
PROVISION OF SHOPMOBILITY SERVICE 2006-2011

**Responsible Cabinet Member(s) -Councillor Nick Wallis,
Highways and Transport Portfolio**

Responsible Director(s) - John Buxton, Director of Development and Environment

Purpose of Report

1. To approve the process for securing the supply of a Shopmobility Service for residents and visitors to Darlington town centre for the period April 2006 to March 2011.

Information and Analysis

2. The Shopmobility Service is currently provided by Darlington Association on Disability (DAD) under a Service Level Agreement (SLA), which ends on 31 March 2006. DAD has provided this service since 1993 and is currently operating under authorisation by Cabinet dated 27 April 2004. It is proposed that a new SLA be made with the successful contractor of a forthcoming tender process for the operation of the Shopmobility service.
3. The Shopmobility service provides users with electric scooters, powered and manual wheelchairs on a loan basis. The equipment is loaned free of charge to registered users and helps those with travel and mobility difficulties access shops and other places in the town centre. It provides a vital service to those residents, and visitors, who would otherwise be unable to access the town centre for shopping, services and social activities. The Pedestrianisation of the town centre will further improve accessibility for the scooters and wheelchairs and should encourage more people to use the service
4. The Shopmobility service has continued to grow from strength to strength. Latest figures show that there are over 300 users in any one month, equating to an average of 12 per day and there has been a 15% increase in usage between 2004 and 2005. Feedback from service users in a recent evaluation questionnaire shows high levels of satisfaction with the service (82%), the staff (87%) and the equipment (79%). The central location of the service in the Dolphin Centre (with its nearby disabled car parking) and it being free at point of use are seen as key factors in the high levels of public satisfaction.
5. The service has changed to meet customer needs since inception, providing more electric scooters as they have become more popular, and developing the nationally innovative “wheelygood” website, showing accessible routes, parking and shops in the town centre. Seventy five percent of users spend an average of £25 or more on each visit; a quarter of these spending £40 or more.
6. The revenue cost of providing this service is currently £62,240 per annum. In addition a small capital allocation of up to approximately £5,000 is made each year from the Local Transport Plan budget for the provision of new equipment. DAD also receives a payment

of £28,000 per annum to cover rental costs of accommodation in the Dolphin Centre on the basis of its wider advocacy function for people with disabilities. DAD currently adds value to the Service by using staff primarily allocated to its other core functions to help deliver Shopmobility and, as a voluntary organisation, has a low cost base.

7. The issue of need would be a consideration in any new service level agreement. Shopmobility users often face higher living costs due to the special equipment that they need to accommodate their disability and often have reduced opportunities for earning a wage due to the same disability. As a result, the tradition of offering the service free of charge fits in with the rationale behind other services to disabled people including blue badge parking in Council car parks.

Proposed Course of Action

8. The Shopmobility service is still required to meet the needs described above. It is proposed that the delivery of the Shopmobility service be tendered. The tender process is necessary to meet both European and Council regulations regarding the supply of services to the Council. Since the tender process will take some time to complete, it is also proposed that Members agree to the extension of the current Service Level Agreement with DAD, whilst the tender process occurs. It is thus suggested that the current Service Level Agreement be extended until 31 March 2007 (or upon receipt of three months notice), with the replacement tendered service being implemented from the end of the extension arrangement until 31 March 2011.
9. The proposed course of action can be financed within the existing resources in the Medium Term Financial Plan.

Outcome of Consultations

10. A high proportion of service users are satisfied with the current service as set out in paragraph 4 above, and continue to need a Shopmobility service, for the reasons set out in paragraphs 3 and 7 above.

Legal Implications

11. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

12. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Council Policy Framework

13. The issues contained within this report do not represent new Council policy or a significant departure from existing policy.

Decision Deadline

14. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

Key Decision

15. This is a key decision since the service covers all Wards in the Borough and will cost over £100,000 during the period up to 2011.

Recommendations

16. It is recommended that Members:
 - (a) approve the extension of the existing Service Level Agreement with Darlington Association on Disability until 31 March 2007 or earlier at three months notice.
 - (b) approve the award of a Shopmobility service by tender for the remaining period up to 31 March 2011.

Reasons

17. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:
 - (a) To ensure continuity of service whilst tenders are sought for longer-term provision of the Shopmobility service.
 - (b) To continue to provide and improve where possible, on the level of service offered to users.

John Buxton
Director of Development and Environment

Background Papers

- (i) Shopmobility Service Level Agreement.
- (ii) Service usage and service user evaluation data provided by DAD.

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