

Cabinet makes decision on plans to save cash on supported transport services

Oxfordshire County Council's cabinet has agreed proposals to make £7.5m of savings from its supported transport budget.

More than half of the savings are already being made by running existing services more efficiently. All transport services the council runs and funds are now managed by a single unit - which is reducing costs by £3.7m.

To achieve the remaining savings the council's cabinet has agreed a recommendation to remove the subsidies that the council pays to commercial bus companies to operate low use routes. The council is continuing to talk to these companies to see if they can take on any of the services commercially.

Oxfordshire's taxpayers currently pay commercial bus operators £3.7m per year to wholly or partly subsidise more than 100 bus routes.

Commercial bus companies can choose to continue to operate these services if they wish to. Each of these services have been subsidised for a specific purpose, in some cases to run a service in full and for others to simply fund a detour to a commercially funded service, or a stop at a less well used bus stop.

The 100 plus subsidised bus services in Oxfordshire make up around nine per cent of the bus network. This means that more than nine out of ten services run without any public subsidy and would not be affected by cabinet's decision.

The council has however allowed itself the option of reverting to a £2.3m saving on bus subsidies – should it emerge during the Winter that the authority has a better budget position than the worst case scenario. Should this happen, off-peak services would be prioritised for remaining bus subsidy funding.

More than 2,600 responses were received to a consultation that was launched in early summer on this subject.

Cllr David Nimmo Smith, Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet Member for Environment, said:

“As a county council we are faced with very difficult choices. We are now in our sixth year of cuts since 2010. We've stopped using more than 100 properties, reduced our staffing by 30 per cent and our senior management by 40 per cent since 2010. We're sharing services with other councils.

“We have a legal and moral duty to support the most vulnerable in society – that means adults who are in our care because they need help washing, dressing, eating and other personal care, and children at risk of abuse and neglect.”

“Almost 50 per cent of our budget goes on care services for adults and children. We need to make savings in other areas to fund those vital services.

“We have already successfully made big savings by running and funding supported transport services more efficiently and have plans to do much more. To make the remaining savings we have consulted on options to either reduce or end the subsidies we pay to bus companies while discussing with them the prospects for them continuing to run services.

“It is really important to understand that more than 90 per cent of bus services in Oxfordshire would be unaffected by these proposals.

“We’re in the process of saving £290m from 2010 to 2018 and may have to save as much as £50m on top of this.”

Supported Transport budget

The council has reviewed all its supported transport services since first outlining the need for savings from the £30m it spends in this area in autumn 2013.

The £3.7m of savings that will come from efficiencies include smarter transport commissioning, and better use of specialist resources.

Encouraging community transport

As part of the cabinet’s decision the council will cease to be able to fund Dial-a-Ride as a council provided service.

In recognition of the important role that transport plays in Oxfordshire, particularly in rural areas, the county council is actively encouraging voluntary services to be developed. There are already 62 community transport schemes in Oxfordshire; the council wants to see more.

The council wishes to work with community transport groups across the county to try to develop schemes which can meet similar needs to those which Dial-a-Ride currently serve and has had success in some parts of Oxfordshire.

In Oxford, Aspire, an award-winning charity and social enterprise was earlier this year given a start-up grant to deliver Dial-Ride in the city. Oxfordshire County Council supported the organisation to get the service up and running to ensure a smooth and seamless transition for customers, with a view to making it a sustainable long-term service in the future.

There are 238 regularly scheduled users of Dial-a-Ride in Oxfordshire. A total of 176 of those live within 400 metres of a bus stop served by a fully commercial service. There are 439 registered users of Dial-a-Ride overall – not all regularly use the service.

There are 50 scheduled users and 83 in total in Oxford. Aspire will continue to provide the service and those service users will therefore not be affected by cuts.

The council may make funding available for groups to bid for in order to set up community transport initiatives which meet an identified transport need in their area.

Councillor Nimmo Smith added: “We’re interested in how volunteers can help deliver a service similar to that currently provided by Dial-a-Ride. We already have volunteers involved in community transport schemes and there are many volunteers in our libraries.”

What happens next?

The outcome of the November 10 meeting will now be fed in to the overall budget process – with final decisions on the council’s overall budget being taken in early 2016.

Under the cabinet’s approved option, bus services would cease at different times throughout the Summer and Autumn 2016 depending on contract termination times.