



Kirklees
METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

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Review of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Group

Report on the

Relative Merits of the Metro Access Bus and Taxi Voucher Scheme

November 2002

Kirklees Metropolitan Council

Scrutiny Review of the Relative Merits of the Access Bus Service and Taxi Voucher Scheme

Summary

The purpose of this review was to look at the relative merits of the two services and whether the Taxi Voucher scheme could be expanded through diverting money from the Access Bus.

The investigations into each scheme and discussions with providers and users have demonstrated that the Access Bus and the Taxi Voucher Scheme provide a different, complementary, type of service for different users. Both services have their strengths, but also have drawbacks.

The Access Bus is a high volume, low cost, unlimited and free service for anyone of any age who feels that they have difficulty using public transport. As a result of high demand, however, the service does not provide a great deal of choice or flexibility. Customers are required to be flexible and travel on days when other people in their area travel. It provides guaranteed trips for groups of users that agree to use the bus on the same day/time each week.

In contrast, the Taxi Voucher Scheme provides a much more flexible service as it is not limited by time or boundaries. Users are able to travel to wherever they want, whenever they want. However, it is a low volume, higher cost service, with a cost to the user, and with a limit on the amount of use. Also, fewer people are entitled to use the service as the eligibility criteria are much stricter.

It does not seem appropriate, therefore, to suggest that funds from the Access Bus should be diverted to fund the expansion of the Taxi Voucher Scheme. Although the taxi voucher scheme provides an individual and personal service it could not provide the same volume of journeys that the Access Bus does, nor the same number for each user, and also operates much stricter eligibility criteria.

Whilst reviewing this subject it has become clear that there are a number of concerns about whether the transport needs of people with disabilities and mobility problems are being met. A Scrutiny Commission looked at and reported on these issues in 1995. It is now appropriate to review progress, particularly as the short-term regeneration funding for the taxi voucher scheme runs out in 2004.

It is proposed, therefore, to establish a Scrutiny Panel to review progress in meeting the transport needs of people with disabilities and to recommend further improvements. The Commission can investigate the potential to improve access to mainstream transport provision, as well as considering how both schemes can be improved, the long-term funding of the Taxi Voucher scheme and whether any new initiatives are required. The Panel could start work in January and be asked to report its recommendations by June at the latest. The Panel would be expected to fully involve METRO (possibly as a co-optee), and representatives of disabled people.

Context and Purpose of the Review

When proposals to the Cabinet Finance Sub-Group sought additional funding to expand the Taxi Voucher Scheme, members questioned whether existing subsidy for the Access Bus was a good use of resources.

The issue was referred to Scrutiny with a request for an 'examination of the relative merits in quality and cost effectiveness terms of the Access Bus Service and Taxi Voucher Scheme'; and to 'establish whether the Council should approach the Passenger Transport Authority and seek a diversion of subsidy from the Access Bus into a wider Taxi Voucher Scheme'.

Initially, it was not possible to start the review due to the impending local elections; however, some desk research was carried out. Subsequently, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Group decided that it would oversee the work rather than set up a separate panel and requested the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny to complete the work and report back.

The review has involved gathering information about the two services – the finances, the costs, number of journeys – and also discussions with the providers and users of both services, and action research when the chair travelled on the Access Bus to speak with users.

Background

The Access Bus is a fully accessible door-to-door dial-a-ride bus service provided by Metro from its mainstream budget which operates within each of the five districts of West Yorkshire. The service is provided free of charge to eligible residents and operates between 9.00am and 5.30pm Monday to Saturday and 9.00am to 5.00pm on Sunday. A limited number of late and evening journeys are also available, which provide transport up to 10:30pm to groups wishing to travel for social purposes.

Anyone of any age who is unable to use conventional public transport, or has extreme difficulty in doing so, due to a disability is eligible to use the Access Bus. Drivers are trained to the same standard as social services drivers, eg disability awareness, lifting, handling and first aid. Drivers assist customers to the door and beyond if necessary.

Access Bus is mainly used to transport passengers from their home to their nearest shopping centre and back. Passengers also use the service to visit family and friends, social clubs, luncheon clubs, churches etc. It is not possible to guarantee a trip or to offer transport to hospitals for appointments or to council run facilities.

The Access Bus has a limited budget for taxi provision, which is mainly used, in rural areas to cater for areas of low demand. Taxi transport is also provided where, due to access problems, it is impossible to use the bus.

The Taxi Voucher Scheme was set up in November 1996 covering the Huddersfield Pride area. After a positive evaluation in 1998, it was subsequently extended to the DRAM

(Dalton, Rawthorpe, Moldgreen) area in December 1998. The scheme was extended again in 2001 as a result of a successful bid to the Rural Partnership Fund (covering parts of the Colne Valley, Holme Valley, Meltham Township and Kirkburton Parish), and most recently also now includes the SRB5 areas of Huddersfield.

Each individual is eligible to purchase £90 worth of vouchers at a cost of £30 per year. These are contained in 6 voucher books worth £15 each (purchased for £5). They can be bought throughout the year upto the maximum of 6 books. The individual user books a taxi journey and can use the vouchers to subsidise the cost. The vouchers are purchased through the Kirklees Passport Office to enable the eligibility to be checked and the taxi drivers are reimbursed through the Building Control and Licensing Service.

The eligibility criteria are based on receipt of one of the following benefits:

- Disability Living Allowance (Higher Rate Mobility)
- Disability Living Allowance (High Rate Care)
- Disability Living Allowance (Mid Rate Care)
- Wheelchair Users Database
- Attendance Allowance
- Registered Blind
- Registered Partially sighted
- War Pensioners Disablement Benefit (Mobility Supplement)

Financially the taxi voucher scheme has been dependent on a variety of short-term external regeneration funding. The scheme is run by a voluntary committee of users and council officers and is dependent on 'voluntary' administrative support from a number of services.

Findings of the review

The research concentrated on establishing the relative merits in value and quality of service of both the Access Bus and the Taxi Voucher Scheme.

1. Value

The Access Bus can be used by anyone of any age who feels that they have difficulty using public transport. There are no strict eligibility criteria and no medical certification is required.

There are currently 1501 registered users in Kirklees and a total of 64,500 journeys in Kirklees were carried out last year. Five buses a day operate in Kirklees. The main type of journeys are shopping trips (the majority), University of the third Age, luncheons, visiting friends and family, private appointments. 70% of users are over the age of 65.

The Taxi Voucher Scheme can be used only by a person of any age who is in receipt of the one of the benefits set out above. It is a service for people with a defined disability/mobility problem.

There are 375 registered users. Most people use the vouchers for shopping, visiting friends or relatives, participating in leisure and recreation and also for doctors and hospital appointments.

2. Value for Money for the User

The Access Bus operates at no cost to the user and there is no absolute limit on the number of times one person can use the service. However, due to high demand for the service customers, may be limited to one return journey per person per week dependent on location of customer address and destination. The Service is oversubscribed and as a result the service is not very flexible and does not offer a great deal of choice.

The Taxi Voucher Scheme costs between £5 and £30 per person per year depending on usage. Each user is entitled to a maximum of 6 voucher booklets worth £15 each (each booklet costs the user £5) – a total of £90 worth of taxi journeys per year. The total allocation can be used up within 6-12 weeks. It does, however, offer the individual greater flexibility and choice.

3. Value for money for the Authority

The Access Bus benefits 1501 users in Kirklees (a total of 64,500 journeys per year) at an estimated cost of £300,000 to the authority. It is only possible to give an estimate as the service is a West Yorkshire one provided by Metro. The total budget for the Access Bus is £1.7 million.

It should be noted that as a West Yorkshire service provided by Metro it would be extremely unlikely that it would be technically possible to divert a notional sum to another scheme, even if that was desirable.

Comparatively, the Taxi Voucher Scheme benefits 407 users in the defined parts of South Kirklees at a cost of £46,500. One third is paid by the user, and the rest comes from the SRB and Rural Partnership Grants. Metro also makes a contribution to the costs. It needs to be noted that the administrative costs of the scheme are difficult to define as they are in effect provided on a good will basis by a number of council services. If the taxi voucher scheme were to be expanded, proper administrative support, possibly up to 3 posts, would be required.

Comparing costs, number of users and number of journeys, it is extremely unlikely that the taxi voucher scheme would be able to provide the same number of trips as the Access Bus.

4. Quality of Service

There is a high demand for the Access Bus and it undoubtedly meets some of the transport needs of a great many people. It provides fully accessible vehicles with trained drivers for regular journeys throughout the year. It operates between 9am and 5:30pm and is mainly used to transport users to shopping areas. Because the service is oversubscribed the user may not always be able to secure a trip but mechanisms have been developed to try and reduce the chances of that happening. These include guaranteed trips for groups of users in the same area that agree to use the bus on the same day/time each week.

The drawbacks of the Access Bus are that the service does not provide a great deal of flexibility or choice for the user. Users express concerns that it can be difficult to book

journeys as the 'phone is not answered', although Metro introduced the long term group booking facility in order to remove the need to book each week and thus reduce call congestion. It is also planned to install a new telephone system which will improve call handling and allow the booking lines to remain open between 8:30am and 3:30pm. The lack of flexibility and restricted hours limit independence and personal choice. Some people also prefer not to use specialist group provision as they feel that this labels or stigmatises them. Metro is working to reduce this perception by the use of modern standard ramped Access Buses.

The Taxi Voucher Scheme offers much more freedom and flexibility for the individual. It is not time limited and can be used at any time for any purpose. Discussions with users show that it is highly valued, giving them a more independent lifestyle and enhancing self confidence as it enables people to use a mainstream rather than a specialist provision.

The drawbacks, though, of the Taxi Voucher scheme are that it covers a limited area of Kirklees and only benefits users up to the value of £90 worth of taxi journeys – a number of users report that they use up their allocation within 6– 12 weeks (and they have to contribute one third). There is also a problem that taxis are often not available early in the morning/mid afternoon when the vehicles are being used for school runs. Users also comment that the availability of taxis with appropriate facilities is limited and this can make it difficult to book a journey, particularly at short notice. There can also be problems with the attitude and lack of awareness of (a few) drivers.

Conclusions

Investigations into each scheme have demonstrated that the Access Bus and the Taxi Voucher Scheme provide a different, complementary, type of service for different users. Both services have their strengths, but also have drawbacks.

The Access Bus is a high volume, low cost, unlimited and free service for anyone of any age who feels that they have difficulty using public transport. As a result of high demand, however, the service does not provide a great deal of choice or flexibility. Customers are required to be flexible and travel on days when other people in their area travel. It provides guaranteed trips for groups of users that agree to use the bus on the same day/time each week.

In contrast, the Taxi Voucher Scheme provides a much more flexible service as it is not limited by time or boundaries. Users are able to travel to wherever they want, whenever they want. However, it is a low volume, higher cost service, with a cost associated to the user, and with a limit on the amount of use. Also, fewer people are entitled to use the service as the eligibility criteria are much more strict.

Given that this is the case it does not seem appropriate to suggest that funds from the Access Bus should be diverted to fund the expansion of the Taxi Voucher Scheme. Although the taxi voucher scheme provides an individual and personal service it could not provide the same volume of journeys that the Access Bus does, nor the same number for each user, and also operates much stricter eligibility criteria. However, the taxi voucher scheme is clearly of great benefit and opportunities could be sought to expand the geographical area of coverage in the immediate short-term – possibly through use of NRF money.

Whilst reviewing this subject it has become clear that there are a number of concerns about whether the transport needs of people with disabilities and mobility problems are

being met. A Scrutiny Commission looked at and reported on these issues in 1995. It is now appropriate to review progress, particularly as the short-term regeneration funding for the taxi voucher scheme runs out in 2004.

It is proposed, therefore, to establish a Scrutiny Panel to review progress in meeting the transport needs of people with disabilities and to recommend further improvements. The Panel can investigate the potential to improve access to mainstream transport provision, as well as considering how both schemes can be improved, the long-term funding of the Taxi Voucher scheme and whether any new initiatives are required. The Panel could start work in January and be asked to report its recommendations by June at the latest. The Panel would be expected to fully involve METRO (possibly as a co-optee), and representatives of disabled people.

Recommendations

- 1 Having reviewed the relative merits of each scheme it does not seem appropriate to suggest that funds from the Access Bus should be diverted to fund the expansion of the Taxi Voucher scheme.**
- 2 Sources of funding, such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, could be explored to expand the immediate geographical coverage of the taxi voucher scheme.**
- 3 A Scrutiny Panel be established to review in depth the progress in meeting the transport needs of people with disabilities and to recommend further improvements including the long term funding of the Taxi Voucher scheme.**