



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

28th FEBRUARY 2023

FREE BUS TRAVEL THROUGHOUT RHONDDA CYNON TAF FOR MARCH 2023

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR – FRONTLINE SERVICES, IN DISCUSSIONS
WITH THE RELEVANT PORTFOLIO HOLDER, THE CABINET MEMBER
FOR ENVIRONMENT AND LEISURE, (CLLR A CRIMMINGS), AND THE
LEADER OF THE COUNCIL (CLLR A MORGAN)**

Author: Roger Waters, Director – Frontline Services

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of the report is to:

- (i) Seek Cabinet approval to provide free bus travel for the period of 1st – 31st March 2023 for all journeys that start and terminate within the Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) county boundary. This would apply to all operators currently operating a scheduled service.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is recommended that Cabinet notes the content of the report and approves the proposal to introduce free bus travel for the period of 1st – 31st March 2023 for all journeys that start and terminate within the county boundary.

2.2 It is recommended that Officers review the outcomes of the free bus scheme, and seek to develop further free bus travel initiatives during the 2023/24 and 2024/25 financial years e.g., during December 2023; subject to funding

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 The Council has been successful in bidding for money through the UK's Shared Prosperity Fund to introduce initiatives that will help reduce the cost of living for residents, through measures that improve energy efficiency and combat fuel poverty and climate change. £500k has been awarded for the 2022/23 financial year, with further awards of £1.1m for 2023/24 and £1.2m for 2024/25.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 The Wales Transport Strategy 2021 recognises the need for an accessible, sustainable, and efficient bus transportation network with specific attention to reliability, frequency, and geographical reach. Together with the review of mandatory and voluntary fares, the scheme looks to encourage modal shift from private car use towards sustainable travel.
- 4.2 The Council's 'Making Rhondda Cynon Taf Carbon Neutral by 2030' strategy, agreed by Cabinet on 22 June 2022, states 'Working with Cardiff Capital Region and Cardiff Capital Region Transport Authority (CCRTA), Transport for Wales and Welsh Government to develop public transport infrastructure and services to enable sustainable travel across the region that will meet future demand. Reducing the user cost of public transport would support this commitment and incentivise bus patronage.
- 4.3 Changing travel patterns associated with the evolving Covid-19 pandemic, highlighted the need to promote a public transport system that is reliable, affordable and easy to use, as a low carbon alternative to the motor car. Reduced public transport patronage has also necessitated a review of the way bus travel is funded in Wales.
- 4.4 As a result of these evolving travel patterns, local bus services in Wales are currently financially supported through the Welsh Government's Bus Emergency Scheme (BES3). This support addresses the loss of farebox revenue by operators and the additional costs associated with responding to the COVID 19 pandemic. Under the terms of the agreement, operators provide bus services that meet local needs under the direction of the lead authority for each region, working with and on behalf of its constituent local authorities. With the continuation of BES3 funding for the 2023/24 financial year, this initiative would encourage greater sustainability within the bus network by encouraging the return of patronage that was lost during the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. FREE BUS TRAVEL PROPOSAL

- 5.1 This report outlines the proposal to provide free bus travel for the period 1st – 31st March 2023 for all users in accordance with the terms of the Grant funding, operating alongside the existing concessionary fare scheme.
- 5.2 The proposed initiative offers free travel on all scheduled bus services (regardless of operator) that start and terminate within the county boundary. Services that start or terminate outside the county boundary would be excluded and subject to the full regular fare.
- 5.3 There would be no time restrictions applied, so free travel would be available from the first to last service each day, with wider benefits for social interaction and supporting economic activity across the county borough.
- 5.4 The proposal prioritises people and the climate.

- 5.5 With transport being responsible for 17% of Welsh Greenhouse gas emissions, the need to encourage transport modal shift has never been greater, with private car use emitting 62% (2018).
- 5.6 The proposal would support longer term objectives to encourage the use of more sustainable modes of travel as supported by the Wales Transport Strategy.
- 5.7 It also makes transport services accessible, fair and inclusive through the removal of economic barriers, which potentially prevent people from using sustainable public transport and encourage increased usage of public transport for retail and leisure activities. Over 30% of households in RCT do not have access to a private motor car.

6. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY

- 6.1 An Equality and Socio-Economic Impact Assessment has been prepared for the purpose of this report. It has been found that a full report is not required. There are limited negative or adverse equality or diversity implications associated with this report, which can be easily mitigated.
- 6.2 Under the Public Sector Equality Duty as set out in the Equality Act 2010, Local Authorities are required to have due regard to the need to:
 - 1. Eliminate unlawful discrimination.
 - 2. Advance equality of opportunity.
 - 3. Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 6.3 The Council is committed to meeting the requirements of the Equality Act and in doing so contributing to the national Well-being goal of a more equal Wales, required by the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

7. WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no Welsh language implications as a result of the recommendations in this report.

8. CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT

- 8.1 There are no consultation implications aligned to this report.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 9.1 The estimated cost of this one-month initiative is up to £500k, which will be wholly underwritten by Shared Prosperity Fund grant funding.
- 9.2 The Council will agree the costs of the initiative with operators in advance by using a historical level of “on bus” revenue (July 2022). This arrangement simplifies administration and removes any financial incentive for operators to inflate claims; and has been endorsed by the lead regional bus funding group, responsible for managing BES funding. It also provides parity between bus operators and does not cross subsidise or unduly increase the BES3 national agreement.
- 9.3 The initiative will operate alongside the WG concessionary bus pass scheme, and concessionary pass holders will need to present their pass to ensure the correct level of funding is obtained from the Welsh Government.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 10.1 The Council can provide free bus transport for RCT residents under its general powers of well-being, provided that the way in which it operates does not breach any of the competition requirements or other statutory provisions relating to local transport provision in the various Transport Acts.
- 10.2 As such, the proposal would apply to all bus operators in RCT, but only to journeys starting and terminating within the county boundary and on routes already registered. This would ensure no unfair competitive advantage for specific operators or cross-subsidising out of area passengers.
- 10.3 This additional voluntary agreement between the Council and the RCT bus operators would operate alongside the BES3 national agreement, with the Council underwriting the revenue that the operators would have received from the paying passengers.
- 10.4 As the current BES3 contracts cap each operator’s profit, there would be no financial advantage or disadvantage to operators if the scheme was introduced.
- 10.5 The Transport Act 2000 requires travel concession authorities in Wales to issue statutory travel concession permits to any applicant resident who is aged 60 or over or meets the eligibility criteria, with regard to disability as set out in Section 146 of the Act. In Wales, this is the All-Wales Concessionary Travel Scheme.

11. LINKS TO CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

- 11.1 The Council has committed to reducing our carbon footprint. This supports the priorities of the Council’s Corporate Plan ‘Making a Difference’ – 2020-24.

- 11.2 Public transport supports and promotes the Council's Corporate Plan priorities for People – are independent, healthy and successful; Places – where people are proud to live, work and play and Prosperity – creating the opportunity for people and businesses to: be entrepreneurial and fulfil their potential and prosper.
- 11.2 These in turn support the seven well-being goals of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. This proposal contributes to the Well-being Goals and is consistent with the five ways of working, as defined within the sustainable development principle in the Act.

12. CONCLUSION

- 11.1 This initiative will make transport services accessible, fair and inclusive through the removal of economic barriers that potentially prevent people from using sustainable public transport and encourage increased usage of public transport for retail and leisure activities.