



HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE: 9 MARCH 2023

PETITION TO MAINTAIN THE 159 HINCKLEY TO COALVILLE BUS
SERVICE

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of the report is to provide the Committee with the information relating to the decision to cease the financial subsidy agreement for Service 159 operated by Roberts Travel between Coalville and Hinckley following the presentation of a petition. The petition is requesting the decision to be reconsidered and for service 159 to be reinstated.

The Petition

2. The petition, received by the County Council on 22 February 2023 contained a total of 2,388 signatures (1,625 paper / 763 e-petition) and is worded as follows:-

“Many people use the 159 to get to work, to college and to the shops. It's a much valued bus service whose loss will be heavily felt particularly in villages like Stapleton where it is the only regular bus service. It's a service that covers much of the county and serves seven members County Divisions, Hinckley De Montfort, St Mary's, Mallory, Market Bosworth, Coalville South, Coalville North and Ibstock and Appleby. I hope even at this late hour you can step in and restore the subsidy to Roberts to keep the 159 going”.

Background

3. Service 159 operated between Coalville and Hinckley (via Hugglescote, Ellistown, Ibstock, Nailstone, Barlestone, Newbold Verdon, Market Bosworth, Cadeby, Stapleton and Barwell) Monday to Saturday on an approximately 90-minute frequency using two vehicles.
4. The service was part subsidised by the Council on a de-minimis contract until 31 December 2022 at a cost of £532 per day (£162,792 per annum). This de-minimis funding was not for specific journeys or sections of the route and was additional funding required to enable Roberts Travel to operate the service.
5. Roberts Travel confirmed that they would require the same level of subsidy in order to continue the service going forward. They also indicated that should the subsidy be removed, then they would likely need to take the commercial decision to withdraw the service.

6. Following review and further discussions with Roberts Travel, the Council confirmed that it would be unable to continue subsidising the service on the same de-minimis funding basis. On 15 December 2022 Roberts Travel confirmed that they would be de-registering the service, with the last day of operation being Saturday 25 February 2023.
7. The Council reviews and assesses its supported service provision in the context of its Passenger Transport Policy and Strategy (PTPS), which was adopted by the Cabinet on 16 October 2018. The focus of the PTPS is on high priority journeys (food shopping, primary healthcare) that can be accessed at a local centre. 800 metre access to a bus service or local centre is a key factor of consideration. Service 159 was reviewed against the PTPS.
8. The Council currently supports a further 26 bus services. The current financial position, with regard to these supported bus services, is that inflated contract costs will result in a Council 'Local Bus Services' budget deficit of approximately £1m going into the 2023/24 financial year. In addition, due to wider authority budget pressures, a further £200,000 Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) savings target on the baseline budget was agreed by the County Council on 22 February 2023.
9. Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the Council was underway with a PTPS review of all of its supported bus services. The reviews were paused during the pandemic, but they have now recommenced as agreed by the Cabinet on 10 February 2023.

Service 159 Review and Considerations

10. As the 31 December 2022 contract end date for service 159 neared, discussions were held between Roberts Travel and the Council.
11. Roberts Travel confirmed that they were willing to extend the service at the same level of subsidy (£162,792 per annum) for a minimum of five months until 28 May 2023. They advised that they reviewed the service earlier in the year but were limited in what they could do to reduce the subsidy requirement. They added that if they were to make any additional revisions, it would not result in any significant reduction in the cost of the subsidy and might result in a further loss of revenue, which would also have to be factored into the subsidy price.
12. Roberts Travel further stated that even with the subsidy from the Council, as well as the receipt of Covid Bus Recovery Grant funding from the Government, there continued to be a shortfall in funding to operate this service.
13. The option to extend the de-minimis arrangement for a further five months at the same level of subsidy was discounted as this would not have increased the likelihood of the service being commercially viable.
14. On reviewing the service against the PTPS, it was identified that if the service was withdrawn some direct journeys will no longer be possible, for example: Hinckley to Coalville; Market Bosworth to Coalville or Hinckley; Newbold Verdon to Coalville or Hinckley.

15. On analysis of accessibility to alternative services or a local centre, it was identified that most villages along the route would have access to alternative commercial services or a local centre as detailed in the table appended to this report.
16. It was recognised that should the service be withdrawn, while most communities would continue to have access to alternatives, they may not necessarily be the journeys and destinations desired, for example, specific worker journeys. However, such provision is outside of the scope of the PTPS, which primarily focusses on access to those important food shopping and healthcare services, and for most communities along the route that alternative access is there.
17. An analysis of the passenger data showed that approximately a third of journeys were before 9 a.m. and after 4 p.m. which is when worker journeys would most likely be undertaken.
18. No eligible scholars travelled on this service although the operator advised that they had sold four full academic year passes and three autumn term passes.
19. In light of the significant level of funding required to part subsidise this service and that the majority of residents along the route would continue to have access to an alternative commercial service and local centre, there was not a justifiable case for the Council to continue this subsidy agreement with Roberts Travel. The Council informed Roberts Travel of its position and they subsequently de-registered the service with the last day of operation being 25 February 2023.
20. For the communities left without access to an alternative commercial service or local centre, the Council has stepped in to provide a Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) service. Localities where the Council has introduced DRT's are as follows:-
 - 1) Hugglescote to Coalville (operating on Thursday and Saturday);
 - 2) Junction of A447/B582 (Belcher's Bar) to Ibstock (operating on Thursday);
 - 3) Cadeby to Market Bosworth (operating on Monday and Thursday);
 - 4) Stapleton / Properties in the vicinity of Dobbies Garden Centre to Barwell (operating on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday).
21. These DRT's will cater for the very low demand from those communities and allow for around 1.5-2 hours access to important services at a local centre with a pick up being set at approximately 09:45 and a return journey being set for approximately 11:30. As part of managing the DRT, officers will consider requests for minor alterations from communities that may arise during the 'settling in' period.
22. The decision taken by the Council is in line with its PTPS and while it is fully recognised that the alternatives in place may not provide people with their preferred choice of destination or times of travel, with the significant financial challenge it faces, as highlighted in paragraph 8, the Council is simply not able to cater for this flexibility of choice and is therefore unable to reconsider its decision to step away from this subsidy agreement.

Consultation

23. On adoption of the PTPS on 16 October 2018, authorisation by the Cabinet was given to the Director of Environment and Transport, following consultation with the Cabinet Lead Member, to implement the PTPS Operational Handbook.
24. On 5 December 2022, the outcomes of the review of the 159 service were presented to the Director of Environment and Transport who, in consultation with the Cabinet Lead Member, took the decision to withdraw from this subsidy agreement.
25. On 16 December 2022 all local members on the route of 159 service were briefed about the Council's position on the subsidy agreement and Roberts Travel's subsequent commercial decision to de-register the service with effect from 25 February 2023.
26. Parish councils were notified on 23 December 2022 and passenger notices were displayed at bus stops and also on the buses. Information was also provided on the Council's Choose How You Move website. There was also significant media coverage on the withdrawal of the service.
27. Residents were also written to with details of the DRT the Council would be providing from 25 February 2023.

Resource and Legal Implications

28. Not renewing this contract with a subsidy of £162,792 per annum will reduce the pressure on an already stretched Local Bus Services budget. The alternative DRT provision the Council has introduced for those communities left without access to important services will cost £24,908.
29. Despite this, going into the 2023/24 financial year the Council is still heading for a circa £1million deficit on its Local Bus Services budget and, due to wider Authority budgetary pressures, a further £200,000 MTFS savings target on this budget was approved by the County Council at its meeting on 22 February 2023.
30. The Director of Corporate Resources and the Director of Law and Governance have been consulted on the content of this report.

Timetable for Decisions

31. The 159 service has now been de-registered by Roberts Travel with the last day operation being Saturday 25 February 2023.
32. The DRT's as outlined in paragraph 20 were in place for 27 February 2023 and details are available on the Choose How You Move website.

Conclusion

33. The Council has reviewed the 159 service in the context of its PTPS and discussed the subsidy requirement with the bus operator Roberts Travel.
34. With there being access to alternative services for the majority of residents along the route and taking account of the £162,792 de-minimis subsidy requirement to continue providing the service against a significant Local Bus Services and wider Authority

budgetary pressure, the Director of Environment and Transport, following consultation with the Cabinet Lead Member, took the decision not to enter a new contract with Roberts on this basis.

35. Roberts Travel subsequently withdrew the service with its last day of operation being 25 February 2023.
36. DRT provision is in place for those communities left without access to important services following the withdrawal of the 159 service.
37. The Council has reviewed this decision following receipt of the petition and has concluded that, in the context of the policy and financial position, it will not change its decision not to renew a contract with Roberts for the 159.

Background papers

Report to the Cabinet - 10 February 2023 – Passenger Transport Policy and Strategy:
<https://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=7073&Ver=4> item 6

Report to the Cabinet - 16 October 2018 – Draft Passenger Transport Policy and Strategy:
<https://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=5184&Ver=4> item 210

Report to the County Council – 22 February 2023 - Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023/24 – 2026/27:
<https://politics.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=134&MId=6913&Ver=4> item 38a

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

38. This report has been circulated to Members representing the electoral divisions in the areas covered by the 159 service: Mr S. Bray CC, Mr M. Mullaney CC, Mr K. Merrie CC, Mr C. Smith CC, Mr B. Harrison-Rushton CC and Mr D. Harrison CC.

Equality Implications

39. An Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment (EHRIA) report on the PTPS was completed in 2018, helping to inform its development. A copy of the EHRIA report was appended to the October 2018 Cabinet report.
40. The PTPS EHRIA report noted that the proposal to review public transport provision, including bus subsidies, DRT and Community Bus Partnerships, could have a disproportionate effect on some groups, such as rural communities, older people, people with limited mobility, people with a disability and young people.
41. In light of the recommencement of the PTPS reviews of all of the Council's supported bus services this year, the EHRIA has been reviewed and a draft Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) produced. The EIA concludes that where some existing supported services are not likely to be supported and cease to operate, there will be a negative impact to individuals who use these services. It noted that there is a potential for this to disproportionately impact older people, people with disabilities, and people who live in isolated or employment deprived areas. However, it notes that while some services will no longer be supported and cease, where any residents are left without

access to important services (food shopping, healthcare) the Council will ensure that replacement service provision is in place.

42. The 159 service has been reviewed in the context of the Council's PTPS, so the implications and mitigations as laid out in the above EHRIA and draft EIA are relevant.

Human Rights Implications

43. There are no human rights implications arising from the conclusions in this report.

Appendix

Analysis of boarding data for the period 27 October – 26 November 2022

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