

Report to: Transport Committee

Date: 2 July 2021

Subject: **School Bus Services**

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Is this a key decision?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for call-in by Scrutiny?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information or appendices?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
If relevant, state paragraph number of Schedule 12A, Local Government Act 1972, Part 1:	
Are there implications for equality and diversity?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

1. Purpose of this report

1.1 To provide an update on school transport provision.

2. Information

Context

2.1 The Combined Authority provides around 350 dedicated school bus services across West Yorkshire, transporting around 21,000 children and young people to and from school every school day. Around 120 of these services are subsidised by the Local Councils under Co-operation Agreements because they were originally introduced to meet needs of children who qualified for free travel under legislation or Council Policy.

2.2. A set of Transport Committee approved policy guidelines are used to determine whether or not a dedicated school bus should be provided. These consider the availability of public transport alternatives, the walking distance to school and the extent to which this is parental choice.

- 2.3 The vast majority of these services carry a mix of children who do qualify for free travel and are issued with a free bus pass, and children who do not qualify for assistance and travel at separate fares or use a weekly or monthly Under 19 Ticket. The ratio of qualifiers to non-qualifiers is broadly 1:6.

2020/21 Academic Year

- 2.4 Planning and procuring services in preparation for and during the 2020/21 academic year proved particularly challenging due to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic. Planning the return of pupils and students in September started in July with a comprehensive on-line survey of students and schools to understand travel intentions and concerns. Social distancing required over 90 additional services to be procured over and above the 350 school buses commissioned in normal times. These additional services were funded by a specific grant from Department for Education. School bus operators range in size and resource, but all needed to adopt safety, hygiene, and safeguarding precautions.
- 2.5 Once the arrangements were made, they needed to be monitored closely. Any incidence of overcrowding required prompt action to ensure the right number of buses were available for the school the following day. The provision needed to be adapted throughout the autumn term in response to changes driven by local outbreaks at schools and colleges. Swift action was needed in January when schools closed again to ensure the pupils of critical workers could still attend. The re-opening of schools in March required further planning to ensure that school transport met changing requirements with regard to social distancing and hygiene.

2021/22 Academic Year

- 2.6 The Education Transport team have already begun preparing for the 2021/22 school year. At this stage, provision will assume 'business as usual' but this will be amended in light of any new Government Covid guidance. Policies regarding the provision of school transport were last reviewed by the Committee in 2019 and it is not proposed to amend them for the coming year.
- 2.7 Contracts for school bus services expiring in 2020 were extended for a year in the light of the uncertainties caused by the pandemic. This will necessitate a higher level of service procurement for the coming academic year than would normally be the case. This process is under way with contracts of a total value of £2.1m pa invited for tender. Contracts of a total value of £1.9m will be extended for up to two years. Whilst there may be minor changes to routes and some services may change operators, there will be no significant impacts for pupils. This approach is also aimed at reducing impacts on SME bus and coach operators to assist their recovery from the economic impacts of the pandemic.
- 2.8 The Combined Authority owns 60 BMC Condor "yellow school bus" vehicles currently in service on contracts expiring this year. The contracts for the

operation of these services will end in August 2021. These vehicles age between 13 to 15 years and form the remainder of the fleet of 150 buses obtained with a Government grant in 2006. Transport Committee have been advised of the disposal by sale of 90 buses in 2018 and 2019. Given the advanced age of the remaining buses, it is intended to transfer ownership of these buses to the current operators in return for an agreement to retain prices at current levels (with no indexation increase) for up to a further two years.

3. Tackling the Climate Emergency Implications

- 3.1 The provision of dedicated school bus services reduces car usage and school gate congestion.

4. Inclusive Growth Implications

- 4.1 There are no inclusive growth implications directly arising from this report.

5. Equality and Diversity Implications

- 5.1 There are no equality and diversity implications directly arising from this report.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 The total cost of the school bus services commissioned by the Combined Authority is £13m per annum. The net cost is c£3.5m taking account of revenue from fares and prepaid tickets together with the contributions for the five West Yorkshire Local Councils.
- 6.2 The remaining BMC Condor “yellow bus” vehicles are valued at approximately £110k. Assuming inflation continues at current levels, maintaining £1.9m pa of contracts without applying RPI indexation will offset an anticipated increase in costs of around £140k. Passing the full responsibility for the vehicles to the respective bus operator also reduces risks of unforeseen expenditure for the Combined Authority.

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1 There are no legal implications directly arising from this report.

8. Staffing Implications

- 8.1 There are no staffing implications directly arising from this report.

9. External Consultees

- 9.1 No external consultations have been undertaken.

10. Recommendations

- 10.1 That the Committee notes the update on home to school transport provision in the 2020/21 academic year.
- 10.2 That the Committee endorses the approach taken in planning for the 2021/22 academic year and the disposal of the remaining MyBus vehicles.

11. Background Documents

None.

12. Appendices

None.