 In the first year the Council was able to access a grant from the Department for Transport to fund the continuation of all 14 services. However, this is no longer available and in subsequent years the Council has directly funded the highest priority routes, while providing advice on alternative travel options to students affected where services have unfortunately had to be withdrawn to reduce costs.
- 6.4 In the current academic year, the Council is funding a total of 5 dedicated school bus routes (numbers S40, S46, S48, S49 and S50), all of which serve Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School. In addition, the Council also pays a small fee to

National Express to extend service 14 (which is in general use and is not a dedicated school service) to cover Blue Coat Church of England School.

- 6.5 The total cost of providing these services for a full academic year is £327,375. However, this cost will be partly offset by the income received from parents who are required to buy a specific pass to use any of the dedicated services.
- 6.6 It is currently forecast that £101,196 will be received in pass sales by the end of the academic year. This means that the net cost of providing these services is expected to be approximately £225,000.
- 6.7 As part of the Council's budget setting process for 2023/24, £220,000 has now been allocated for the support of school bus services. Subject to final approval of the 2023/24 budget, the risk that these 5 services could all have to be withdrawn at the end of the current academic year will therefore have been mitigated. However, there is still some risk that rising operating costs will have an impact on the precise level of service that can be secured with this budget.
- 6.8 Council officers will now work with colleagues from TfWM and staff at Bishop Ullathorne to make plans and to secure operators to continue to provide current, or similar, services for the 2023/24 academic year.

7 Health Inequalities Impact

- 7.1 Given the continuation of all the routes covered by this report, there are not expected to be any impacts on health inequalities.

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