

Community Bus Partnerships – Frequently Asked Questions

Following consultation on proposed changes to Leicestershire's supported bus network in early 2014, the County Council's Cabinet resolved to implement Community Bus Partnerships (CBP) on four routes in the county. These services were:

- Service 7 – Measham to Atherstone
- Service 55/56 – Melton to Grantham
- Service 113 – Melton to Oakham
- Service 129 – Ashby to Loughborough

This document seeks to provide some basic guidance for those involved or interested in the Community Bus Partnerships.

1. What is a Community Bus Partnership?

A Community Bus Partnership brings together the local community, bus operator and local authority to try and increase the use of a specific bus service. The partnership would focus on the whole route, examining ways of improving the service and encouraging increased usage, ultimately making it more financially sustainable in the long term. The concept comes from the successful Community Rail Partnerships which through improving services, marketing and station facilities have secured the future of rural rail services.

2. Has the idea been tried before?

The idea of applying the principles of community rail partnerships to bus services is a relatively new idea and very few examples exist. Where there are examples they have tended to be in urban areas and we believe Leicestershire is the first area to adopt the principle for rural bus services.

3. Who can get involved in a CBP?

Anyone is welcome to get involved in a Community Bus Partnership and no prior knowledge or experience is necessary. A successful partnership is likely to have a good mix of people including bus users, businesses, community groups and Parish Councils.

It is envisaged that each partnership will have a small formal committee, which includes an officer from Leicestershire County Council and a representative from the bus operator, who are responsible for the management of the partnership. Responsibilities will include agreeing objectives and targets of the CBP, adjusting the service to meet users' needs, promotion of the service, seeking funding opportunities and monitoring of performance.

There will also be opportunities for people who are not able to commit as much time to join an informal 'friends of the route' group. People in this group could assist with the promotion and advertising of the service, fundraising, motivate neighbours and friends to use the service or take responsibility for maintaining a bus stop. Friends of the route will also be vital in providing ideas and feedback for the formal partnership to consider.

There is also the opportunity for local businesses, schools and community groups to get involved however ultimately it will be up to the partnership to decide the form their CBP takes and the activities they get involved with.

4. Is this a way of the council shifting responsibility to the community?

Due to a reduction in funding from central government, the authority has to examine ways of delivering services in a different and more financially sustainable way. The original consultation highlighted active communities along each of the chosen routes and it was felt that there was a good chance of community involvement making a difference. The idea of a CBP is to harness the knowledge and experience of the local community and work together to improve the service and increase passenger numbers thereby reducing the subsidy paid by the County Council. This is an alternative to losing the bus service by improving usage of the bus service but it is recognised that the services are unlikely to be commercially viable in the longer term.

5. Can the partnership make changes to the route, timetable or fares?

The partnership, in consultation with the operator and LCC are welcome to consider changes to the route, timetable or fares in order to improve the service. There are however a number of things that the partnership should carefully consider before making changes:

- Significant changes to the route or timetable will need to be consulted upon and alternative transport arrangements made for any settlements which are left unserved or with a reduced level of service as a result of a decision by the partnership.*
- Any changes to a Local Bus Service have to be registered with the Traffic Commissioner with a period of 56 days notice and incur an administration fee.*
- It usually takes a while for the impact of service changes to be reflected in usage levels and sufficient time should be given to allow monitoring of any service adjustment.*
- Regular changes to a service are not advised as industry research suggests that frequent service alterations create uncertainty for passengers and ultimately result in a decline in patronage.*

The operator and LCC will be able to advise on any operational or regulatory constraints and the likely impacts of changes to the service.

6. Can the partnership make changes to the publicity, advertising and promotion of the service?

The partnership, in consultation with the operator and LCC are welcome to consider changes to the branding, publicity and promotion of the service, indeed innovative marketing campaigns run by Community Rail Partnerships have been instrumental in increasing usage on rural rail routes. Any changes will obviously need to be communicated to users of the service which the LCC officer and operator will be able to advise on.

7. What is the target passenger/revenue growth?

Given the challenging financial situation the authority finds itself in and the uncertainty over the level of future funding for the County Council, no target has been set for the CBPs by the County Council's Cabinet. However the key factor for success will be a sustained increase in passenger numbers and therefore a reduction in subsidy provided by the County Council per passenger journey.

The CBP will be encouraged to agree targets, including patronage growth, to work towards over the three years of the CBP contract. It is recognised that it will take time to demonstrate sustained patronage growth and therefore the partnership will not be expected to show immediate results.

The performance of each of the CBP routes will be reported to the County Council's Cabinet on an annual basis. After three years, Cabinet will make a decision on whether to extend the CBP contract for a further two years based on the performance of the route and the financial situation of the council at that time.

It should be noted that if a partnership is unable to progress or fails to show any encouraging signs of increasing usage on the service, the County Council's Cabinet may take a decision to revert to the original proposal for the service before the end of the three year contract.

8. Do concessionary passenger journeys count?

The aim of the CBPs is to increase patronage on their specific route and therefore reduce the subsidy per passenger paid by the County Council. A percentage of the regular fare is received for concessionary passenger journeys and therefore these do help towards reducing the subsidy for each service. The LCC officer will be able to provide more advice on concessionary travel journeys.

9. How will performance of the service be monitored?

Where possible, baseline performance data for the service will be provided by the current operator in order to enable the CBP to agree a baseline from which to work. Once the CBP has been established, data will be provided by the operator on a regular basis detailing the performance of the service and support will be available from LCC to assist the CBP in the analysis of this data.

10. What funding is available to support the activities of the CBP?

Given that extra resource has already been put into CBP routes by retaining a bus service and not using Demand Responsive Transport, there is unlikely to be significant levels of funding identified specifically for the CBPs and one of the key traits of a successful partnership will be making the best use of the existing resources. There will be up to £500 per annum available as match funding for information along the route and the partnership are encouraged to explore opportunities for external sources of funding such as grants, local business sponsorship or Parish Councils. It will be the responsibility of the partnership to identify ways of funding activities of the CBP, however support and advice will be available from LCC officers.

11. How will the council support the CBPs?

Both County Councillors and officers are committed to supporting the CBPs in order to give them the best chance of success and if successful, provide a model which could potentially be used on other rural routes throughout the county. Therefore each partnership will benefit from the ongoing assistance and advice of an officer from council's Sustainable Travel Group, advice and signposting of further support and the development of a web page for each CBP to assist with promotion and advertising. There will also be the opportunity for the four partnerships to share ideas, successes and best practice through various means.

In addition to support from the council, the new CBP contracts will ensure the operator engages with the partnership and is open to feedback and suggestions from the partnership and wider community.

12. Will infrastructure improvements be available to the CBP routes?

Where LCC are responsible for bus stop infrastructure (bus stops, shelters, timetable cases etc), we will investigate opportunities to improve infrastructure should the CBP identify desired improvements. However given the financial challenges the authority faces it is unclear what the level of future funding available for bus stop improvements will be and it is unlikely significant improvements will be able to be made to any particular route given the size of the county's network. There will however be the opportunity for the CBP to raise funds or seek external funding opportunities in order to fund infrastructure improvements. The LCC transport officer will be able to advise on appropriate infrastructure.

13. How is a CBP bus service different from a regular contract?

A CBP service uses the knowledge and skills of the community along the route to improve the service and motivate others to use the service therefore increasing patronage and helping the service to become more financially sustainable.

In addition, the CBP services are subject to a new form of contract which places additional requirements on operators over and above the usual expectations for a contracted Local Bus Service. The requirements include:

- A high standard of customer care training for drivers on the route*
- A small pool of drivers to ensure familiarity with the route and customers*
- Attendance at up to four CBP meetings and up to three public events by a company representative who has the appropriate level of operational and management experience to be able to engage fully with the partnership by offering advice and support.*
- Ability for members of the partnership to contact operator representative and LCC transport officer.*
- Expectations for dealing with complaints and enquiries.*

14. What incentive is there for the operators to engage in the CBP?

Apart from the CBP contract requiring operators to engage in the partnership, it is in the operator's interest for the route to be successful in order to make the route more sustainable in the long run and win the contract extension. There may also potentially be reputational benefits in successfully engaging with the community and the potential for increased job satisfaction for drivers.

15. What if the operator consistently fails to deliver an appropriate level of service?

It is recognised that operator performance will have a significant impact on the success of the partnership. The partnership will be responsible for feeding back any service issues to the operator and should be mindful that sometimes service disruptions are unavoidable. If however the operator consistently fails to deliver an appropriate level of service, LCC have the power to take action against the operator and ultimately terminate the service contract.