

REPORT ON PROGRESS AT WEST NORFOLK COMMUNITY TRANSPORT

Purpose of the organisation

West Norfolk Community Transport Project (WNCT) is a registered charity and its purpose is to provide transport and accessibility help to those that need it. Users have to be members, which is free, and they can then access its services subject to their not being able to use mainstream public transport either because of mobility impairment or the lack of mainstream provision where they live.

Recent business development

The cost of provision of such services, mainly Dial a Bus, is increasing as fuel costs increase again but mainly due to the staged increase of the statutory living Minimum Wage. Transport services are labour intensive and therefore changes to wage costs impact more severely than in most business sectors. As a result, in the last year, WNCT has identified areas where it could run mainstream bus services, still using small minibuses, to increase income.

Dial a Bus

The use of Dial a Bus services is overall flat-lining but this includes examples where use is growing and others where it is falling. Those witnessing the most consistent growth are in King's Lynn urban area, for two new four seat fully accessible cars have been bought, and the lower running costs have enabled the hours of service availability to be expanded.

Elsewhere some routes have fallen in use because either the membership list has reduced due to either death or moving to care/nursing homes, and in one case, Docking, because of the start of a new six days a week mainstream bus service there by WNCT.

Breckland and South Norfolk Flexibus

This is a five vehicle contract provided by WNCT for Norfolk County Council. The contract was awarded again in 2016 for a further five to eight years following competitive tendering. The contract specification required new vehicles to be provided, for which a lump sum payment was provided by the County, and these have been sourced and introduced in the past month.

Mainstream bus services

WNCT has long provided such a service in the Downham Market and Welney areas. In 2016 to this has been added a route from West Raynham and Great Massingham to Fakenham and to Harpley where it connects with Stagecoach for King's Lynn, and a second route from Docking, Bircham and villages in that area to King's Lynn. Towards the end of last year, a further new route, running away from the main road, was started between Downham Market and King's Lynn. Use of these continues to grow, and the Docking route typically carries 650 to 700 passengers a month. Whilst it attracts no subsidy from the County Council, it is carefully interworked with contracts to take children to Docking Primary School and students to COWA and in that way attracts parallel financial support.

Shopmobility

Shopmobility, based at the multi-storey car park in King's Lynn, for which the Borough provides a contract payment, provides pavement scooters which are used by an average of about ten people a day. It fulfils an important part in the chain to get people with mobility impairment via Dial a Bus into town and to the shops and businesses.

Looking ahead

The General Manager left in January to take up a similar position at Sanders Coaches in Holt, and a replacement has been sought and will join at the beginning of May.

Business development is therefore slightly on hold at the moment, but the opportunity is being taken to hold higher level discussions with County Council officers to identify the most appropriate future direction for WNCT.

If subsidy levels hold, and yet costs continue to increase as they certainly will, then the charity faces alternative scenarios, one is to reduce the level of provision to members, the other is to boost its commercial facing services to provide greater surpluses to help underpin the current level of charitable operations.

It is therefore recommended that grants and contract payments from the Borough to WNCT must be held constant and not reduced whilst this re-focusing of the business activities takes place.

Councillor Fraser

February 2017