

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
6TH SEPTEMBER 2007

REAL TIME BUS INFORMATION**Purpose of Report**

1. To provide a brief report on the outcome of the actions requested by Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 7th June 2007.

Background

2. Following a request by Members at their meeting on 18th January, a report on the Real Time Bus Information system in Wiltshire was presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 29th March 2007. This gave a factual account of the objectives of, and progress with implementing, the system. It was reported that the technical elements of the system had been delivered and were working satisfactorily. However, the effective delivery of information through the system was still causing problems and was highly dependent on the continuing input of staff time by both the bus operators and the Council. Members expressed concern about the continuing difficulties that were being experienced and asked for an update report to be presented to the next meeting on 7th June.
3. This report focussed, as requested, on the way the functioning of the system was measured and monitored. The two bus operators involved with the system, Wilts & Dorset and First, accepted an invitation to attend and were asked for their views on the effectiveness of the system. They re-stated their continued support for the real time information system (in which they have both invested resources of their own) and for their active participation in regular meetings with the system supplier and Council officers. They confirmed that its effective operation depends on the accurate and timely updating of system data, and continued monitoring and action to identify and deal with any problems that arise. There was also concern about the reliability of network coverage on parts of the route.
4. Members expressed concern about the lack of effective real time information in some areas, given the length of time the project had been running and the investment made, and resolved:
 - (i) *To thank the representatives of the bus operators for attending and giving their views on the system during the debate.*
 - (ii) *To ask the Cabinet Member to confirm the level of priority afforded to the delivery of Real Time and whether the additional 18.5 hours of staff time identified as being required to improve its effectiveness would be forthcoming.*
 - (iii) *To ask the Director of Resources to review how effective the project management had been and whether any advice or support would be appropriate if the scheme was still regarded a priority for the Council.*
 - (iv) *To ask the Director of Environmental Services to co-ordinate a brief report back on the outcome of the above actions, along with any further views of the bus operators to the next meeting.*

Main Considerations for the Council

5. The implementation of the Real Time system was project managed from the Salisbury Joint Transport Team as one of the key elements of the Salisbury Transport Plan (subsequently extended to include the four inter-urban routes following a successful bid for Government Challenge funding). The implementation phase is completed by the delivery and signing off of the technical elements of the system. However, it has become apparent that ongoing management and technical input required by the system is greater than had originally been envisaged. The original intention had been that the system would be managed together with the other elements of the Intelligent Transport Systems in Salisbury and that consideration would be given to setting up an Urban Traffic Control Centre that could also undertake monitoring of bus movements, variable message signs for car parks and closed-circuit TV. This has not materialised, and the changes in the role of the Joint Transport Team have reduced the staff resource available to actively manage the Real Time system.
6. It was acknowledged in the previous report that the current resources for monitoring and managing the system are insufficient to achieve an improvement in the current level of functioning of the system and it was estimated that an extra staff resource of approximately 18.5 hours per week would be required to allow the daily management needed to maximise the potential of the system. The Cabinet Member has confirmed that this will be a priority, and that the extra resource required to improve the effectiveness of the system will be made available.
7. It has not yet been decided how this resource will be deployed, but in the short term it is anticipated that a Project Team will be set up (including the new resource) to increase the level of monitoring, identify the reasons for underperformance and put in place an action plan to address these. The Director of Resources will be asked to comment on the proposals.
8. In the longer term, the setting up of a Traffic Control Centre (which would take on the management of the Real Time system among a range of other functions) is being considered. The business case for this is being developed as part of the Front Line Services workstream of the 'One Council for Wiltshire' transition.
9. The bus operators support the actions proposed above.

Environmental Impact

10. The Real Time system aims to increase bus use by improving the confidence of users, and by making the system more reliable the proposals will help to achieve this objective.

Risk Assessment

11. If action is not taken to improve the reliability of the system, there is a risk that the system's objectives will not be achieved. There is also a risk to the reputation of the Council if a high profile investment is perceived not to be functioning effectively.

Financial Implications

12. The cost of the proposals during 2007-08 can be met from additional efficiencies that have been identified within the public transport revenue budget. The business case for longer term resources delivered through a Traffic Control Centre is currently being developed.

Options Considered

13. The option of continuing as at present, with monitoring and management of the system carried out by staff in the Passenger Transport Unit and Traffic Team in addition to their other duties, has been rejected because this would not result in any significant improvement in the functioning of the system.
14. To cease operating the system would be an over-reaction to the scale of the problems experienced, would lose the benefits of all the investment already made, would damage relationships with operators and would incur penalties under the terms of the contract signed with the operators when the system was purchased.

Conclusion

15. The Cabinet Member has confirmed that effective operation of the Real Time system is a priority, and that additional resource will be made available to achieve this. In the short term the extra staff time will be funded through efficiencies identified in the public transport revenue budget, while for the longer term the business case is being developed for a Traffic Control Centre that would take on management of Real Time among its other functions.

GEORGE BATTEN

Director of Environmental Services

Report Author

IAN WHITE

Passenger Transport Co-ordination Manager

The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this Report:

Service Level Agreement with Wilts & Dorset Bus Company