

Agenda Item IMD21

INDIVIDUAL EXECUTIVE MEMBER DECISION REFERENCE IMD: 2023/24

TITLE	Park & Rides Sites
DECISION TO BE MADE BY	Executive Member for Active Travel, Transport and Highways - Paul Fishwick
DATE, MEETING ROOM and TIME	24 October 2023 12:15, LGF3
WARD	(All Wards);
DIRECTOR / KEY OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Giorgio Framaliccio

PURPOSE OF REPORT (Inc Strategic Outcomes)

To gain approval for reintroducing a Park and Ride service at Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride service for a trial period using grant funding from the Department for Transport.

To gain approval for opening the Coppid Beech Park and Ride site. Park and Ride users will be able to make use of the car park in conjunction with the Lion 4/X4 service on the A329 London Road.

RECOMMENDATION

1. To approve the reintroduction of a Park and Ride bus service which operates between Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride site and Reading Town Centre using grant funding.
2. To approve the opening of the Coppid Beech Park and Ride site.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

In 2019, before the Coronavirus pandemic, the Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride service was operated commercially by Reading Buses. The success of the park and ride provision attracted grant funding from Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), this allowed for the expansion of Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride site and the construction of Coppid Beech Park and Ride site. This work is now complete. However, because of the Coronavirus pandemic Park and Ride bus services nationally saw a significant reduction in passenger levels resulting in the Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride service (which at that time was relocated to Thames Valley Park and Ride due to the ongoing construction works at Winnersh Triangle) being stepped down and then withdrawn. It was the borough's intention for a new service to begin following completion of construction at Winnersh Triangle, however, because that service was commercial (i.e. with no subsidy provided by the Council) the decision to restart the service was with Reading Buses, who determined that there would not be sufficient demand for the service given the change in travel habits and lack of use of Park and Ride both locally and nationwide being stepped down and then withdrawn.

The Department for Transport have recently awarded Wokingham Borough Council grant funding to support improvements to Bus Services. It is proposed to make use of a proportion of this grant funding to help re-establish the park and ride service. The grant funding is time limited and there is no certainty that any further funding will be provided in the future. If the bus service does not become commercially viable it will be stopped.

Coppid Beech Park and Ride site is now completed. By opening this site, this will allow access to the electric vehicle charging infrastructure and provide a parking facility which can be used in conjunction with Reading Buses Lion 4/X4 service on the London Road. Close monitoring of the site's usage will be undertaken. If the site is not well used it may be reclosed.

Background

In 2019 the Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride site was operated with a commercial bus service provided by Reading Buses. The service operated approximately every 15 minutes, Monday to Saturday, between Winnersh Triangle and Reading Town Centre. Park and Ride passengers were charged a £1 contribution towards the maintenance of the car park. The parking revenue covered the operating costs of the car park.

Business cases were submitted to, scrutinised and approved by Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) for the expansion of the car park at Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride and the construction of Coppid Beech Park and Ride site. These schemes were successful in attracting LEP funding and with match funding from Developer Section 106 agreements have now been constructed and completed.

During the construction phases of both schemes, the Coronavirus pandemic significantly impacted bus travel. Typically, Park and Ride bus services were used by commuters during the week and for leisure/shopping on a Saturday. The national shift with greater home working has meant park and ride services nationally have been slower to recover. Recovery rates are between 40-45% of pre-pandemic passenger levels.

The Department for Transport (DfT) has provided local authorities with grant funding associated with Bus Service Improvement Plans and the National Bus Strategy, Bus Back Better, March 2019. Wokingham Borough Council has been awarded just over £800,000 in grant funding over two financial years. The funding is time limited and no further funding is available beyond 31st March 2025. If a commercial park and ride bus service cannot be re-established at the site, the service will be stopped.

It is proposed to use a proportion of the DfT grant funding to support the restart of a park and ride service from Winnersh Triangle. The exact amount of funding allocated will be determined by a competitive tender and close monitoring of passenger numbers.

Business Case

To re-establish the original 15-minute frequency, Monday to Saturday service for a two-year period, it is likely the majority, if not all the grant funding would be required. The level of cost involved and the uncertainty around future demand means that the service

is likely to struggle to be commercially viable within the grant funded timeframe. Instead, it is proposed that a phased approach is taken alongside performance monitoring.

Traditionally the busiest period at Winnersh Triangle Park and Ride was in the few weeks running up to Christmas, with typically 13% more passengers than an average week. It is proposed that the first phase of re-establishing a park and ride service takes place towards the end of November 2023, and operates through to at least mid-April 2024. During this period, it is proposed to begin with a Saturday only service at a 20-minute frequency. The exact cost of this phase will be subject to a competitive tender.

Should passenger levels and revenue permit, it is the Council's aspiration to see a 20-minute frequency service then re-established Monday to Saturday between Winnersh Triangle and Central Reading. Whilst it is acknowledged that the level of financial support required to re-establish the park and ride service on this basis is likely to be higher, for further grant funding to be allocated beyond April 2024, there must be a reasonable chance that by the end of March 2025 a commercial service can be provided. DfT grant funding is limited and no further funding is available beyond March 2025. If a commercial service cannot be re-established within this timeframe it will be stopped.

Any decision to change the service beyond April 2024 will need to be taken in February 2024 to meet the 70-day notice period registration requirements of the traffic commissioner.

Coppid Beech Park and Ride is a new park and ride provision which has not been subject to a previous commercial bus service. However, the site is well located for access to the Lion 4/X4 service on the A329 Reading Road. The Keephatch Gardens bus stops are 250m walk from the site. Reading Buses are unable to divert the Lion 4/X4 into the Coppid Beech park and ride site currently, therefore it is proposed to work with Reading Buses to establish a park and ride offer using the existing Lion 4/X4 service on the A329 Reading Road in conjunction with the Coppid Beech car park. The Lion 4/X4 service provides access to Reading and Wokingham Centers approximately every 20 minutes and Bracknell Town Centre every 30 minutes Monday to Saturday. A Sunday service runs roughly every 30 minutes. The wider benefits of opening the site are that this will allow access to the on-site electric charging infrastructure and provide a parking provision for other nearby community facilities. If the site is not well used and does not cover its operational costs it will be reclosed.

At both Winnersh Triangle and Coppid Beech Park and Ride sites the £2 national fare cap means that return bus journeys will be no more than £4 per person. Passengers who hold an English National Concessionary Travel bus pass will be able to travel on the Lion 4/X4 or the re-introduced Winnersh Triangle service free of charge within the terms of the scheme. All passengers will be subject to the relevant parking charges.

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)	Estimated £20,000-£30,000	Yes	Revenue Grant Funding
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Estimated £150,000 - £160,000	Yes	Revenue Grant Funding
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 31 st March 2025.

Cross-Council Implications
The provision of a park and ride service into Reading Town Centre has a positive impact on the climate change emergency, local air quality and congestion.

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

SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES	
Director – Resources and Assets	Given that the grant funding is very-ring fenced for bus service, no objections
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
Not applicable.

List of Background Papers

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