

Agenda Item IMD28

INDIVIDUAL EXECUTIVE MEMBER DECISION REFERENCE IMD: 2023/28

TITLE	Free Bus Travel
DECISION TO BE MADE BY	Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways - Paul Fishwick
DATE, MEETING ROOM and TIME	10 November 2023 LGF 9 - 10:30am
WARD	(All Wards);
DIRECTOR / KEY OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Giorgio Framaliccio

PURPOSE OF REPORT (Inc Strategic Outcomes)

To gain approval for introducing free bus travel from local bus stops in Wokingham Borough on selected dates in the run up to Christmas on all Reading Buses and Thames Valley Buses services.

All free bus travel referred to above will be fully funded using grant funding from the Department for Transport (DfT).

RECOMMENDATION

1. To approve the introduction of free bus travel from local bus stops in Wokingham Borough on Reading Buses and Thames Valley Buses on selected dates in the run up to Christmas using grant funding from the DfT.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

To encourage the use of local bus services and reduce traffic on local roads in the run up to Christmas it is proposed to make use of DfT Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding to provide free bus travel from local bus stops within Wokingham Borough on selected Saturdays and Sundays. Free bus travel is offered at a time when the cost of living and household expenditure is highest. The proposal will allow residents to shop locally, supporting local businesses in villages, on high streets and in town centres. The proposal will be extended to specific bus services on two Sundays to further support local community events. Encouraging local bus travel also has positive outcomes for local air quality and the climate emergency.

The proposed free travel days will be on the following dates:

- Saturday 18th November 2023
- Saturday 25th November 2023
- Sunday 26th November 2023 (Lion 4/X4 only for Wokingham Extravaganza)
- Saturday 2nd December 2023
- Sunday 3rd December 2023 (Orange 13/14 only for Woodley Winter Carnival)
- Saturday 9th December 2023
- Saturday 16th December 2023
- Saturday 23rd December 2023

Reading Buses and Thames Valley Buses will allow passengers to board the bus free of charge from any local bus stop within Wokingham Borough on the above dates. The operators will be reimbursed a fixed amount to cover the revenue loss for these days using BSIP grant funding from the DfT.

For anyone visiting the borough and therefore not a resident of Wokingham Borough, free travel will only be provided in one direction, unless an equivalent scheme is operating in the area where passengers board. For residents who wish to travel outside of the borough, usual fares will apply for the return journey, unless an equivalent scheme is operating in the area where passengers board for the return journey. Free travel will not extend to services which are not local bus service, for example park and ride services or football specials. Free travel will not be provided on any other operator's service during these dates, for example the Arriva 850 service.

Background

Bus travel can provide access to jobs and education, support the local economy, and reduce social isolation, especially in more rural communities. Compared to other forms of transport, bus travel has greater benefit for allowing independence for younger and older residents as well as those with mobility difficulties. In general bus travel is more affordable than owning a private vehicle when all costs are considered on an annual basis. When well used, bus travel also provides positive outcomes for local air quality and the climate emergency, with one double decker bus having the ability to remove 75 private cars from local roads.

However, whilst the benefits of bus travel are well understood, the Covid pandemic had a significant impact on passenger numbers and therefore the viability of local bus service. In Wokingham Borough, passenger levels reduce to below 30% of their pre-pandemic levels. Whilst passenger numbers have now generally recovered to over 80%, there is still more work to do to see a full recovery.

In March 2021 the DfT published the National Bus Strategy – Bus Back Better. The central aim of Bus Back Better was to get more people travelling by bus – first, to get overall patronage back to its pre-COVID-19 level, and then to exceed it. Bus Back Better directed Local Transport Authorities to produce local BSIPs. BSIPs set out local measures to improve bus travel and achieve the DfT's central aim of increasing bus travel.

To support the implementation of BSIPs, the DfT has made various funding available to LTAs. Wokingham Borough Council were awarded just over £400,000 in 2023/2024 financial year, with a similar amount in 2024/2025. The Council will also use some of this funding to support the reintroduction of Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride.

Using a small proportion of the above funding it is proposed to introduce free bus travel on selected weekend days in Wokingham Borough in the run up to Christmas. Providing free bus travel in the run up to Christmas allows an alternative option to car travel, at a time when residents are mostly likely to make local journeys where the bus could be a feasible alternative. The aim is to restore confidence in bus travel and encourage residents who may not otherwise consider using the bus, to give the bus a try. For residents this proposal will come at a time when the cost of living is highest, with increasing fuel bills coupled with other financial pressures associated with Christmas.

With half of all bus travel now being for leisure, eating out and shopping, the offer of free bus travel will further support local businesses and high streets by offering an additional benefit to shop locally within the Borough.

The proposal has been designed around typically the busiest shopping days in the run up to Christmas, supporting footfall to town centers. The addition of the two Sundays aims to support two specific community events, Wokingham Winter Carnival, and Woodley Christmas Extravaganza.

The free travel initiative will be promoted through My Journey and by local operators.

Business Case

The cost to provide free travel on all identified dates is £47,871. The cost will be fully funded by BSIP grant funding from the Department for Transport. BSIP grant funding can only be spent on improvements to local bus services within a limited timeframe.

For anyone visiting the borough and therefore not a resident of Wokingham Borough, free travel will only be provided in one direction. For residents who wish to travel outside of the borough, usual fares will apply for the return journey. The only exception to this will be if neighboring authorities offer an equivalent scheme, in which case neighboring authorities will have separate arrangements with local bus operators and will cover the cost of bus travel from the point where passengers board.

Free travel will not extend to services which are not local bus service, for example park and ride services or football specials. Free travel will not be provided on any other operator’s service during these dates, for example the Arriva 850 service.

The national £2 fare cap and concessionary passes will continue to be valid where the payment of a fare is still applicable.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£47,871	Yes	Revenue Grant Funding
Next Financial Year (Year 2)			
Following Financial Year (Year 3)			

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

The first instalment of revenue grant funding was received by Wokingham Borough Council at the end of September 2023. Funding is time limited; all funding must be spent within 12 months of receipt and not later than 31st March 2025.

Cross-Council Implications The provision of a free bus travel on these days has a positive impact on the climate change emergency, local air quality and congestion for all destinations in Wokingham Borough as well as to destinations in the neighboring boroughs of Reading, Bracknell, Windsor and Maidenhead and Surrey.

Public Sector Equality Duty
A stage one Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken.

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES	
Director – Resources and Assets	
Monitoring Officer	
Leader of the Council	

For Highways use only	
<i>If your item is not about a highways matter you do not need to complete the Town and Parish Council information or the Local Ward Member information</i>	
Town and Parish Councils	
Local Ward Members	

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

List of Background Papers

Contact Rebecca Brooks	Service Place
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