
DARLINGTON CONCESSIONARY FARE
TRAVEL SCHEMES 2005/2006

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 propose a course of action for the provision of a concessionary fare travel scheme on local bus services and taxis during the 2005/06 year in the light of the announcement by Government of a new national scheme for elderly people (over 60 years of age) and people with disabilities to be introduced in April 2006..

Information and Analysis

Current Situation

2. Since 2001, the Council has participated in an operator provided prepaid bus pass, giving eligible users the ability to travel on local bus services without payment in return for an up front contribution. This discretionary scheme developed out of a tradition whereby many residents receiving travel tokens under a previous scheme redeemed them for an operator season ticket rather than for individual journeys. The current prepaid pass is available in two forms, namely:-
 - (a) an Urban Bus Pass giving free travel in the urban area of Darlington and half fare travel in rural areas in the Borough
 - (b) a Borough Bus Pass giving free travel throughout the Borough of Darlington.
3. Prepaid passes are normally issued in either six monthly or yearly time periods, although new applicants can purchase a pass for the balance of the Council financial year that they are joining in.
4. The Council also offers a statutory bus pass under the requirements of the Transport Act 2000. This pass is locally branded as a Standard Bus Pass and gives users the ability to travel for half fare on local bus services throughout the Borough. There is currently no charge for this pass and the current issue will not expire until 31 March 2009.
5. The Council also offers taxi vouchers as an alternative to the use of a bus pass. Vouchers were introduced in 2001 to replace the previous token based system, continuing to provide people who were unable to use conventional bus services with a travel concession. To encourage the supply of accessible personal transport, redemption of the Taxi Vouchers is

limited to journeys made by accessible vehicles within the Borough and licensed by the Council or the Traffic Commissioners (where the owner has other vehicles/staff licensed by the Authority). The vouchers are also redeemable on Ring-a-Ride services, since they use wheelchair accessible vehicles.

6. Table 1 summarises the passes available in 2004/05

<i>Pass Type</i>	<i>Details</i>	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Number taking up</i>
Urban 6/12 months	Free travel in the urban area of Darlington and ½ fare in the rural area for 6 or 12 months	£40 or £80	3,476
Borough 6/12 months	Free travel throughout the Borough for 6 or 12 months	£45 or £90	922
Standard/Half Fare	Travel throughout the Borough until 31 March 2009	Free	7,865
Taxi Vouchers/£50 book of £1 vouchers	For use on accessible taxis and Ring a Ride throughout the Borough	Free	1,586

7. In addition to the receipts from the passholders of the prepaid pass, a Council budget of £712,800 has been set for 2005/6 in anticipation that a review of the concessionary fares scheme could keep the cost increase within this limit, whilst still improving the scheme for pass-holders.

Review Process

8. The Council appointed JMP Consultants Ltd. in 2004 to investigate possibilities that met the future needs of local residents, met policy outcomes and that were financially sustainable to both the Council and local bus operators. As part of this work, JMP consulted the following groups of people about their needs and perception of the issues:-
- (a) Current passholders
 - (b) Eligible residents who have not applied for a pass
 - (c) The Council, and
 - (d) Participating bus operators.
9. In anticipation of the review leading to a revised scheme, Urban and Borough Bus Passes and Taxi Vouchers for 2005/6 have been issued only for a six month period, so that a revised scheme could be operated from October 2005.
10. Before the JMP study recommendations were presented to Members, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced free off peak local area bus travel for those aged over 60 and disabled people in England from April 2006 in his March budget speech. In the light of this, it is recommended that no changes be made to the existing bus concessionary travel scheme in the coming year. To change the scheme in October and then again in April would be difficult and confusing for all concerned. However, the discretionary taxi voucher scheme is unaffected by the Chancellor's decision and it is recommended that the detail of these is

changed from 1 October 2005 in order to address the issues raised by users.

Taxi Vouchers

11. The review raised the following issues in relation to taxi vouchers.
12. Users are unable to book journeys from the local taxi trade due to a severe shortage of accessible vehicles. This restriction in supply is due to the reluctance of the trade to invest in bespoke taxis; rather, many operators prefer to purchase saloon or estate cars for taxi and private hire work.
13. Users are unable to book journeys from Ring-a-Ride due to a lack of capacity in this service. The Council contracts for 1.5 vehicles to be available for such work during daytime hours, but this has proved to be inadequate to meet the demand and does not answer the travel needs of those who wish to travel "out of hours". Recent figures suggest that many potential users have given up trying to book the Ring-a-Ride service.
14. Some users cannot easily use accessible vehicles due to their particular medical circumstances. There are a number of residents who could use a conventional car, but cannot easily use the designs of accessible vehicles available. This issue is mainly related to the step heights and type of movement needed to board and alight.
15. There is an ongoing concern about the redemption of vouchers. Whilst new procedures have reduced the potential for fraudulent use, the vigilance of Council staff has uncovered cases where suspicions over misuse have occurred. This is an issue in any system with restricted use being enforced at point of use rather than at point of application.
16. It is proposed that taxi vouchers are made available for payment for journeys by any Darlington Borough Council licensed hackney carriage, private hire vehicle (or similar vehicle operated by a Darlington licensed taxi or private hire company) where one trip end is within the Borough of Darlington. Access to services outside the Borough is an issue that has been raised by users. Vouchers are also proposed for use for payment for journeys by the Ring-a-Ride service or its successors, as well as for payment for certain bus season tickets.
17. It is also proposed that the eligibility criteria for taxi vouchers are changed slightly as follows:-
 - (a) People who meet the national criteria for travel disability
 - (b) People aged 75 and over
 - (c) People who are resident in a Registered Residential or Nursing Care Home in the Borough.

Current criteria allows anyone entitled to the concession (eg over 60's or registered disabled) to opt for taxi vouchers. The above proposal is intended to target eligibility towards those likely to be most in need. The extension of the scheme to allow use of vouchers on any licensed taxi rather than only wheelchair accessible vehicles should result

in more effective use of vouchers but with a consequent increase in reimbursement costs.

18. This action is based on the following rationale:-

- (a) To await the detail of the new statutory free travel concessionary fare scheme before making any proposals for discretionary schemes that the Council may choose to offer
- (b) To avoid any confusion and disruption due to a double change in bus concessionary travel schemes within one year (the JMP study proposal being for a 1 October change)
- (c) To allow those in greatest need for taxis to be able to use them more easily than at present due to the ability to use vouchers on all Darlington licensed vehicles and to encourage those in greatest need for specialist transport services to be able to access these facilities
- (d) To facilitate and encourage cross-boundary travel, enabling links throughout the Tees Valley/County Durham and thus helping to address issues associated with changes in healthcare provision on a regional basis
- (e) To encourage those currently not using public transport to sample it, via the offer of limited free travel by exchanging vouchers for daily or weekly bus travel tickets.

Implications

- 19. All three bus operators involved in the prepaid scheme have supported the recommended action and all the operators have been asked to continue to provide the current prepaid scheme until 31 March 2006.
- 20. It is proposed that further work is undertaken during 2005/06 to review the current arrangements for the Ring-a-Ride service which are due to end on 31 March 2006. Any proposals for this service will reflect the issues raised in both this study and in the research for the Second Local Transport Plan. It is proposed to retain JMP Consultants Ltd., to further assist and advise Council officers during this process.

Costs

- 21. The precise costs to the Council are dependent on pass take up and usage, but it is estimated that the most likely outturn value in 2005/06 for a full year would be £789,500 net, which is more than the allocated budget of £712,800. This budget outturn value assumes that the most likely taxi usage scenario proposed by JMP occurs, that an uplift of 8% or less is agreed with bus operators for the Council's contribution to the prepaid pass budget and that all other variables remain the same as in the 2004/05 financial year, including pass income.
- 22. The cost of the proposed new taxi voucher scheme (included in the above estimates) is anticipated to be £53,500 in 2005/6 and £80,000 in a full year, compared with the 2004/5 cost to the Council of £27,000. This increase could have been accommodated within the budget set for 2005/6 had the bus concessionary fares scheme review gone ahead.
- 23. However, the need substantially to increase the funding to keep the Urban and Borough Bus Passes in place for a further six months can not be accommodated and will require

amendment of this element of the Medium Term Financial Plan.

Outcome of Consultation

24. Consultations with users have been carried out by JMP and with operators by Council officers. The outcomes are within the report. A further round of consultation with taxi operators undertaken during May and one letter has been received as a result from an owner of a wheelchair accessible taxi, who felt that the proposed changes would be detrimental to his earnings and would reduce the number of wheelchair accessible taxis in Darlington (which he felt is now increasing).

Legal Implications

25. 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

26. 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

27. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework

Decision Deadline

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

Key Decisions

29. This is a key decision and has been advertised in the Forward Plan.

Recommendation

30. It is recommended that Members approve the following:-
- (a) that no changes are made to the existing concessionary fare travel schemes for bus travel until after 31 March 2006
 - (b) that the existing taxi voucher scheme be amended from 1 October 2005 to offer more functionality to users as specified in this report and that the eligibility criteria for use of this scheme be amended as set out in this report

- (c) that further work is undertaken to prepare proposals for the Ring-a-Ride service from 2006 onwards
- (d) that the Director of Development and Environment be authorised to make any necessary administrative arrangements to implement the concessionary fare travel schemes
- (e) that the additional cost, above the approved budget for Concessionary Fares, is approved and the Medium Term Financial Plan is amended accordingly by allocating £77,000 additional resources for 2005/6.

Reasons

31. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-

- (a) to avoid confusion and difficulty to pass-holders, bus operators and the Council were the bus concessionary fare scheme be changed in October 2005 and again in April 2006
- (b) to ensure that bus patronage and accessibility for bus passengers are retained until the new national scheme is introduced
- (c) to improve the operation of the taxi voucher scheme for the benefit of users
- (d) to consider options for Ring-a-Ride users' travel needs
- (e) to provide funding for continuing the Urban and Borough Bus Passes until the new national scheme is implemented.

John Buxton
Director of Development and Environment

Background Papers

JMP Study Report 2005
Consultation response

Simon Houldsworth : Extension 2701
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