

EXECUTIVE

Minutes of the special meeting held on 14 April 2009 at the Town Hall, Royal Leamington Spa at 7.30 pm.

PRESENT: Councillor Michael Doody (Chairman); Councillors Mrs Bunker, Caborn, Mrs Grainger, Hammon, Kinson, Shilton and White.

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Crowther (Labour Group Observer); Councillor Ms De-Lara-Bond (Liberal Democrat Group Observer); Councillor Gifford (Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee); and Councillor Mrs Knight (Chair of Audit and Resources Scrutiny Committee).

1. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

2. **PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE COUNCIL'S DISCRETIONARY ASSISTED TRAVEL SCHEME**

The Executive considered a report from Revenues and Customer Services which sought approval for a revised discretionary assisted travel scheme entitling eligible residents to either £50.00 or £25.00 of travel tokens upon payment of a £5.00 administration charge. The value of entitlement would depend upon the quality of bus service serving the parish.

The Executive held on 8 April 2008 requested that various Budget Working Groups be established to consider specific areas of work, one of those being Assisted Travel.

The Assisted Travel Working Group (the Group) was to consider:

- How the additional £50,000 allocated in the budget (2008/09) should be spent; and
- How the current scheme should be modified in the light of the experience of Racing Club Warwick's Communitaxi Scheme.

Following a comprehensive examination of the Communitaxi scheme provided by Racing Club Warwick (RCW), the Group concluded that the scheme was not benefiting residents in the rural areas. This conclusion was not a criticism of the efforts of RCW but a belief that the scheme was not meeting the objectives described in the partnership agreement between RCW and the Council.

The Group recognised that the Communitaxi scheme was of benefit to some urban residents but given the significant annual investment made by the Council of £70,000 per annum, it did not consider that the scheme provided value for money to Warwick District as a whole. The Group was of the opinion that the Council's resources would be better targeted towards those residents who had an irregular or only acceptable bus service and that the most efficient way of doing this was by the re-introduction of travel tokens.

EXECUTIVE MINUTES (Continued)

Although many residents in rural areas were in receipt of a free national bus pass, the opportunity for those residents to use the pass was limited due to the quality of the bus service in operation. The Group therefore proposed that for the year 2009/10 the Council should allocate to eligible residents tokens to the value of either £50.00 or £25.00 (with a £5.00 administration charge) and then consider the take-up of the scheme to see whether it would be possible to increase the value of the token allocation in future years.

The £5.00 administration charge was considered appropriate as it was felt that the tokens were more likely to be used if there was a charge. It had been the experience of many authorities that without a charge local residents collected their entitlement but did not use the tokens thereby diverting resources from those most in need.

The Audit and Resources Scrutiny Committee were unhappy that there was potential for this scheme to overlook the most vulnerable people in the community – those unable to use public transport – and felt that more work was required to benefit residents in urban areas. The Committee was also concerned that this may not be a good use of resources, about the potential to go over budget, that the scheme was open to abuse by people passing or selling tokens on, that the Council could potentially lose money by having to pay for tokens upfront, and that there should be a process to adequately monitor take-up of the scheme and those sections of the community which were not catered for. The Committee was keen to ensure that, when receiving its six month review, the Executive had the information available to consider the impact of exclusion from the scheme on disabled urban residents.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had very strong opinions for and against the implementation of this new scheme.

However, the majority of members on the Committee would like the Executive to re-tender for a scheme which was similar to that previously operated by Racing Club Warwick. The scheme should be modified in light of experience and offer an enhancement to residents in the rural areas, but the scheme should be available to all residents in the District, including those in urban areas. The majority did not support the new scheme which was proposed.

The Committee would also like all Town and Parish Councils to be reminded that they should participate in Warwickshire County Council's consultation on improving the existing bus routes in the District.

A vote was taken on this comment and the result was 6 in favour and 5 against.

Councillor Crowther acknowledged that this was a difficult problem to solve, but he felt that issuing taxi tokens was like handing over bank notes which cannot be accounted for. He also questioned if this was best use tax payers money?

Councillor Ms De-Lara-Bond had concerns that the scheme had already been withdrawn at 31 March 2009 and that the new scheme was creating a rural and urban divide. There needed to be some options available for isolated people and those with mobility problems in urban areas as many had problems using the buses. She felt that this area had been overlooked in the new scheme.

EXECUTIVE MINUTES (Continued)

Councillor Doody responded that no scheme would be satisfactory to everyone. Issuing tokens to eligible residents up to the value of £50 or £25 was never going to be enough, but in the circumstances of the current financial climate, it had to be.

The issue of the proposed scheme being discriminatory had been raised, but he felt that this was not the case. The previous scheme with Racing Club Warwick had been discriminatory because it had been difficult to book the taxis and sometimes it appeared that RCW didn't want to go out and pick up residents in certain areas of the District.

The Working Party had looked at bus routes in the District and had found that to introduce an additional route would cost over £50,000 and was not a realistic option.

Councillor Doody acknowledged that tokens would be a form of currency but it was just for use with the taxi scheme and he reiterated that if there was no bus service in an area, eligible residents would receive £50 worth of tokens and if there was a service, but it was not adequate ie no buses running on a Sunday, residents would be entitled to £25 worth of tokens.

He stated that disabled people were entitled to a Disability Living Allowance (Mobility Component) and this could be used for supplement their transport costs. Also those residents aged over 60 years in the District, were also entitled to a free bus pass, therefore, he could not be persuaded by the argument that the scheme was being discriminatory. In his own ward, Radford Semele, the new scheme wouldn't apply as the bus service was sufficient. Overall, he felt that the proposed scheme was a good one and thanked the Working Group for their work.

RESOLVED that

- (1) a new assisted travel scheme providing eligible residents with £50.00 or £25.00 travel tokens upon payment of a £5.00 administration charge, be approved;
- (2) the eligibility criteria as set out in Appendices 1 and 2 to the report, be agreed;
- (3) the three year partnership agreement with Racing Club Warwick that ended on 31 March 2009, be noted; and
- (4) the Executive to receive an update report in six months to review the take-up of the scheme.

(Portfolio Holder for this item was Councillor Caborn)
(Forward Plan reference 160)

(The meeting ended at 8.25pm)