

REPORT OF CONSULTATION WITH REGISTERED USERS OF DIAL-A-RIDE AND OPTIONS FOR SERVICE REVISION

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 Members to consider the results of the consultation undertaken with Rochford registered Users of the South East Essex Dial-a-Ride service (SEEDAR).
- 1.2 The Council has given preliminary notice of its intention to withdraw from the SEEDAR Partnership in July 2002 subject to an alternative scheme being introduced using Taxi Vouchers.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 South East Essex Dial-a-Ride is a Partnership between Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, Essex County Council, Castle Point Borough Council and this Authority. It operates within the three Districts and provides specialised transport for persons who do not have access to, or cannot use, conventional public transport.
- 2.2 A single journey using Dial-a-Ride costs £1.20; a return journey £2.40. These are flat-rate charges irrespective of the distance travelled within the operating area.
- 2.3 SEEDAR operates a fleet of fully wheelchair accessible vehicles using drivers skilled in the handling of persons with mobility problems. Comments received in returned Survey Forms, and made during telephone conversations with the Hackney Carriage Office, indicate the Users of the Service have the highest possible regard for the Staff (Drivers and Operators) employed to operate Dial-a-Ride.
- 2.4 Bookings are taken by telephone at the Dial-a-Ride Office in Southend. In order to make the best use of the vehicle resources, pick-ups and set-downs are carefully scheduled using a computer booking system and skills developed over a long period of time. The size and nature of the Rochford District, with the mix of built-up and rural areas, contrasts with the smaller but more densely populated Borough of Southend-on-Sea.
- 2.5 The necessity to schedule the Service does not permit it to accommodate bookings that can vary in respect of timings; for example for Hospital Appointments when the return journey can be delayed.

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- 2.6 Bookings can be made up to seven days before the day of travel, but normally not less than two days. This, inevitably, causes pressure on the booking system because the natural tendency for the Service User is to contact the Booking Office at the first opportunity to secure the time they require. This is understood by long-established Users of Dial-a-Ride but comment from some who have joined recently indicates they have abandoned attempts to obtain a Dial-a-Ride journey having become frustrated at the continuously engaged telephone line. When they eventually make contact the time they sought is not available. SEEDAR Staff will always endeavour to assist, and may be able to offer an alternative time or a subsequent cancellation, but this may not be suitable to the customer.
- 2.7 The difficulties experienced can be attributed to the high demand for the service. The recovery of the administration of Hackney Carriage Licensing, and the Council's positive encouragement towards the introduction of wheelchair accessible taxis, was seen as a possible alternative solution to the service provision.
- 2.8 In order to evaluate the options available and whether the Council's decision to withdraw from SEEDAR was appropriate a Survey was conducted to determine requirements of Users.

3 SURVEY RESULTS

- 3.1 An introductory letter and survey form were sent to the 252 Service Users in the District as well as other voluntary organisations and Parish Councils. 177 responses have been received. This represents a 70.2% return rate. Responses were also received from organisations and the breakdown of the survey of individuals is given in Appendix 1.

4 CONCERNS EXPRESSED BY SERVICE USERS

- 4.1 During the consultation process concerns were raised in written form and verbally by Users of Dial-a-Ride regarding the ability of a replacement scheme to deliver the same standard of service without disadvantaging those who rely on the present arrangements. The results of the survey are given in Appendix 2. Appendix 3 lists factors for consideration and Appendix 4 is a letter from a user of Dial-A-Ride that gives an overview from the user's perspective which was repeated by many.

5 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 As reported to an earlier meeting, the Council has been able to negotiate a reduction in the proposed contribution for 2001/2. This has now been fixed at £31,600. In addition, Essex County Council contribute £39,062 to support the scheme. The County have indicated

that if Rochford withdraw from SEEDAR no funding will be provided for a substitute (taxi voucher) scheme. This means that available financing for such a scheme in 2002/3 would have to remain at around £31,000 unless additional funds were identified within the core budget.

- 5.2 As indicated by the survey, users take advantage of Dial-A-Ride at varying levels. Some use it 3-4 times a week, others 3-4 times a year. It would therefore be difficult to establish an equitable form of voucher distribution other than all participants having an equal share. On the basis of the foregoing this would be around £125 per user based upon the current take-up. Such a level would be insufficient for high users and excessive for infrequent users.
- 5.3 High users would find themselves without vouchers a short way into the financial year and being left with the only alternative option as being the high cost of taxis. The Head of Service will give illustrative examples at the meeting.

6 FACTORS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 6.1 Appendix 3 sets out matters that require consideration
- 6.2 Additionally, the Government have just released the result of a long term study entitled "Older People - Their Transport Needs and Requirements" which advocates the provision of special transport schemes like Dial - a - Ride. The Executive Summary Key Results and Conclusions are reproduced for Members consideration as Appendix 5.
- 6.3 The SEEDAR scheme also runs in conjunction with the Shopmobility scheme which means that users can order a wheelchair to be made available on the Dial-a-Ride vehicle for their use at the destination of their journey. This facility would not be available with a substitute taxi voucher scheme.

7 OPTIONS FOR CHANGE

- 7.1 It is not anticipated a Taxi Voucher Scheme would provide the benefits desired. The commitment of a significant number of wheelchair accessible taxis to school contracts and inability to carry more than one wheelchair restricts both current vehicle availability and flexibility.
- 7.2 The Survey undertaken illustrates the Dial-a-Ride facility does not require all vehicles to be fully wheelchair accessible; in certain circumstances alternative vehicles, e.g. estate cars, could be used as a lower capital cost Fleet addition. The proportion of Service Users indicating preference for saloon derived vehicles is significant. The Head of Service believes that the best way forward is for Rochford to remain in SEEDAR and to participate in the ongoing service review

with the partner authorities and to try to influence service delivery change from within.

- 7.3 The current SEEDAR charging policy fails to recognise levels of usage by individuals and distances travelled. There is justification in a Partnership Review to determine the basis of charging to reflect the benefit to the user on a proportional basis. It must be determined whether it is reasonable for a Service User travelling from Hullbridge to Rayleigh to pay the same as someone making a longer journey from, say, Hullbridge to Southend.
- 7.4 The current charging policy could be altered to a zonal basis with a standard fare relating to a journey from one zone to an adjoining zone. It would be envisaged that the zones would be relatively large to avoid over-complication of administration and a flat rate increase would apply for each additional zone. Discussions with the partner authorities could mean that other options emerge.

8 RECOMMENDED

It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

- (1) To formally remain within the South East Essex Dial-a-Ride Partnership.
- (2) That the Head of Revenue & Housing Management and nominated Partnership Members be authorised to enter into discussions with the other SEEDAR Partnership Members with regard to service revisions, alternative vehicle options and graduated fare structure resulting from this report that would address Members current concern within the existing operational structure. (HRHM)

Steve Clarkson

Head of Revenue & Housing Management

Background Papers:

Dial-a-Ride Survey Returns
Dial-a-Ride File Papers
DETR Research Document

NOTE: Any additional information received subsequent to this Report will be brought to the Committee's attention.

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