

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-046-2020/21
Date of meeting: 03 December
2020



Portfolio: Environmental and Technical Services – Cllr N Avey
Subject: Covid 19 Development Projects - Travel Local Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) trial
Responsible Officer: Qasim (Kim) Durrani (01992 564055).
Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That continued subsidy payments to Essex County Council for operation of Bus 87 is not sustainable and as agreed by Cabinet on 19 October the outcome of Travel Local initiative of Covid 19 Recovery projects be progressed further;**
- (2) To agree allocation of £26,574 from the Sustainable Travel Projects for a three month trial of a Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) bus service to be operated by Epping Forest Community Transport (EFCT) and to include as much of the current Route 87 as is feasible; and**
- (2) A further report be presented to Cabinet with the outcomes of the DRT trial and opportunities to extend the DRT service to other parts of the District to improve connectivity.**

Executive Summary:

Earlier in the year the Council agreed to part fund operation of Bus Route 87 service with Essex County Council when the commercial operator Arriva was unable to operate it as a commercially viable option. This was initially done on a six month basis from 1 April 2020, however due to the impact of Covid-19 this was extended by another three months up to 31 December 2020. Covid-19 has compounded the commercial viability of this service as fewer people are using the bus, however, it remains popular within the Loughton area and between Epping Station and Staple Tye and Central Harlow.

It is proposed that instead of extending the subsidy the money could be better utilised in trialing a 'hybrid' Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) service with Epping Forest Community Transport (EFCT). This is a pre booked peak hours service where passengers can check the route, availability and decide to book a seat if they so wish. Off peak, a traditional timetabled service would run, with acceptance of concessionary passes (but subject to Covid-19 vehicle occupation rules).

Early discussions with EFCT have been very encouraging. They have provided a DRT service (booked by phone) to Princess Alexandra Hospital during the peak Covid-19 earlier in the year and are keen to work with the Council and trial a DRT in the District.

However, due to the uncertainty over demand and the costs associated in setting up a DRT it is necessary to have budget to carry out a trial. If successful it could be self-financing and could service as a baseline for introducing in other parts of the District. For avoidance of doubt any passengers wishing to use the new service will be charged the same fares as the current operator Arriva.

We will make best endeavours to trial as many (D)igital-DRT features offered by Arriva Click et al as possible. However, certain aspects may be hard to replicate fully on cost, timescale, vehicles or technology grounds.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To seek funding for a trial DRT service which could be self-financing in future.

Other Options for Action:

It is not sustainable to continue to subsidise the non-commercially viable Bus Route 87 and the Council could stop this subsidy which may cause some reputational risk to the Council by disconnecting parts of the District from Harlow and the Princess Alexandra Hospital.

Report:

1. Bus Route 87 is operated by Arriva Herts and Essex. They are a national operator with multiple bus routes across Essex and Hertfordshire. This service stops at 12 primary bus stops plus other less busy ones in the District: Epping Green, Epping Town, Theydon Bois, Debden and Loughton. The service connects these towns and villages with the Central Line and thus offers a sustainable travel route to London. Due to lack of financial profitability of the route Arriva gave a notice of termination of the service to ECC and the Transport Commissioner in Autumn of 2019.
2. The Council took the view that termination of this service will adversely impact current bus users, reduce even further the connectivity between some of the towns and villages in the District especially severing the link these communities have with the Central Line and the Princess Alexandra Hospital. It was agreed that ECC and EFDC jointly fund the provision of the current service for 6 months up to 30 September 2020. This would have allowed time to explore other options for better connectivity between the various urban and rural areas served by this route and if feasible other areas of the District. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19 usage of this service has continued to decline.
3. Cabinet received an update on a Travel Local initiative under the Covid 19 Recovery projects at its meeting on 19 October 2020. This is one of the initiatives to provide local travel options for more distant villages and towns off the underground route and thereby support local training, employment and shopping, build upon Covid 19 secure sustainable public transport services.
4. Officers have been considering various proposals and following discussions with ECC and private providers it has been established that Epping Forest Community Transport (EFCT) could prove to be a viable partner. EFCT provided a DRT service during the peak of the Covid 19 Pandemic when commercial operators were unable to safely operate services. EFCT played a key role in enabling key NHS workers to get to Princess Alexandra Hospital, Harlow and St Margaret's Epping and have been running a closed user group commuter service for Merck Sharpe & Dohme staff following their relocation to Broxbourne.
5. Following discussions with EFCT it has been established that they can provide a

public DRT service along the current bus route 87 as well as enabling others like Princess Alexandra Hospital or EFDC staff to take advantage of the DRT service. This DRT service will be in the form of pre booked cashless service where users will ring the EFCT contact centre and book a space before the journey. It is intended to expand the bookings to electronic means, for example with an App or website and this facility may launch during the trial period as EFCT have much of the underlying technology.

6. The intention is for the DRT service to be offered to EFDC staff which will increase sustainable travel options for staff coming to the Civic Offices in Epping. This will reduce reliance on car commuting, which will help with traffic congestion, air pollution and free up car parking spaces in Epping. Estimates from the staff home location analysis suggests that approximately 60 staff live within a reasonable walking distance of a stop served by the current 87 bus. However, due to current Covid-19 restrictions, there is a reduced expectation that staff return to the Civic Centre in significant numbers during Q4. This does reduce potential usage and places extra reliance on NHS staff and other early commuters to use the DRT service.

7. Usage of Route 87 was declining over the years and Covid 19 has impacted it even further. This makes it difficult to plan a DRT service and an adequate fare structure. If NHS and EFDC staff start using the service then it is possible that it will become self-sustaining. However, EFCT need a financial commitment to enable them to put the necessary measures in place. For avoidance of doubt the new service will have the same fares as the current service operated by Arriva.

8. If DRT is proven to be successful it could be rolled out to other parts of the District. A move away from single car occupancy journeys will help the wider environment and greatly benefit the air quality challenges faced by Epping Forest. If the Q4 trial is successful, we will explore lower or zero emission vehicles over a wider range of settlements. EFCT minibuses are all Euro 6 standard which at least meet London ULEZ requirements. The route passes adjacent to two sections of the Forest itself at Theydon Bois and Loughton Road, but would not use the A104/Wake Arms route. Success will mean an increased opportunity for greener sustainable travel for staff, residents, workers and visitors.

9. The trial will help us and ECC better understand the commercial dynamics and best practice in running a DRT service on a larger scale. Key local plans sites such as HGGT, North Weald and the Dowding Way employment site are all likely to feature (D)-DRT in some form or other as a sustainable transport solution. It should be noted that this is still an evolving transport solution and some trials and services have not succeeded commercially (eg Arriva Click's Sittingbourne & Kent Science Park service). We will keep a careful eye on comparable services elsewhere to identify key success factors.

10. If as predicted the demand responsive service successfully encourages an increase in use over the previous 87 bus service through use by additional hospital staff and Epping Forest DC staff, this would carry added benefits. Mainly a reduction in traffic potentially driving through the Epping Forest SAC area from the south of the District into Epping reducing emissions through less cars on the road and also less queuing traffic. This would be most beneficial at congested sites such as Bell Common (current Air Quality Management Area) and Wake Arms Roundabout (within EFSAC).

11. This approach is still novel for Essex and has attracted interest from ECC and operators which may improve chances of bids for future funding by DfT, Innovate UK etc who have both launched research schemes looking at rural transport solutions. At the start of the trial EFCT propose two vehicles, running between PAH, Harlow Bus Station into Epping/Debden returning from Debden/Epping to PAH, Harlow Bus Station. However, the DRT service may only need to use one minibus initially, depending on the demand.

Conversely, a third vehicle could be deployed for DRT service if demand is very high and fare revenue supports it.

12. During the two month period in June and July 2019 a total of 20,083 passenger journeys were made generating a revenue of £20,544. For the same period in 2020 the corresponding figures are: 7,638 and £8,572. This represents a circa 60% drop, which is not surprising given the challenges around Covid-19. However this does offer the opportunity of providing viable alternative travel options for EFDC staff, NHS and other workers who live or work along the DRT route and have to continue working onsite throughout the crisis.

13. During the trial period the service will run at the same frequency at off peak times as the current Arriva Route 87 service and will be supplemented by a bookable DRT service during peak commuter times. It will be very important to carry out internal and external communication around the DRT to exploit the opportunities this offers for residents, visitors and commuters. In addition, ECC and Arriva themselves will be publicising the cessation of the 87 in its current form from late November, so we must coordinate such that affected residents know that a replacement service is being planned, even if the exact details are not confirmed at that time. As a minimum, we propose an EFDC web page with the opportunity for current 87 users to register for updates on the replacement service and to give customer satisfaction and other survey feedback.

Resource Implications:

Since the start of this financial year the Council has contributed of £75,000 to ECC for keeping the Route 87 service operational. It is recommended that instead of ongoing subsidy the following, one off and ongoing financial commitment be made to EFCT for a trial DRT service from 1 January to 31 March 2021.

One off set up cost:

Card Machine/machines (contactless payment)	£98 (49 each handset for two buses)
Marketing the service	£352
Driver training & uniform	£240
Register service Traffic Commissioner	£52
Flexiroute upgrade passenger app	£1500 per year
Total:	£2,242

Ongoing operating cost:

Operating cost per Driver/Bus route (2 drivers' covering a 12hr shift)	£19,332 (£6,444 per month)
Marketing (including digital and social media)	£2,000
Contingency / Risk	£3,000
Total:	£26,574

As stated elsewhere in the report, the costs will be offset against any income generated as per the fare table below. Fares which will be the same as current Arriva 87 fares. Single fares are shown below, but return fares offer 25-35% discount on two singles (for example, Harlow to Epping Station return = £5.20 versus two £3.50 single fares). Concessionary passes/fares will be accepted under normal ECC T&Cs.

Single Fares (Fare Stages shown – additional stops exist)

2.0	Northbrooks												
2.0	2.0	Sumners / Katherines											
2.0	2.0	2.0	Staple Tye (All Stops)										
2.5	2.5	2.5	2.0	Jacks Hatch									
3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.5	Epping Green								
3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.0	3.0	Epping / Maltings Ln / Church							
3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.0	3.0	1.0	Railway Station, Epping						
3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.0	3.0	1.0	1.0	Sunnyside Rd / Epping Woodland					
3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.0	3.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	Ivy Chimneys / Spotted Dog				
4.5	4.5	4.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	Theydon Bois			
5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	Debden		
5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	1.5	Loughton	
5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	1.5	1.5	Debden.

The map appended to this report shows approximate EFDC staff home locations in relation to current route 87 bus stops, plus other direct Public Transport options to Epping & the Civic Centre.

Legal and Governance Implications:

EFDC is not a transport authority but any service run on our behalf has to comply with regulations which EFCT are already familiar with. Organisations such as EFCT that provide transport on a ‘not-for-profit’ basis can apply for permits under Section 19 or Section 22 of the Transport Act 1985. These permits allow the holder to operate transport services for hire or reward without the need for a full public service vehicle operator’s (PSV ‘O’) licence. At the time of writing, we believe that the DRT peak commuter element will be best run under a Section 19 license, which entails users registering with EFCT as members, which normally means a £15 per year fee as per the traditional Dial-a-Ride services (although EFDC or employers such as NHS may wish to subsidise). The daytime service will be run as a time tabled Section 22 service allowing anyone to use the service on a fare-paying basis. It is worth noting that Section 19 and 22 operation has been subject to High Court interpretation during 2019 with some major commercial operators objecting to Community Transport operators taking fares, but based on the latest interpretation, the service as proposed is fully compliant.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

As the replacement minibuses are expected to be lower emission Euro 6 standard to replace an older fleet for the current 87 route. This would reduce emissions on the route based on more efficient engines. On DRT journeys, buses will only stop at pre-booked pickups, so less stop/start/idling and if there is no demand on a given trip slot, it will not run and nobody can just hail and ride without pre-booking during peak hours. There is likely to be a reduction in overall road travel compared with standard operation for the route. This is likely to decrease overall emissions with reduced travel time.

Officers are in discussion with Zeelo for a UK Innovation fund bid for geospatial analysis to support development of new DRT services to serve ‘rural transport deserts’. If/when our Q4 trial is successful, then a feasibility of a fully digital DRT service using the latest vehicles including the possibility of working with a new e-bus manufacturer will be assessed.

Consultation Undertaken:

EFCT, ECC (Integrated Passenger Transport Unit),

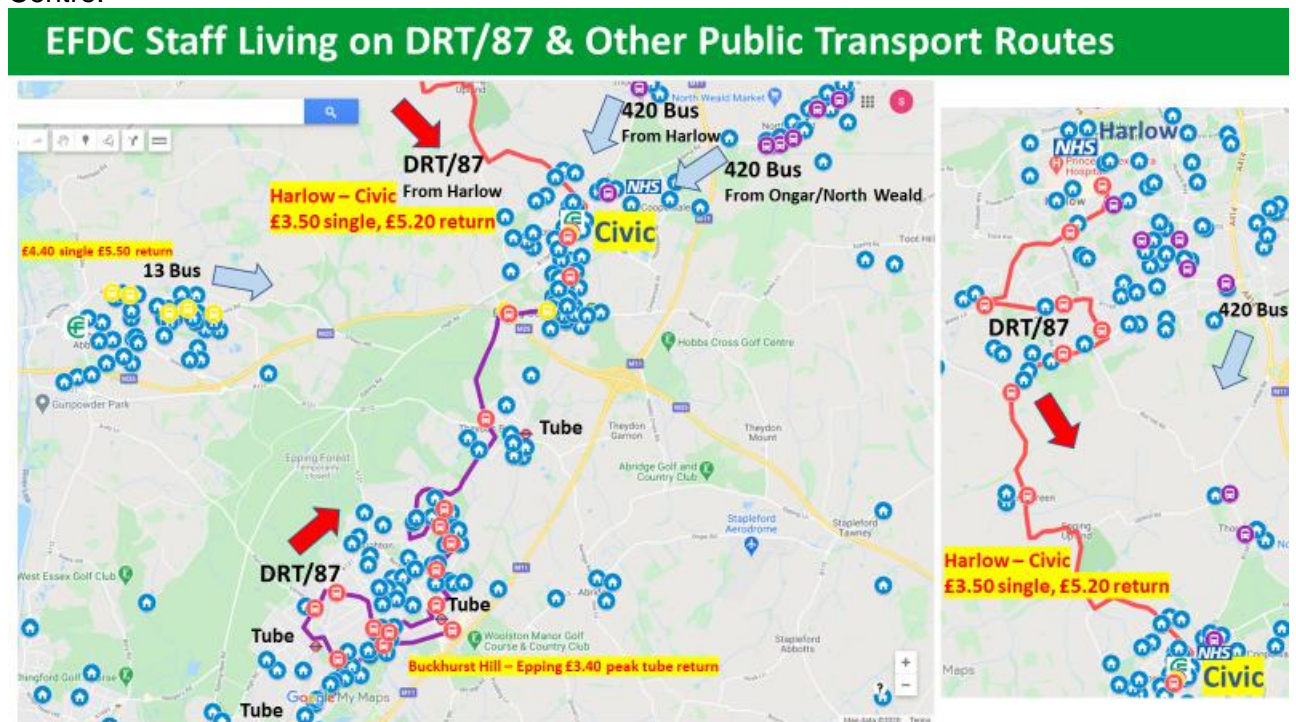
Background Papers:

Covid 19 Development Projects Update

Risk Management:

The Council is not responsible for operating or funding public transport. However it decided to share the funding with ECC to keep the Bus Route 87 operating when Arriva could not operate it as a viable commercial service. If the Council decides to stop this funding then the service will cease to exist from 31 December 2020. This could adversely impact a number of users of the service and could lead to criticism for the Council. This can be mitigated by conducting a trial DRT service, which costs slightly more than the Quarterly subsidy Council was paying, if proven successful then this could lead to other DRT routes being operated across the District.

The map below shows approximate EFDC staff home locations in relation to current route 87 bus stops, plus other direct Public Transport options to Epping & the Civic Centre.



Due Regard Record

This page shows **which groups of people are affected** by the subject of this report. It sets out **how they are affected** and how any **unlawful discrimination** they experience can be eliminated. It also includes information about how **access to the service(s)** subject to this report can be improved for the different groups of people; and how they can be assisted to **understand each other better** as a result of the subject of this report.

S149 Equality Act 2010 requires that due regard must be paid to this information when considering the subject of this report.
