



# Review of Community Transport Provision in Bracknell Forest

Report by a Working Group of the Environment Scrutiny  
Panel

July 2004

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## 1. THANKS

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Jon Freer, Assistant Director of Environment & Leisure (Streetcare), BFBC

Alun Powell, Transport Co-ordinator, Environment & Leisure Department, BFBC

Simon Pearce, Assistant Director of Social Services & Housing, BFBC

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Councillor Cliff Thompson, Pensioners' Champion, BFBC

A representative of Community Transport users

Mrs Marion Langdon, Vice Chairman, Bracknell Forest Senior Citizens' Forum

Mr Fred Rule, organiser of Keep Mobile

Bracknell Forest Access Advisory Panel

Attendees at the Transport Stakeholders Meeting, 24 February 2004

Andrea Carr, Senior Democratic Services Officer, BFBC

Throughout this report Bracknell Forest Borough Council has been abbreviated to BFBC or referred to as 'the Council'.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

The Community Transport Working Group was set up by the Environment Scrutiny Panel to examine the provision of community transport in Bracknell Forest with a view to ascertaining what the Council's expectations should be, whether the current provision meets those expectations and to identify and recommend solutions to any shortcomings in the provision.

The Working Group met on a number of occasions over the first two quarters of 2004 to interview witnesses and discuss its recommendations.

## **3. OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the Working Group were to:-

1. review the community transport contract with Keep Mobile.
2. ascertain whether community transport needs are being met locally.
3. identify and recommend possible service improvements with a view to overcoming identified gaps in service.

## **4. WHAT IS COMMUNITY TRANSPORT**

In order to identify the desired focus and achievable level of community transport in the Borough it is necessary to define what is meant by the term "community transport". Community transport is a term sometimes used interchangeably with public transport but for the purposes of this report, it refers to transport provided for people who would not otherwise be able to access public or private transport due to frailty or physical disability. A wider definition of community transport could include subsidised provision of public transport on routes which can not be run on an economic basis by private providers.

## **5. WHAT PROVISION OF COMMUNITY TRANSPORT EXISTS IN THE BOROUGH?**

### **Background**

Community Transport is provided by a voluntary sector organisation, Keep Mobile, which provides dial-a-ride services, group bookings, shopping trips and other outings. Keep Mobile is partly supported by a contract with Bracknell Forest Borough Council but also raises funds from other sources and delivers services well in excess of the contract specification.

The Council is itself also a direct provider of community transport services through its own vehicles and drivers. This is especially the case in regard to transport connected with social care provision. It could also be argued that local taxi drivers provide a certain degree of community transport due to the obligation now placed on them to provide wheelchair accessible vehicles. The extra cost of this obligation is not met by any direct grant. Other community transport is provided across the Borough by Bracknell Voluntary Car Service and Good Neighbour Schemes in the form of private cars driven by volunteers for doctor and hospital visits and shopping trips etc.

A number of user groups utilise community transport buses driven by their own voluntary driver(s) from amongst those who previously drove for Forest Line buses, a previous service provider, as the volunteers preferred not to undergo the training and checks now required to qualify as a Keep Mobile driver. This includes the need to obtain accreditation under the Minibus Driver Awareness Scheme (MiDAS), a programme developed to enhance the driving and passenger awareness skills of minibus drivers; undergo First Aid training and testing; and possibly be subject to Police checks. The number of buses available has increased in the last year as Age Concern has reduced its fleet.

The closure of Johnstone Court Day Centre may have an impact on community transport as former users would require transport to alternative provisions. There is transitional funding available within the Council's budget to meet such costs.

### **Demand for Community Transport**

Peak demand for community transport occurs at Christmas time and during the summer months. The core journey criteria relate to lunchtime trips and, although there is limited demand for extra provision on week days, transport is sought for evening and weekend trips. It is occasionally necessary for Keep Mobile to refuse requests for transport because of the absence of a driver mainly through insufficient notice of the request being given. Keep Mobile's buses are not fully utilised owing to little demand at certain times and insufficient funding to provide additional drivers. The Council's experience is similar and although its buses are available for use in the evening, the restrictions of training, insurance and indemnities discourage their use by voluntary drivers. A new, longer contract will facilitate capacity building measures towards meeting demand at peak times.

### **Social Services and Housing Department's Community Transport Service**

The Social Services and Housing Department has a fleet of 12 buses whose core business is to transport service users to and from resource / day centres. However, as adult day service provision is diversifying, a larger range of locations offering a wider choice of services is now involved. Although many service users are similar to those using community transport, some users of Bracknell Resource Opportunity Centre require escorts or support and elderly users tend towards the higher levels of need catered for by Keep Mobile. Drivers are paid and police checked and generally undertake the dual role of driver / carer accompanying users to the day / resource centres and assisting there before returning users to their homes. The eligibility criteria is based on level of need.

Although the Department is keen to collaborate with Keep Mobile and the Council's Transport Section with a view to increasing vehicle stock and service capacity, the need to cater for users with high levels of need prevents complete convergence of services. Users without high levels of need seeking transport to facilitate community and social engagement, such as former users of Johnstone Court who are in receipt of some interim transport subsidy following the closure of that facility, are referred to Keep Mobile. This enables the Council to focus its transport service to a smaller number of people with high needs. As a small number of former Forest Line users have appeared unhappy with the service provided by Keep Mobile as it differs from that which they had been accustomed to previously, the use of taxis is a possible alternative form of transport for such people. Taxis could be sponsored for community transport purposes if considered the most appropriate form of transport under the particular circumstances. When providing a local taxi service to users, community transport organisations are prevented from under-cutting fares charged by local taxi companies.

Although carers are not strictly entitled to accompany those for whom they are caring unless they have paid the community transport membership fee, there have been no complaints in this regard to date. The Council enables carers to use its transport on occasions and Keep Mobile is amenable to volunteers travelling to assist wheelchair users.

## **6. THE BRACKNELL FOREST CONTRACT WITH KEEP MOBILE**

### **Background**

One of the key objectives of the working group is to review the working of the contract set up by Bracknell Forest for the provision of community transport.

A contract for community transport provision commenced on 1 October 2002 under which the Council was to pay for a specified level of service. Prior to the letting of the contract, there were two voluntary sector Community Transport providers operating in the Borough, namely, Keep Mobile and Forest Line. These two organisations were funded by fundraising and grants from local authorities including Bracknell Forest Borough Council. The Council announced the intention to cease grant funding and advertise a contract in order to achieve a guaranteed level of service. Keep Mobile tendered for and won the contract and Forest Line, which chose not to tender, has since ceased to operate.

The Access Advisory Panel was consulted at the time and expressed the view that a choice of providers was beneficial for users of the service and that there was a risk that rationalising to a single contract would lose the benefits of competition.

As the fleets belonging to the Social Services and Housing Department and Keep Mobile are both moderately new and in good condition, the service is revenue funded and capital expenditure is not an issue at present. Although there is a possibility of including adult day opportunities provision and social services transport needs in a new contract, care should be given to providing the correct balance of service provision. The issue of whether it will be advantageous to provide all travel to day centres through community transport has been raised as part of an associated Best Value review.

## **Satisfaction Survey**

The results of the survey of registered users undertaken in 2003 indicates that the area where some dissatisfaction has been expressed is the potential difficulty of group travel owing to the lack of an advance booking system and the requirement to confirm arrangements on the day of travel. Evidence indicates that Keep Mobile will only schedule drivers for such bookings one week in advance, which presents difficulties for those wishing to arrange future outings such as theatre visits, and requires confirmation of users on the day of travel in order to configure the seating within buses to accommodate the needs of disabled users and to inform scheduling and timetabling of pick ups / drop offs.

## **Financial Aspects**

Keep Mobile is a non-profit making registered charity which operates by virtue of income received from the Council, users and rebates on fuel duty. The organisation states its running costs to be £200,000 per annum, of which £120,000 is obtained through the Council contract. Although community transport users benefit from an 80% discount on the cost of the scheduled shopping trips which is built into the fare structure, bus pass users do not receive any additional subsidy as the cost of providing community transport is greater than that of a regular bus service. The Council subsidises the scheduled shopping trips at a fixed per mile cost but non-scheduled trips are not discounted as they were run on the basis of a taxi service. Although higher rates of rebate are available when service users of over 70-75 years of age are transported, many are reluctant to give their dates of birth despite that fact that this could help fund the service. Keep Mobile is in a position to offer group outings at a subsidised rate.

Keep Mobile users are required to pay an initial membership joining fee of £1 to meet the terms of its rules of association. The Council has paid users' initial membership fee as part of the community transport contract.

Although community transport providers will not bid for contracts against each other as they are voluntary bodies, the private sector has shown some interest when the associated contract was last awarded. However, private companies will be more costly as they will charge commercial rates. A system of subsidising buses and drivers for evening use, as that provided by Reading Borough Council, offers an opportunity for service growth depending on funding arrangements and whether a group is prepared to share the cost of providing a driver.

Provision of community transport through a contract is thought to provide service stability and offer the provider long term security to invest in buses, drivers and training etc. Although the initial annual contract expired in October 2003, it has been extended for a further year whilst a re-tendering exercise is undertaken with a view to procuring a five year contract commencing in October 2004 with a possible two year extension. A lengthier contract will give opportunities to enhance the understanding, relationship and good will between the Council and the successful contractor with a view to increasing involvement and building up a resilient service. The existing contract is considered to be successful and enables the Council to access previously unavailable information such as the amount of mileage incurred, the number of passengers carried daily, the purpose of transport and the destination of trips. The outcome of the Best Value review of community transport currently being undertaken will inform the preparation of the contract specification, which will be sufficiently flexible to cater for changes / additions to service levels. Education and Social

Services transport could be provided to some degree with the latter being scheduled between morning and afternoon home to school transport runs.

Procurement of the contract is a six month process and Expressions of Interest from Europe have been invited. The next stage of awarding the contract consists of identifying a 'preferred provider' and preparing a pre-qualifying questionnaire to eliminate unwanted providers. The contract will contain a clause that the provider should be based in Berkshire. Three Expressions of Interest have been received to date and once the preferred provider has been identified by the end of May, the details of the contract specification will be prepared. Whilst the likely core costs of the contract could be calculated, the cost of service add-ons is unknown at this stage. Although sub-contracting will be prohibited under the contract, the contractor will be permitted to have a partner and it will be possible to have more than one provider. However, complications arise when numerous providers become involved.

The tendering process is welcomed as an opportunity for Keep Mobile to be tested against the market and for it to compete against other service providers.

Keep Mobile monitors its customers to ensure that they comply with community transport eligibility criteria in terms of age and disability. This monitoring also provides an opportunity to increase the number of users and activities catered for and to make the most economic use of the vehicles and other resources available.

To date the relationship with Keep Mobile has been good and the organisation is prepared to do all it can to enhance the service provided. This has included doubling the amount of work it is contracted to do following the decommissioning of the Age Concern bus. Keep Mobile is thought to provide added value to the service through its knowledge of its customers and the local area and its willingness to co-operate.

### **Community Transport Charges**

Community transport users are obliged to become a member of Keep Mobile in order to use its service. The membership fee is £1 for life and £10 per annum to receive the annual booklet of scheduled trips and events throughout the year. Although many events are arranged for particular societies and social clubs, other members are at liberty to take part if they so wished.

### **Drivers**

Keep Mobile employs one full time salaried driver and utilises some part time drivers who receive expense payments, all of whom are MiDAS trained and police checked. With regard to other Council's, the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, which used Keep Mobile and Ready Bus, pay drivers but do not have a contract in place, in common with Wokingham District Council. Although some organisations continue to offer voluntary drivers, such as the Crowthorne Car Scheme, these are not always reliable and drivers are often reluctant to undergo MiDAS training. Keep Mobile is prepared to train and insure drivers and allow them to use its buses to transport their own groups.

Although voluntary drivers tend to restrict the number of hours they are available to work, it is likely that a new contract will require provision of evening and weekend trips necessitating additional vehicles and drivers.

## **Service Satisfaction**

The user survey recently undertaken indicated a high level of satisfaction with the service being provided by Keep Mobile. 202 of 232 users had responded to the effect that they were happy with the service and 95 of 170 vehicles used were wheelchair accessible. However, Keep Mobile is occasionally criticised for being unable to guarantee trips, this situation is in common with all other community transport providers and often arises through confusion on the part of users who mistakenly interpret the provider's late request for trip confirmation details, such as the number of wheelchair users included, as the first indication that requested transport will be provided. The transition from the joint service provided by Keep Mobile and Forest Line to the contract with Keep Mobile is thought to be a satisfaction factor and the source of any criticism is often from those who previously used the small scale tailored service provided by Forest Line which they preferred to the larger scale, scheduled and more business orientated service provided by Keep Mobile. It is thought that the views of previous Forest Line users may have been adversely influenced against Keep Mobile by Forest Line at the time the contract was awarded to Keep Mobile. No serious complaints have been received during the past six months.

Although the information concerning the exact mix of service users in terms of the elderly and disabled is not available, it is thought that wheelchair users constitute approximately 15% of all users whilst many are able to walk with assistance.

## **7. REVIEWING THE EVIDENCE**

### **Documentary Information / Evidence**

The following documentary information / evidence was made available to the Working Group:-

- Community Transport Update Report prepared for the meeting of the Access Advisory Panel held on 1 October 2003. (Annexe A)
- Community transport contract service specification. (Annexe B)
- Response to the satisfaction survey of all 2,500 registered users of community transport in Bracknell Forest undertaken during 2003. (Annexe C)
- Memorandum dated 18 September 2003 from Transport Co-ordinator to Assistant Director of Environment & Leisure (Streetcare) concerning the transport contract with Keep Mobile.

### **Interviews with Witnesses**

In addition to interviewing relevant officers of the Council to inform the review, the Working Group held witness sessions with the Voluntary Sector Champion, the Pensioners' Champion, a representative of community transport users, the Vice

Chairman of Bracknell Forest Senior Citizens' Forum and the operator of Keep Mobile. Issues covered in these sessions are summarised below.

#### Witness Session with the Voluntary Sector Champion and Pensioners' Champion

Owing to their connection with community transport users, the Champions were invited to a meeting of the Working Group to provide information and answer questions with a view to informing the review of community transport.

Whilst neither Champion has a direct involvement in community transport provision, they both have an interest in the level and standard of service provided from the perspective of the user. They had been present at meetings when the preliminary community transport contract specification had been formed on the basis of service requirements suggested by the bidder, Keep Mobile, but had limited subsequent involvement. Points made by the Champions during the session are set out below.

When Keep Mobile became the sole provider of community transport in the Borough, many elderly and frail former users of Forest Line had become distressed fearing that the service, which was a lifeline to them, would deteriorate. Such residents, who were unable to walk to or stand at bus stops, were entirely dependent on community transport. However, since problems associated with the transition to Keep Mobile had been solved and residents had been satisfied that it was offering a service equivalent to that provided by Forest Line, users appeared content with the service and the Champions were unaware of any recent complaints.

Although it was felt that some users did not entirely trust Keep Mobile owing to the perceived manner of a member of its staff which it appeared had strained public relations with users on past occasions, it was not known whether relations had improved.

As there was minimal public transport in the area during evenings and weekends, the need for reliable community transport at these times was identified and suggested as a service improvement. It was acknowledged that those residents who were unfamiliar with how community transport operated may incur difficulties in using the service. A shuttle service to and from Bracknell town centre was suggested as a further possible improvement.

With regard to meeting the needs of those who would benefit most from community transport, the need to identify such individuals and establish their needs and wishes in this regard was highlighted.

Discussions concerning the role that taxis could play in community transport revealed that there was no taxi rank in Crowthorne and two recent attempts to book a taxi for transport to and from that area had been unsuccessful as firms had been unwilling to accept the bookings.

When considering whether Keep Mobile was a realistic provider of community transport for future years in the light of the Council's wish to provide a balanced service to the whole Borough across the full spectrum of needs, concern was expressed regarding the potential risk of the Council relying on a single organisation to provide community transport for the frail and elderly. Such people were unable to access public transport or use hired commercial vehicles which were unsuitable as they lacked low steps and tail lifts. This reliance was heightened by the loss of Forest Line and Age Concern buses. Examples were given of the need to cancel group trips planned well in advance due to Keep Mobile being unable to provide the

transport owing to other commitments. Although Keep Mobile would respond to one-off group booking requests involving one vehicle where possible, it was unable to offer both buses for a whole day due to its core business. Keep Mobile also served the Wokingham District and, despite having a large fleet, allocated only two of its buses for use in Bracknell Forest. The issue of whether Bracknell Forest paid Keep Mobile more than it received from Wokingham District Council was a question to be addressed in the light of the levels of service provided to the two areas.

Although Keep Mobile provided a satisfactory regular service, it often lacked the capacity to meet requests for one-off group outings and no alternative provisions were available to cater for this type of demand. Accordingly, the provision for such outings, other than those organised by Keep Mobile, was identified as a need which the Council may wish to consider meeting. It was reported that Keep Mobile claimed that an increased level of funding would be required to enable it to provide more drivers and vehicles to overcome this service shortfall. Although the contract with Keep Mobile provided value for money, it would not be economically viable to increase funding of the contract to enable one-off trips to be provided and it was suggested that this be addressed by means other than increasing funding to Keep Mobile for this purpose. The possibility of using in-house transport to cater for such trips was suggested as an alternative in the event that spare capacity existed and related issues concerning drivers, indemnities and insurance could be solved.

The regular service provided by Keep Mobile was felt to be reliable and most drivers were patient, courteous and respectful to users. The only identified area of weakness related to the lack of provision in respect of one-off group outings.

As the number of trips provided by Keep Mobile exceeded the contract specification (364 trips per annum), it was suggested that the Council should reconsider the level of provision and manage the expectations of users.

Whilst there was some doubt as to whether a five year contract with Keep Mobile may be too long as the organisation was dependent on its organiser, it was felt that a shorter contract would bring uncertainty for both users and Keep Mobile. The current contract was felt to reduce flexibility for one-off group outings whilst trips scheduled by Keep Mobile potentially limited the availability of buses for other group outings.

Witnesses highlighted a need for community transport in the evening, when public transport was limited. This was dependent on the availability of volunteer drivers who provided services in addition to the core work undertaken by salaried drivers. It was assumed that evening demand was low owing to an expectation that a service would not be provided. Many community transport organisations employed core staff to provide the basic services which were supplemented by volunteer drivers to minimise costs. As daytime and club trips were generally catered for, it was suggested that voluntary drivers be used for evening, weekend and one-off outings where demand remained. The cost of taxis was prohibitive for many Old Age Pensioners (OAPs) and legislation prevented community transport undercutting taxi fares.

With regard to take-up of disability and other allowances, which would assist users to meet the cost of transport, the Working Group was advised that Age Concern publicised such allowances at its open days when a representative of the Pension Service would provide related information to assist those wishing to apply for allowances. It was felt that many OAPs chose not to take-up allowance entitlement for a number of reasons. As lone OAPs may not have an opportunity to access information concerning allowances, a need to reach and inform the housebound was

identified. Such people often lost confidence in going out and community transport was vital to tackle their isolation.

The commercial bus service in Wildridings had been reduced six months earlier and those residents who were unable to walk 400m to bus stops had been advised to use Keep Mobile. Although subsidising services in Wildridings may be beneficial to local users, such measures may result in reducing services elsewhere. Whilst there was a well used frequent bus service in South Bracknell, this was not the case in the north of the Borough.

The Champions were asked whether they wished to recommend a course of action in respect of future provision of community transport in the Borough. One sought an overall plan of provision specifying the quality, frequency, provider and destination of community transport isolating areas of deficiency to enable solutions to be found. It was felt that future provision should focus on the frail and disabled who were unable to use other forms of transport and on the disenfranchised to improve their quality of life. The other Champion felt that the present community transport provision was generally satisfactory with the exception of evening and one-off trips where improvement was required. The importance of community transport to the frail and disabled who had no alternative provisions was highlighted.

#### Witness Session with a Representative of Community Transport Users

In order to convey experiences of utilising community transport, the representative circulated a list of good points, bad points and comments in this regard which had been prepared in consultation with a number of other users. The good points were considered to be the:-

- very successful group bookings/day trips;
- value for money pricing levels;
- very high standard of vehicles and equipment which are kept clean and in good working order; and
- dedicated and friendly drivers.

The following were felt to be bad points of the current community transport service:-

- the need to telephone the provider to seek confirmation of travel the day before an expected trip. This was a particular problem where many users have to book other services around their transport requirement and where some users lack the confidence to book their transport over the telephone and make successive calls in order to make certain that travel arrangements are in place;
- the absence of funding of the current community transport provision after office hours which denies people with specific needs of the right to choose to travel when they wish; and
- the absence of a written and widely circulated booking procedure to clarify the responsibilities of users and providers when bookings are made.

The associated comment recognised that, although the current transport provision carries many groups/parties on a regular basis, it does not make economical sense (from the provider's point of view) for an individual to book the transport from Wokingham to cater for a brief trip within Bracknell Forest.

The representative's current use of community transport was largely in the form of group bookings, the majority of which were in the evenings. She advised that there were occasions when requested transport could not be provided owing to the lack of an available driver. As Keep Mobile was only funded to provide transport during office hours, it was reliant on volunteer drivers to cover evening bookings and this was felt to be a drawback of the service. As salaried daytime drivers generally provided the voluntary evening driving, many were not keen or fit to drive in the evening after carrying out a full shift during the day. Also, driving restrictions and regular break requirements applied. Although there was a fair amount of evening community transport provided, the representative indicated that there was unmet demand and many users were restricted to carrying out their business during office hours due to the lack of evening drivers. She would welcome the inclusion of evening service provision in the community transport contract. Opportunities for daytime community transport were limited by day trips for groups as these reduced the number of vehicles and drivers available for general use.

The representative felt that the Keep Mobile service offered good value for money and highlighted the success of the group bookings and day trips organised by Keep Mobile and the friendly dedicated approach of the drivers who knew their passengers and would ensure that they arrived safely home. The support provided by drivers increased users confidence to travel.

The difficulty in obtaining a definitive response to requests for transport was identified as a drawback with the Keep Mobile service as this created uncertainty and impacted on other services which users needed to arrange around their transport requirements. The need for users to telephone Keep Mobile the day prior to the trip to confirm travel was a cause of frustration. This was a particular problem for those who were inarticulate and preferred not to make repeat telephone calls or seek reasons for the unavailability of transport. Whilst the representative appreciated that there may be circumstances beyond Keep Mobile's control which prevented the provision of evening transport, she felt that once booked, transport should be provided. The late confirmation arrangement applied in the case of regular group bookings in addition to casual bookings and as the Borough's community transport was limited to a single provider, this constrained the opportunity for users to seek alternative transport. Although the representative had not experienced difficulties in obtaining transport during daytime, her use at this time was limited. Group community transport users were often obliged to spend much time on buses owing to the 'around the houses' approach of collecting and dropping off each passenger at their home along the route and this was felt to be a drawback with group bookings.

With regard to the economic sense of necessitating a bus to travel to and from Wokingham in order to provide transport in Bracknell, the representative advised that more use would be made of Keep Mobile in the event that it had a base in Bracknell.

The representative highlighted the benefit of the invaluable service provided by the two disabled access taxis which served the Bracknell area. The taxis were fully booked throughout the day and many disabled people were entirely dependent upon them for transport. Although the taxi fare from the representative's home to Bracknell town centre was £5 each way, she preferred to meet this cost, with the benefit of her mobility allowance, in order to obtain reliable transport.

By way of summary, the representative stated that, although Keep Mobile undertook a valued job, there were aspects of its service which could be improved and streamlined. Having accepted that the Council had pursued a community transport arrangement with a single provider, the representative was prepared to work with the Council and Keep Mobile to secure service improvements.

#### Witness Session with Marion Langdon, Vice Chairman of Bracknell Forest Senior Citizens' Forum

Mrs Langdon took this opportunity to raise the issue of transport difficulties experienced by the frail and elderly in Wildridings following the cessation of the 151 and 152 bus routes which had previously served that area. It was suggested that affected residents should seek alternative transport from Keep Mobile.

In this connection the Bracknell Shopmobility scheme was discussed and it was noted that this was a charitable initiative sponsored by the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership in order to give shoppers with limited mobility an opportunity to hire wheelchairs and other mobility equipment.

Although the majority of those attending the Bracknell Senior Citizens' Forum meeting were mobile, Mrs Langdon felt that community transport would boost participation by involving those with mobility difficulties. There was a need to increase awareness of Keep Mobile within the Forum as this was limited. Whilst Members acknowledged that increasing awareness of Keep Mobile may lead to over demand, management of expectations and the eligibility criteria would overcome this problem.

#### Witness Session with Fred Rule, Organiser of Keep Mobile

Mr Rule explained Keep Mobile's booking system which was accessible by telephone from 9.00 am to 1.00 pm Monday to Friday. With regard to contracted work, which involved daytime travel from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm provided by paid drivers, users were given an instant answer as to the availability of transport. For the remainder of the service, which fell outside the contract and required volunteer drivers, Keep Mobile required 7 days to ascertain whether drivers would be available for bookings. The non-contracted service was the area where complaints had been received. Recruiting volunteer drivers was a difficulty which had been exacerbated by the introduction of the community transport contract and all paid drivers worked on a part-time basis, often volunteering to undertake additional driving out of kindness.

The receipt of a grant from the Council was Keep Mobile's preferred method of providing community transport as this enabled partnership working with the funder. A grant system also enabled the charitable status of the organisation to be recognised and facilitated fundraising for additional community transport. Although Keep Mobile had raised £80-90,000 to provide voluntary transport, this sum could not be utilised to support contracted work which exceeded the amount specified in the contract three or fourfold. Use of a contract was felt to represent mistrust and it was stated that many councils, especially in the north of the country, were moving away from the contractual approach and returning to grant arrangements. Keep Mobile operated in the Wokingham District on the basis of grants and a service level agreement. Mr Rule anticipated that Keep Mobile's management committee would need to be persuaded to re-tender for the contract with Bracknell Forest as the charitable

organisation did not wish to be branded as a contractor. Also, the contract had caused difficulties for Keep Mobile as the level of service provided had been in excess of the contract, without an increase in rates, on the basis of monthly extensions. These difficulties included uncertainties around forward planning such as the purchase of new buses. Keep Mobile owned nine buses which were replaced on a seven year rolling programme and generally covered 40,000 miles per annum. A perceived disadvantage for the community arising from the Council's decision to provide community transport through a contract was that the service had become limited to a single provider, which restricted availability.

A specific complaint concerning Keep Mobile being unable to provide transport for a group booking outside the contracted service was raised and Mr Rule advised that this had resulted from Keep Mobile declining to guarantee absolutely the transport. Although insurance to provide compensation for Keep Mobile failing to provide booked transport was available at a cost of £12 per trip, users were reluctant to make use of this facility. There was no restriction on the destination of volunteer evening services and 90% of users wished to travel outside the Borough.

Keep Mobile's fare structure was based on public transport fares as legislation prevented it from undercutting the fares of bus companies and taxi services. The nature of the Keep Mobile service was door-to-door transport at the price of a bus. In the case of non-contracted work, passenger fares met the cost of Keep Mobile's direct running costs and drivers' salaries and administration costs were paid by fundraising or grants.

With additional funding, Keep Mobile would be able to build its capacity to meet extra demand, such as serving discontinued bus routes or providing transport to Wexham Park Hospital, if this was required. Community transport operators were permitted to run scheduled bus services and Keep Mobile would continue its door-to-door service in this event. Keep Mobile's current schedules were built around regular runs with Dial-A-Ride services factored in between. Peak community transport demand was 10.00 am and 3.00 pm which coincided with day centre opening and closing times and shopping trips. Many day centre users travelled via Dial-A-Ride. Users generally became aware of Keep Mobile's services through word of mouth and it was no longer necessary for the organisation, which had been operating since 1992, to advertise.

Although Keep Mobile currently operated from a base in Wokingham District which was central to the area covered, Mr Rule stated that the organisation would be content to operate from Bracknell Forest in the event that a yard was provided. However, only one base would be used.

The Working Group was advised that 80% of users were over 70 years of age and those who were elderly and disabled were entirely dependent on Keep Mobile's services. Younger disabled people relied less on Keep Mobile as they were often supported by their families and had the use of private vehicles.

When asked what services Keep Mobile wished to provide in the future, Mr Rule advised that the organisation would like the Council to fund trips outside Bracknell Forest as users, such as those residents with connections with West London, generally wished to travel elsewhere. Provision of a regular service to Wexham Park Hospital, house calls and scheduled routes with identified stops were also welcomed by Keep Mobile.

Mr Rule advised that last year users of the former Johnstone Court Day Centre had received presentations in respect of transport to alternative activities and locations following the close of the Day Centre. Some of this group of former Johnstone Court users were now making use of Keep Mobile's Dial-A-Ride service to travel to other day activities as the Council was not providing their transport. Mr Rule felt that the three buses operated by the Council's Social Services and Housing Department merely for travel to and from day centres were under utilised. He suggested that a more economically viable alternative would be for the Council to fund Keep Mobile to provide this service thereby freeing Council buses and drivers for other community transport use. Keep Mobile drivers would be equipped to transport higher need clients in this scenario through team working if accompanied by escorts from the day/resource centres.

In order to maximise availability and use of its buses, Keep Mobile operated a scheduled seven week servicing system where all buses were serviced in turn on the same day.

In the course of further discussion concerning the re-tendering of the Council contract in respect of community transport, Mr Rule stated that, despite the reluctance of Keep Mobile's management committee to enter into a further contract, he anticipated that the organisation would submit a tender in this regard in the absence of an alternative arrangement. Mr Rule expressed a concern that commercial operators tendering for the contract would be discontent in the knowledge that they were competing against a charity. In the event that the present contractual specification remained unchanged, Keep Mobile would be prepared to accept a grant to fund the non-contractual aspects of the service and would seek a closer link between its management committee and the Council. In addition to enhancing partnership working, closer links would give the Council an opportunity to monitor the service and participate in decisions concerning expenditure. Keep Mobile provided monthly operating information to Council officers.

Mr Rule commented that Keep Mobile's labour costs had increased from £120,000 to £130,000 over the past two years owing to the need to pay drivers in the absence of volunteer drivers. However, existing volunteer drivers were content to work alongside paid drivers in the interests of the community. The driver salary paid by Keep Mobile was lower than that offered by other community transport providers and the majority of salaried drivers were recently retired and worked up to two days per week. As restrictions prevented driving in excess of ten hours, drivers operated in flexible eight hour shifts. Demand for community transport peaked on Mondays and was greater during mornings than afternoons.

A video was currently being prepared for the purpose of informing potential community transport users of the service provided by Keep Mobile.

## **8. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Funding and Partnership**

Bracknell Forest Borough Council funds a certain level of community transport provision. There is no statutory requirement on Councils to do so, therefore this funding is in excess of the statutory requirement and the level of funding should be viewed in the context of competing claims for funding from other services such as schools, social services and the environment.

The Council is not the only source of funding for community transport. The Council's grant in itself can not meet the full aspirations of community transport users in the Borough. However, it is socially desirable that the community transport provision in the Borough is extended to more closely approach those aspirations.

In the view of the Panel, a healthy community transport sector would have multiple sources of income and operate in the voluntary sector with a great degree of independence from the Council. This places obligations on both the community transport sector and on the Council.

We believe that the decision to cease grant funding for community transport and seek a contract relationship with a single provider, while the obvious option at the time, has presented a number of challenges. These challenges have for the most part been overcome and Keep Mobile is performing in excess of the contracted terms. This has been achieved despite the loss of a number of voluntary drivers for a number of reasons including natural turnover and reluctance of some former volunteers to undergo MIDAS training and Police checks.

Contract funding is useful in guaranteeing a core service level, but limits the flexibility with which the current provider, Keep Mobile, can use its available resources in serving community transport users.

Although the use of community transport to cater for home-to-school travel is a possibility, this will present associated scheduling and capacity issues owing to the number of pupils and their need to attend and leave school at the same fixed times.

We have noted that users sought a simplification of the current system, which requires both booking, and subsequent confirmation of transport with implications for telephone costs, user convenience, staff and resources. The Panel would be keen for Keep Mobile to look again at this issue.

### **Bus Passes on Community Transport**

It has been suggested by some that the free or half fare bus passes issued by the Council should be applicable to community transport fares. While this is a superficially attractive argument, it has to be pointed out that the bus passes provide a discount for the holder on the full fare on commercially-run public transport. This discount is recouped by the operator because a grant is paid by the Council to the operator based on the number of passes issued. In the case of community transport, a far higher subsidy per passenger is paid to the provider and a substantial discount is therefore already built into the charging structure. Since practically all Community Transport users qualify for some form of bus pass, administering a discount scheme would be a wasteful bureaucratic exercise for the sake of appearance and the cost would have to be borne by a reduction in service.

### **Customer Service Issues**

There has been some criticism by community transport users, specifically those involved in making group bookings, of the confirmation procedure and the fact that Keep Mobile does not "guarantee" bookings months in advance. The Panel listened to the concerns of users and the views of Keep Mobile. When confirming group bookings, Keep Mobile will call the trip organiser before the trip to confirm the

number of people to be collected. This serves two purposes – to make sure the trip is still happening and to ensure that the correct seating configuration can be set up in the vehicle. There appears to be confusion in some quarters as to the purpose of this call. There is a need for better communication to achieve an understanding among users as to why Keep Mobile call to confirm a short time before the trip.

When a group wishes to make a special trip, for example a Christmas trip to the theatre, they will obviously wish to book well in advance and be reassured that a driver and vehicle will be available. These trips may often need a volunteer driver and Keep Mobile has been unwilling to offer a guarantee that the trip can be manned, far in advance of the date. This is understandable given that volunteer drivers may be unwilling to commit themselves to a trip so far in advance but it would be good if it were possible for users to gain more assurance that group bookings can be met. Unfortunately, even if drivers were to be paid for these events, this would be unlikely to enable Keep Mobile to offer a guarantee so far in advance.

Travel insurance is available to cover group travel in the event that a transport provider is unable to meet a booking. Although financial compensation is not enough to compensate for the disappointment of a cancelled trip, in the rare occurrence that a community transport provider is unable to fulfil a booking it would go some way towards it and users could be encouraged to make use of this insurance.

### **Public Transport**

Although the Working Group's remit did not include public transport, several witnesses referred to the difficulties being experienced by residents, especially the frail and elderly, in relation to a reduced or limited bus service. This was particular the case in Wildridings where bus routes 151 and 152 had been discontinued recently. The Panel would like the Council to consider this issue in the context of strategic decisions on future transport subsidy arrangements.

Another issue of concern highlighted by service users was the abuse of disabled parking spaces.

Although the misuse of on-street disabled parking spaces is enforceable by traffic wardens, such spaces provided by retailers and other organisations are not enforceable. There are no rules restricting the use of such spaces in Council owned car parks and the adoption of orders under the Highway Act is necessary to render them legally enforceable.

### **Service Improvements**

The following have been identified as potential service improvements:-

- Encouragement of greater understanding by users of the limitations and constraints of the community transport service;
- Increased dialogue with users with a view to addressing unrealistic expectations of community transport which is a complicated business operating in a difficult environment.
- Members of Council-sponsored community transport schemes should be entitled to be accompanied by their carers on Community Transport so long as capacity is available.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that:-

1. The community transport sector continue to look to sources other than the Council for a share of its funding, while the Council respect the voluntary sector status of the provider by increasingly framing its relationship in terms of a partnership rather than along the lines it would take with a commercial subcontractor;
2. Any additional service to be commissioned by the Council in excess of the current contract be funded by a grant and agreed through a Service Level Agreement rather than by extension of the contract specification. This would give the provider greater flexibility while, as a voluntary sector provider, respecting its independent and voluntary nature;
3. Consideration be given to the possibility of making greater use of the vehicles owned by the Social Services and Housing Department as an option to increase the amount of community transport provision available. Assuming that volunteer drivers are available, the resulting larger pool of vehicles is likely to increase the scope to improve out-of-hours transport to meet the needs of voluntary group travel;
4. A benefits take up campaign be pursued in order to raise awareness of funds available for the elderly / disabled to access transport to day service opportunities of their choice; and
5. A strategic decision concerning transport subsidy arrangements be undertaken in the future. Options will include the Council subsidising general transport in the Borough, such as providing new bus routes in Warfield and servicing discontinued bus routes in Wildridings, or alternatively increasing funding of community transport.