

Committee: Environment Committee

Agenda Item

Date: 22 January 2008

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Title: **Concessionary Transport: Travel token issues and general update.**

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Item for decision

Summary

1. Two issues relating to the Concessionary Transport scheme are addressed:
 - Travel tokens and their issue via sub post offices. This system is now antiquated, bureaucratic and potentially threatened by closure of some rural post offices. Current levels of use are minimal and so it is proposed to discontinue the arrangement and to issue all tokens centrally instead, primarily postally.
 - Members are updated on progress towards the new National Travel Scheme being introduced in April 2008.

Recommendations

2. That the Council discontinues its arrangement to issue travel tokens via local sub post offices.
3. That Members note the developments regarding the free National Travel pass.

Background Papers

None

Impact

Communication/Consultation	See usage data in the report. All application and renewal stationery will be amended to communicate the changes to users.
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None
Finance	Reduction of administration costs.
Human Rights	None

Legal implications	None
Sustainability	None
Ward-specific impacts	May be some complaints from users of specific post offices (Felsted is historically the best used sub post office).
Workforce/Workplace	Minimal

Travel Tokens.

- Many rural local authorities have had arrangements with local sub post offices to enable concession holders to collect/purchase their National Transport Tokens (often referred to as travel or taxi tokens) there. Over the years such arrangements have dwindled as usage has fallen off due to the availability of alternatives, the preference of a free travel pass rather than travel tokens and closure of sub post offices. Councils have also terminated arrangements as they have found the process to be increasingly bureaucratic and have had concerns over sub post offices holding stock of tokens, which are effectively cash.

- Usage statistics in Uttlesford are:

In the current financial year 35 out of 215 sales of travel tokens (16%) were made via the sub post offices (correct to 20th September).

Previous years' totals were:

2006/7	64 from 406	(16%)
2005/6	145 from 504	(31%)
2004/5	154 from 596	(26%)

- All other applications were made and processed through the Council's Customer Service Centres or posted to the applicant by recorded delivery. Administratively, the banking and audit process involved in collecting returns from post offices is as time consuming as issuing the tokens direct, and there is also the requirement for officers to visit all participating sub post offices a minimum of 4 times each year, the round trip taking at least half a day.
- Given the relatively low, and declining, level of uptake there is unlikely to be much backlash from users if the sub post office option is withdrawn, indeed officers' experience is that users are often happy to discover they do not need to make the journey to obtain their tokens.
- There is, of course, the argument that withdrawing this option may be seen to be eroding the service provided by sub post offices and therefore increasing

the threat of their closure. The counter to this is the low level of existing usage for collection of tokens.

Free National Travel Update

9. Commencing April 2008 the free travel pass will be valid on local scheduled bus services throughout the whole of England, as opposed to just within Essex as at present. The cost of free travel is met by the authority within which any particular bus journey commences.
10. The full impact of the improvement of the pass from half-fare to full-fare (which commenced in April 2006) is still being realised and a recent report from the Essex countywide scheme's contractors, MCL, highlighted a general upward trend in the number and length of journeys being made by concession-holders and hence the cost to be met by respective local authorities. Some local authorities have found the cost of last year's scheme was considerably higher than projected and budgeted.
11. UDC bucked this trend with the actual cost of travel being slightly less than predicted. While this is potentially financially beneficial, it is unfortunate that the key underlying reason for this is the sparsity of bus services available in the District.
12. The new national pass will take the form of a plastic smartcard, to a nationally standardised format, and will be issued by a specialist contractor based on information supplied by the Council.
13. Officers are currently closely monitoring the various issues ongoing with concessionary travel, as part of the Essex-wide scheme. Active contributions are being made to consultation regarding future arrangements and the scheme as a whole have written to Westminster regarding what is felt currently to be a poorly legislated and organised situation.
14. A key implication of this is that the Scheme's consensus is to amend the current time at which the travel pass becomes valid (9:00am) to the statutory minimum time of 9:30am. This is felt to give the Scheme an appropriate position from which to make justified complaints about the level of funding from central government (it is something of a nonsense to complain that costs are not covered when the concession offered is above that required by the legislation). However, to avoid leaving people isolated by this decision, special arrangements can be made in areas where the only available service departs before 9:30am.
15. The Council does offer a further non-statutory concession, namely companion passes (offered to enable the severely disabled to be accompanied when they are travelling). UDC currently issues just 7 of these, but the potential backlash should they be revoked is felt to vastly outweigh any benefit. A number of Essex Councils have decided to retain them. It has been stated that from April the UDC companion passes will only be valid within the District, so any return journeys from outside of Uttlesford will have to be paid for by the passenger.

Some Councils have made reciprocal arrangements, but with such low numbers Uttlesford would be a net loser should it enter into any such arrangements.

Risk Analysis

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Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Possible poor PR due to withdrawal of service and erosion of value of sub post offices.	Low	Low	Use is declining and more efficient alternative is available.
Possible poor PR due to change to 9:30am start time.	Medium	Low	Retaining a 9:00am start puts UDC in a poor position to lobby Westminster over Scheme costs. Arrangements can be made to avoid complete isolation of any pass holders.