

To: City Executive Board

Date: 7th January 2009

Item No:

Report of: Head of Finance

Title of Report: Award of contract for Dial-A-Ride service

Summary and Recommendations

Purpose of report: Dial a Ride Contract Renewal

Key decision? Yes

Executive Lead Member: Cllr. Colin Cook

Report Approved by:

Finance: Sarah Fogden

Legal: Jeremy Thomas

Policy Framework: None

Recommendation(s):

That the City Executive Board:

- 1) grant project approval for the Council to support a new joint contract with the County and Oxfordshire Districts for the provision of a Dial a Ride Service.**
- 2) decide whether to fund 2 buses or revert back to one bus**
- 3) delegate authority to the Heads of Finance, in consultation with the Executive Lead Member, to enter into the consortium contract for the provision of the service following the tender exercise being carried out by the County Council.**

Background

1. This report and its associated Annex invites the City Executive Board to consider future funding for the Octabus dial-a-ride transport service currently funded by the County Council, Oxford City Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, and West Oxfordshire District Council as part of the Octabus Dial-a-Ride Consortium. The dial-a-ride service provides pre-booked door-to-door transport using fully accessible vehicles for people with mobility impairments who could not easily be able to use conventional public transport.

For Oxford City Council, there are two buses at a cost of £80,186. The contract is in the process of being re-tendered for a new contract starting April 2009.

The total cost of the Dial a Ride Service is £237k. As the County Council is the major service funder they are managing the tender to award a new contract.

Current Service

2. The contract that was let in 2005, and which is now drawing to an end, was the result of a competitive tendering exercise. The initial service was provided on the basis of three accessible minibuses, one operating in each of the 'subscribing' City/District Council areas. The service is provided on Mondays to Fridays between the hours of 9am and 5pm.
3. The initial agreed proportions of funding were 52% from the County Council, and 16% from each of the participating City/District Councils.
4. From 1 April 2007 Oxford City Council has been paying the full costs of providing a second Octabus minibus service in the City area on Tuesdays to Fridays (the service remaining resourced by one vehicle on Mondays).
5. During the term of the current four-year contract the Octabus Consortium has met regularly with the staff and management of the existing contractor. The Consortium has been pleased with the degree of support and assistance which the current contractor has provided to the Consortium, and the extent to which the contractor has been willing to engage with the Consortium, in terms of providing information on patronage and patterns of use, on making the vehicles available for demonstration and publicity purposes, their willingness to discuss and resolve any complaints and comments about the way that the service has been provided and developed in the light of operating experience.

The Service operates through individuals paying a membership fee of £5 to join the scheme. Individuals may then ring and book a ride. There is a charge for each journey and concessionary fares are currently accepted for journeys within each Council's boundaries.

6. Use of the Octabus service has been closely monitored throughout the term of the contract. Details of service use have been published in the form of a number of reports and a summary is included below.

7. Membership of the Octabus scheme has risen as follows:

	March 2006	Dec. 2007	July 2008
City:	213	333	375
Vale:	130	213	221
West:	119	211	216

8. The predominant age of Octabus users is 81-90 years, with some 45% of users in this age-group. However, this masks variations between districts, with 50% of City members, 34% of Vale members, and 39% of West members falling into this category.

9. In general, all districts show broadly similar patterns with usage rising incrementally to age 81-90 and then declining.

10. Comparisons of usage patterns between different days of the week have shown little consistency between districts, and variability (over time) within districts.

11. The total number of passenger journeys made has risen as follows:

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4 (Q1)
City:	6,543	7,474	11,309	2,873
Vale:	3,696	3,617	4,615	1,238
West:	2,913	2,892	3,076	769
TOTAL:	13,152	13,983	19,000	4,880

12. The significant growth in patronage came from the addition of a second vehicle operating in Oxford City from 1 April 2007. Patronage in Vale of White Horse is now reported by the operator to be at or close to capacity. Patronage in West Oxfordshire has proved difficult to grow, despite a number of initiatives designed to boost public awareness of the service. There remains unutilised capacity in West Oxfordshire District.

13. By the end of 2007:

- 39% of City members lived in OX3 (Headington)
- 33% of City members lived in OX4 (Cowley)

- 64% of Vale members lived in OX13 & OX14 (Abingdon and hinterland)
- 33% of West members lived in OX18 (Carterton/Burfield/Bampton)
- 30% of West members lived in OX29 (Witney hinterland/Eynsham)
- 19% of West members lived in OX28 (Witney town)
- 58.4% of journeys were made in City, 24.8% in Vale, 16.8% in West
- 53% of all Vale journeys were cross-border, mainly into Oxford City.
- 91% of City journeys take place entirely within City area.
- Just over half of City journeys have Cowley as the destination
- 81% of West journeys take place entirely within West area, 13% to City.
- The overwhelming majority of Vale and West journeys start in Abingdon and Witney respectively.

Costs of Current Service

14. Table 1 below shows how the cost of Octabus is split across the member districts.

	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
County	92,168	92,087	96,838
Vale	28,359	28,334	29,796
West	28,359	28,334	29,796
City	28,359	28,334	29,796
City (additional bus)		47,741	50,390
Total			

Consultation

15. As part of the strategic review process prior to tendering, the Octabus Consortium undertook a postal survey of all Octabus scheme members in January/February 2008. This produced a response rate of 45%, which is regarded as statistically significant. Members were asked about their experiences of using Octabus, and to rate various aspects of the quality of service provided. Members were invited to comment on the usefulness of potential weekend or evening service additions.
16. In general the survey results showed that:
- Half of all respondents used Octabus at least once a week.
 - Some 20% of members use Octabus only two or three times a year.

- Three-quarters of respondents marked “shopping” as journey purpose.
- Four-fifths found it Easy, Fairly Easy or Very Easy to book Octabus.
- Two-thirds assessed the politeness and helpfulness of the telephone service as Excellent or Very Good.
- The Octabus drivers were particularly praised. Over half of all respondents scored the drivers in the top, Excellent, category for helpfulness and politeness; almost as many scored the drivers Excellent for safe driving.
- The overall Octabus service was rated as Excellent, Very Good, or Good by over 90% of respondents, with two-thirds of responses in the top two categories.
- Only a third of members said they would use a Saturday service, a further fifth would do so “sometimes”, another third would NOT travel on Saturdays.
- Only a quarter of members would use a Sunday service, over a third would NOT travel on this day.
- Only one member in eight would use an evening service, whilst over half of members would definitely NOT travel in the evenings.

17. For this review a joint consultation has been carried out in conjunction with all of the above City and District Councils, encompassing all the Parish Councils in each district, the Area Committees of Oxford City Council, relevant County Councillors, local Members of the Youth Parliament, as well as Transport For All, the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, Bus Users UK, and a number of local branches of organisations suggested by member authorities, such as Vale Disability Access Panel, Age Concern, the Alzheimer’s Society, Cystic Fibrosis Trust, Mencap, MIND, Oxfordshire Association for the Blind, Multiple Sclerosis Society, Headway, Wolvercote Commoners Committee, Chipping Norton Gateway Club, West Oxon Volunteer Link-Up, Citizens’ Advice Bureau, Cottsway Housing Association, and a number of Access Groups and Volunteer Centres in the South Oxfordshire district. Specific responses are summarised in the report.
18. Responses to the consultation were received from three Oxfordshire County Councillors, Cllr. Olive McIntosh-Stedman and Cllr. John Sanders (both representing Cowley and Littlemore). Cllr. Sanders expressed concern that many of his elderly constituents in Littlemore found it difficult to use the conventional bus service to visit their GP, but had found it difficult to qualify for Octabus because of the existence of the conventional bus, and because of the limited capacity of Octabus in relation to overall demand. “I could only support the continuation of the [Octabus] service if it could be adapted to suit constituents’ need to visit their doctor”. Cllr. Joe McManners of Oxford City Council responded “I feel that the capacity could be improved”, and replies were also received from two of the Area Committees of Oxford City

Council, those for the North Area and for the North-East Area of the City.

19. Of the responses from consultees in the existing Octabus area 16 were generally positive about the Octabus dial-a-ride and wished to see it continue and develop, whilst the other 14 were either more ambivalent or had no comment to make. No replies from the existing Octabus area were expressly negative in nature, although several respondents felt that publicity about the service could be improved and/or better-targeted.
20. There is a balance to be made with regard to publicity. Limited publicity has been carried out in Oxford City and Vale of White Horse as the vehicles are operating at capacity and publicising the service further could lead to unmet demand.
21. The Access Officer confirms there is a continuing need for the Service.

New Contract

22. The new contract is currently being tendered by the County Council. The proposed new contract will be for three years with an option to extend for up to one year .

One change suggested is that concessionary passes can be used for journeys anywhere (consistent with National concessionary scheme) but that the cost will remain with the District in which the user is resident. So Oxford City do not pay for return journeys out of the City to other Districts.

The City Executive Board need to consider whether the Council will continue with two 'buses or revert back to one 'bus. The tender price may help the Council make this decision and the tender is going ahead on the basis of one full-time 'bus plus the optional second 'bus. The times the bus is available will be similar. Octabus have agreed collectively that there is limited requirement for a Saturday bus and so have not tendered for this option.

Financial Implications

23. As the tender is not yet complete, the financial implications can not be fully assessed. The Council has a budget that covers the two vehicles with a small allowance for an inflationary increase in contract price.

Legal and Staffing Implications

24. No legal implications. There is a potential TUPE implication that is being dealt with by the County Council as lead partner in the consortium.

Risk Management

25. The consortium has a risk register that it reviews regularly.

Recommendations

To grant project approval for the Council to support a new join contract with the County and Oxfordshire Districts for the provision of a Dial a Ride Service.

To decide whether to fund 2 buses or revert back to one bus.

To delegate authority to the Head of Finance, in consultation with the Executive Lead Member, to enter into the consortium contract for the provision of the service following the tender exercise being carried out by the County Council.

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Background papers: None

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