

TO: THE EXECUTIVE
DATE: 10 NOVEMBER 2020

SUPPORTED BUS SERVICE CHANGES

Director of Place, Planning and Regeneration

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the Executive of emerging issues associated with supported bus service provision and seek approval for necessary changes.

2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 **That the supporting information is noted.**
- 2.2 **That the proposed changes to supported bus services are progressed.**

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 The Council must secure the ongoing viability of supported bus services whilst pursuing value for money. Necessary financial savings are required to support the Council's transformation programme and the ongoing impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic. To support these objectives, changes to supported bus services are required.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 The Council could retain current supported bus services without change, however, this would not represent value for money and does not address the increasing risk that some contracted services are likely to become commercially un-viable without change. Furthermore, the financial savings identified within the Council's transformation programme would not be met.

5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Support bus services

- 5.1 The Local Transport Plan sets out the Council's role regarding bus service transport in the Borough. This includes procuring socially necessary services that are not provided by the free market, subject to funding. These are termed 'supported' services and are delivered under the 1985 Transport Act through contracts with bus operators. Typically, these can be described as local bus services that support communities with access to their basic needs such as fresh food shopping opportunities, health appointments, employment, education.
- 5.2 Alongside this role, the Council works in partnership with commercial service operators to improve current services, extend commercial operations, and facilitate changes to services in order to better serve local amenities.
- 5.3 Nonetheless, outside of larger towns/cities travel patterns and individual choice does not translate into bus patronage, which has been declining nationally for some years. The effects of the COVID19 pandemic on public transport use is likely to add further long lasting, and potentially permanent, impacts on bus travel.

- 5.4 This situation presents financial challenges for Councils as declining patronage revenue for operators means the cost to the Local Authority of supporting bus services rises. This situation is set against the increasing pressures on Council budgets and unavoidable efficiency savings.
- 5.5 The current supported and commercial service routes are shown at **ANNEX A**.

Council Renewal Strategy

- 5.6 In September 2020, the Council's Executive approved the 'Recovery and Renewal, Place Based Strategy (COVID19)' which provides a set of principles in response to the impacts of the pandemic. The following principles in particular relate to the challenges surrounding supported bus service provision:
- *Look to involve the community and voluntary sector in supporting people and services where possible;*
 - *Containing/reducing expenditure in the long-term, including refocussing/delivering differently/stopping some services;*
 - *Maximising opportunities to address carbon reduction across all of our activities.*

Necessary service changes in the short-term

Core services

- 5.7 When the supported bus network was last tendered, changes were made to consolidate some routes, simplify others, while still providing a service for as many residents as possible given the funding available at the time.
- 5.8 However, there remains little prospect of any supported services becoming commercial. For example, the number of passenger journeys for a commercial service in the borough is approximately 35,000 to 40,000 per month, whereas the best supported services can only manage around 8,000 per month. Across the services, approximately 60% of journeys are made by fare-paying customers, and 40% by concessionary pass holders.
- 5.9 At this time, the challenges of high car ownership, short corridor lengths and low-density housing (in some areas) gives limited scope for operators to generate enough revenue from commercial services within the borough. For example, the less-densely populated north part of the borough is served mainly by supported services and the pattern of provision remains complex, partly due to the nature of the road network.
- 5.10 The Council's recently adopted recovery and renewal strategy, alongside established transformation programme budget savings, has prompted a value for money review of supported bus services. This identifies a number of contracts which are considerably more expensive for the Council than others, based on cost per passenger.
- 5.11 It should be noted that this review is based on pre-COVID19 patronage levels to give a more accurate reflection of normal patronage. Current patronage levels averaged across all services are approximately 50% of pre-pandemic levels, with some routes more affected than others depending on the destination they serve and the demographic of the users they carry. Data is shown at **ANNEX B**.
- 5.12 Joint work with the main service provider (Courtney Buses) has identified an option to maximise the utility of the bus and driver operating the two most expensive services (no's 299 and 598). This involves extending one route (no. 299) to accommodate the majority of passengers from the fourth most expensive service (no.162/162A). This enables the 162/162A service to be discontinued.

- 5.13 There is no additional cost to expanding the 299 service as the additional patronage from previous 162/162A users will negate the additional running costs and a single vehicle can continue be used on alternate days of the week for both the 299 and 598 services. In combination, these changes enable the removal of a bus from the supported network which generates an annual cost saving to the Council of £125,000.
- 5.14 Additionally, the increased utilisation of a shared vehicle running both an extended 299 service and the 598 service would improve value for money across these linked services. When considered together, and with an expected transfer of patronage from the current 162 service, the combined cost per passenger on these services would reduce to below £3.00.
- 5.15 Ongoing reductions in patronage, whilst maintaining the current scale of service provision, increases the risk of some contracted services becoming commercially un-viable. Importantly, these proposed changes would ensure there continues to be bus provision, albeit on a reduced scale, to communities along much of the existing 162/162A route. Council officers have worked closely with Courtney Buses to identify the main areas of demand on the 162/162A route, and the extended 299 service has been routed to serve as many of these residents as possible.
- 5.16 A map of the proposed service change to extend the 299 service and withdraw the 162/162A service is shown at **ANNEX C**. This would be introduced in early 2021.
- 5.17 The third most expensive service (no.151) is not included in the proposed changes at this time. Half of the total patronage on this service is made up of children, who use the service for travelling to school. This service is jointly funded with Wokingham BC as it runs between Bracknell and Wokingham centres, via Binfield. It features within the Amen Corner development S106 conditions as it connects up to 380 dwellings to the Kings Academy education facility, to Binfield village and Bracknell town centre. As the occupation of housing development in this area continues to expand the patronage on the 151 is expected to grow.

Evening services

- 5.18 When the Lexicon opened in September 2017, the timetable of a small number of the busier supported bus services (the 108, 150, and 158) were extended into the evening to cater for the demand from both workers and patrons. Sunday services on the same routes were also procured for use by shoppers and shop staff.
- 5.19 However, the growth in patronage on evening bus services has not been realised. These services do not currently represent value for money and pre-COVID19 data shows that typically these services can run empty beyond their core daytime operation. The recent COVID19 restriction on pubs, cafes and restaurants closing at 10pm will impact further.
- 5.20 Following consultation with Courtney Buses it is proposed to reduce evening services temporarily, offering a single later bus, replacing the individual routes with a simple loop which incorporates the areas previously served. Core daytime service to the town centre will continue to operate with early evening services typically ceasing by 8pm.
- 5.21 This change to evening services would be reviewed following the next stage of Bracknell town centre regeneration when The Deck development opens, bringing an increase to the evening economy. Whilst final details of the evening service changes are being worked through with the operator, a saving in the region of £18,000 per annum is anticipated. Changes would be introduced as soon as practical.

Direct impact of service changes

- 5.22 The 299 service currently runs two journeys a day, twice a week on Wednesday and Friday, and connects the mobile home site at Warfield Park with Tesco (Warfield) and

Bracknell town centre. The 598 service also runs two journeys a day, twice a week on Tuesday and Thursday, and connects Little Sandhurst to Sandhurst high street and The Meadows (Camberley). Both services are almost exclusively used by concessionary pass holders.

- 5.23 The 162/162A service, which connects North Ascot and Bracknell town centre via the largely rural and sparsely populated Winkfield area runs ten return journeys a day, Monday to Saturday. The service carries only 5% of all supported services passengers, but accounts for 15% of operated mileage. Not only does the 162/162A service represent poor value for money, it is also poor in terms of its environmental impact. Data suggests the bus runs almost empty for many miles on its route.
- 5.24 With the objective of retaining a bus service for as many residents as possible, the proposed extension of the 299 route would serve the more densely populated sections of the 162/162A route, albeit reduced to 5 journeys a day on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. This is considered sufficient for people to plan weekly shopping trips, health appointments or social visits to friends and family; 70% of existing passengers are concessionary pass holders.
- 5.25 Some sections of the 162/162A route would continue to be served by the existing 703 commercial service which operates regularly. However, a short section of the 162/162A route within the mainly rural area of the Winkfield and Cranbourne ward would no longer be served. This would affect one bus stop in Locks Ride, with Chavey Down Road being the nearest alternative. The 2011 Census data indicates that 93% of households situated here have access to at least one vehicle. Operator records show that typically 3 passengers were making regular trips from the Locks Ride bus stop pre-COVID.
- 5.26 In addition, there are two stops on Ascot High Street that would not be served. However, the provision of retail and other amenities available at Tesco and Bracknell town centre, which will continue to be served by the revised 299 route, are greater than those available in Ascot.
- 5.27 The proposed service changes would currently impact on one child who is entitled to support for home to school transport and these potential additional costs have been taken into account.

The role of Community Transport

- 5.28 For some of the more isolated and vulnerable residents without access to daily public transport services, community transport schemes can provide an alternative.
- 5.29 Along with other neighbouring authorities, the Council contributes a grant to Keep Mobile to provide a dial-a-ride service to borough residents. Residents are required to book their transport in advance and contribute to the cost of the journey.
- 5.30 The Council is also working closely with Involve, the volunteer centre, to establish volunteer car schemes in the borough. A number of these schemes have been active in the borough but maintaining enough volunteers has been a challenge in recent years. The Council is considering how to support the administrative role within Involve to help further coordinate these schemes and attract suitable volunteers.

Future bus and sustainable travel

- 5.31 The Government is committed to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The role of transport in achieving this aim cannot be underestimated. A shift towards more walking, cycling and other mobility solutions, together with public transport, must form part of the solution.

- 5.32 During the early period of Covid-19 travel restrictions there was a clear increase in the number of local people walking and cycling around the borough. The significant reduction in car traffic when most people were unable to attend their workplaces encouraged residents to re-discover more active modes of travel.
- 5.33 The impact on public transport has been less favourable. Even after restrictions eased, confidence in using local bus services has been slow to return. Patronage has started to recover, but at the time of writing this report, figures show patronage levels are still around 50% of what they were pre-pandemic. The lasting impact of COVID19 on public transport use is unlikely to be clear for some time to come. It is therefore too early to consider a more wide-ranging review of services.
- 5.34 Retendering supported bus services at this time would undoubtedly result in more cautious responses by operators which in-turn would impact further on value for money. In the meantime, the Council will continue to work closely with operators to encourage as many people as safely possible to use existing services, and pursue the needs and opportunities outlined in this report.

6 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS

Legal Advice

- 6.1 The statutory basis for retaining a supported bus service is set out in the report. The proposals are underpinned by the Authority's duty under Section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999 *"to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness."*

Whilst there is no statutory duty to consult on the changes, there is a common law requirement to consider whether it would be appropriate in this case and if so, how, when, with whom and how widely to consult. Cabinet Office Guidelines indicate that consultation may not be appropriate for minor or technical amendments to regulation or existing policy frameworks. Given the relatively small scale level of change proposed it is the Borough Solicitors view that public consultation is not required.

Mitigation in respect of possible equalities implications are set out in paragraph 23 of the initial Equalities Screening assessment. These are proportionate to the scale of the proposed route changes.

Financial Advice

- 6.2 Contained within the 2020-21 budget proposals was a value for money review of the supported bus services contract, with the aim to deliver £0.150m of savings spread over two financial years (2020-21 and 2021-22).

The 2020-21 budget reflects an anticipated saving of £0.035m which has been met this year from additional Department for Transport (DfT) funding.

The total saving of £0.150m in 2021-22 will be delivered through the proposed alteration of some services, the temporary reduction in evening services and any shortfall will be balanced through additional DfT funding.

For future years should the trial reduction in evening services be discontinued the overall savings target would be £0.014m short (£0.007m of which reflects additional HTST costs) which can be met from existing and future S106 contributions.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.3 An Equalities Impact Assessment screening has been conducted in partnership with Community Engagement and Equalities officers and a full EIA is not required. The screening documents are shown at **ANNEX D**

Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.4 None

7 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 Officers recognise changes to bus services can be very contentious. Residents are seldom in favour of reductions to existing timetables. Those benefitting from additional services, such as the significantly extended 299 service, are often overshadowed.
- 7.2 Due to government-imposed travel and socialising restrictions, and shielding actions taken by vulnerable members of the community, a full consultation exercise has not been undertaken. Instead, officers have collaborated closely with the operator and to gain an understanding of the number and type of users likely to be affected. The proposed service changes are considered by officers to have the least possible impact.

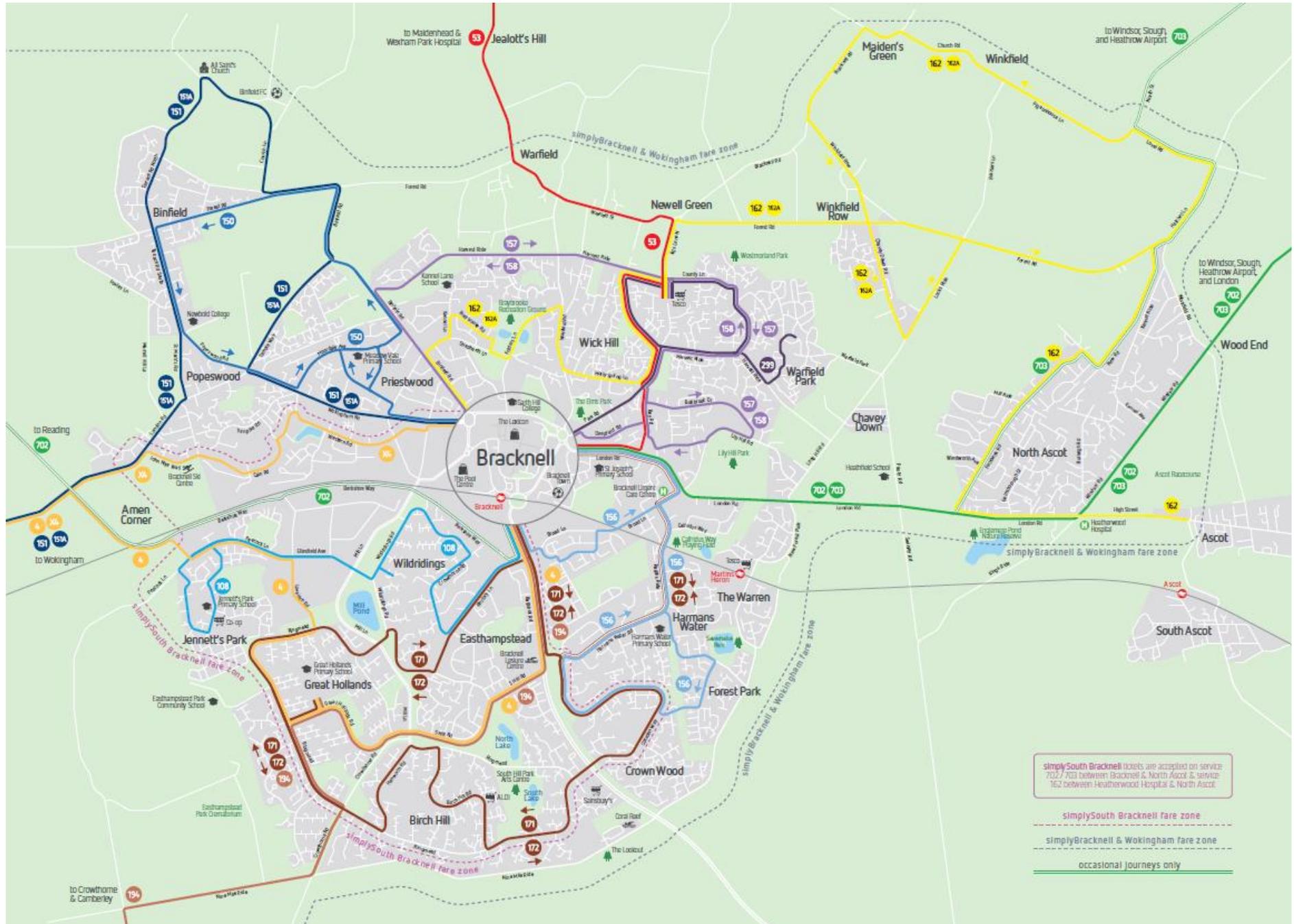
Background Papers

None

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VALUE FOR MONEY – SUPPORTED BUS SERVICES

ANNEX B

Service No.	Route Summary	Frequency	Cost to the Authority per passenger	% Concessions
53	Bracknell to Wexham Park Hospital, via M'head & Slough	Approx. hourly service Mon- Fri, 2 hourly on Sat	£0.53	15%
108	Bracknell to Jennetts Park, via Wildridings	40 min frequency Mon-Sat, evening services at 9, 10 and 11:36pm, and 7 journeys on a Sunday	£0.75	37%
150	Bracknell to Binfield via Priestwood	Half hourly Mon-Sat, evening services at 9,10 and 11pm, and 7 journeys on a Sunday	£0.76	41%
151	Bracknell - Binfield - Wokingham	5 trips per day, Mon-Sat	£5.83	30%
156	Bracknell - Forest Park - The Parks - Harmans Water - Brants Bridge	Hourly service Mon-Sat	£1.13	61%
157/158	Bracknell- Bullbrook - Tesco- Harvest Ride	Hourly in each direction, so combined half-hourly, Mon-Sat plus evening and Sunday service on 158 only	£2.12	72%
162/162A	Bracknell - Priestwood 2 - Tesco - Winkfield - Ascot	4 services to Ascot per day (last one leaves Bracknell at 1400 during the day), service to Winkfield has odd frequency but approx hourly Mon-Sat	£5.00	70%
299	Warfield Park - Tesco - Bracknell	2 services on only, Weds and Fri	£6.92	97%
598	Little Sandhurst - The Meadows - Camberley	1 return trip a day, Tues and Thurs only	£13.59	97%

Bus Network with proposed 299 amendment

