

# Transport Programme – Rural Impact Screening – Sutherland Mainstream Schools and Public Bus Services Re-tendering 2015

## Rural Impacts

### Background

The Transport Programme has been instigated by Highland Council to make savings on the delivery of transport services across Highland – the target reduction is to generate £2.246m savings from expenditure of £15.003m.

The focus of this rural impact assessment is Highland Council's expenditure on mainstream schools and public bus services in Sutherland, which is the first area undergoing contract re-tendering. The value of current contracts for mainstream schools and public bus services (which includes dial-a-bus services) is £1,677,000. This expenditure supports the majority of bus services operating in Sutherland.

Currently the mainstream schools and public bus services contracts are delivered by a range of contractors ranging from parental contracts (11 of these) to take pupils to school through to a large national commercial bus operator. Most of the 21 commercial providers are small to mid-sized transport businesses. Highland Council also delivers some of the school transport in-house (8 routes are delivered this way).

For Sutherland there is a target to save £252,236 which was notified to and agreed by Community Services Committee on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2015. As a result there will be a lower, although still substantial (£1.424m), sum available to procure transport services for mainstream schools and public bus services in Sutherland.

Through a consultation running over February – April 2015 current and prospective suppliers, the general public, ward councillors, community councillors and community groups were informed of the budgetary circumstances and of Highland Council's intention to re-tender the Sutherland bus services. Views on potential impact and ideas for cost efficient service provision were sought from these stakeholder groups during the consultative process and reports capturing these have been fed into the process of route specifications planning.

### **1. Describe what the change will mean in rural communities – positive and negative.**

E.g. centralisation, re-location or closure of service, change in sector provision e.g. third sector or private sector model, is this different in different rural areas?

Features of the new invitation to tender are:

- **Contracts will run until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2021:** longer contracts will offer operational sustainability and enable business development investment to be made.
- **Many of the routes include options for different service levels, in order to assess savings from potential service reductions as well as the cost of alternatives proposed in the public consultation:** there will potentially be a reduced service in some areas.
- **On all public routes, if wheelchair accessible vehicles are not already in use, options are invited for accessible vehicles:** this could improve accessibility for disabled people.
- **An increase of approximately 5% on the Council's maximum fare scale has been applied, with the increase being slightly biased towards longer journeys:** potentially

higher fares, particularly for people living further away from larger settlements; but potentially lower contract costs for Highland Council if contractors feed the fare increases into their tender prices.

- **In the consultation process it was suggested that all school routes could be opened to the public. This is unlikely to be feasible in all cases, but where there is a known public need, school routes have been converted to public routes or school and public contracts have been merged.**
- **Routes have been combined into single contracts where there was an operational benefit from doing so. Options have also been designed for different methods of operation, in order to compare prices and enable the most cost-effective method to be chosen.**
- **Flexibility has been built into the Conditions of Contract to allow for future changes in needs such as changing pupil numbers requiring larger or smaller vehicles, or lengthened or shortened routes.**

## **2. How will people in rural communities be affected? Both positive and negative impacts.**

Accessibility of service - travel time to the service, higher costs of goods/services, new costs of goods/services, energy costs, public access to internet, impact on seasonal or part-time workers, self-employed people and people on low wages, impact on land based business and on tourism business, concerns about sustainability of the service, is there variable impact across different rural communities?

### Public Perspective

The points raised in this section are drawn from responses received to the questionnaire developed for members of the public. A copy of the questionnaire and the full analysis report can be found within the report 'Sutherland-Overall ConsultationFeedback-AggregatedReports-v1.0' at <http://www.highland.gov.uk/transport-programme>.

#### *Accessing Services:*

- Respondents were concerned that reduction/removal in bus service in their local area would mean they could no longer make connections to other parts of the country. It was noted that if services were to be reduced then the remaining services must coordinate with other transport.
- Respondents use public transport for social and recreational activities- a reduced/withdrawn bus service would reduce access to these activities, particularly in the evening.
- Respondents also highlighted a reduction/removal in services could result in increased isolation, particularly for older people as they tend to rely more on public transport. A reduction could also limit the mobility of people with disabilities who use public transport. It is also likely to reduce the ability of young people to get about, reducing their independence.
- It was also highlighted that public transport is used to access health services. If services are reduced or removed it was again noted that an overnight trip may be required to make appointments.
- Some respondents noted that they did not believe there would be an impact, or that it would depend on which services were to be reduced.

#### *Fuel Poverty:*

- It was noted that if public transport was reduced then people would have to use their cars more which would make travelling more expensive.

#### *Economic Impact:*

- Some respondents noted that they use public transport to travel work and that they do not have any other way to travel.
- It could impact on people with businesses, if their customers can no longer access their service via public transport.
- It was also noted that a reduced service could impact on the number of tourists in the area- this is likely to have an economic impact in areas that depend on tourism.

#### *Cumulative Impact:*

- It was suggested that the impacts of a reduction in public transport could lead to an increased need for health and social services, and so may end up costing the Council more in the long run.

#### Community Perspective (Community Councils and Community Groups)

The points raised in this section are drawn from responses received to the questionnaire developed for community councils and community groups. A copy of the questionnaire and the full analysis report can be found within the report 'Sutherland-Overall ConsultationFeedback-AggregatedReports-v1.0' at <http://www.highland.gov.uk/transport-programme>.

#### *Accessing Services:*

- Community groups highlighted that many people are already unable to take part in leisure and educational opportunities, especially in the evening, due to inadequate transport services. Further reductions would make it very difficult for people who do not drive to access basic services such as shops. This would detrimentally affect the quality of life in communities.
- Many people in rural areas have to travel to towns to access services, such as health care appointments. Community groups highlighted that if public transport was reduced then some people will have to take overnight trips if no appropriate return services were available.
- In some areas there may only be one service linking a settlement with other communities. For these areas, it will be important to consider how these communities will be expected to access essential services such as shops and a Post Office.

#### *Economic Impact:*

- If public transport is reduced then the only option for people who do not drive will be to use taxis which are not affordable for many.
- Community groups were concerned that a reduction in service would impact on the number of tourists visiting areas in Sutherland. This would have an economic impact as many areas depend on tourism. It was suggested that improving transport would have a positive impact on tourism, particularly introducing a taxi service.
- A reduction in service could also affect people traveling to work- this may impact on the ability of some people to work outwith their local area.
- Removing/reducing transport services could lead to an increase in the need for home care support services.

### Suppliers' Perspective

The points raised in this section were drawn from responses received to the questionnaire circulated amongst 33 current and potential suppliers. Thirteen organisations took the opportunity to respond. A copy of the questionnaire and the full analysis report can be found within the report 'Sutherland-OverallConsultationFeedback-AggregatedReports-v1.0' at <http://www.highland.gov.uk/transport-programme>.

#### *Working with other Providers:*

- There was a concern that the Council may introduce tendering processes that would favour commercial providers: it would be important to consider the wider impacts of potentially losing community transport providers.

### Impact Considerations from Public Meetings

Four public meetings were held in Durness, Lochinver, Golspie and Bettyhill.

A copy of the meeting reports can be found within the report 'Sutherland-Overall ConsultationFeedback-AggregatedReports-v1.0' at <http://www.highland.gov.uk/transport-programme>.

- Services are already very limited; there are already obvious gaps such as not being able to get to Raigmore and back in one day, or services in the evening
- Dial-a-bus or on-demand services may be more useful than timetabled services, particularly for rural areas
- Attendees also had suggestions about specific routes in their areas

### **3. Are any other public services changing locally as well?**

Is there cumulative impact from partners' services?

A new 3-18 community campus is to be built on the site of the current Tain Royal Academy, comprising Early Years, Primary, Secondary, Additional Support Needs (ASN) and Gaelic Medium provision to replace all other local authority education provision within Tain, including the existing Tain Royal Academy building and Community Complex. This may have some minor impacts (as existing schools are all close by) on the home-to-school transport services required when the new campus opens - this is likely to be 3 years hence (circa 2018).

Schools are considering altering their closing times. Decisions could impact on the transport and its cost of provision.

NHS Highland (reported during 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2015 Board meeting) will be redesigning the Public Dental Service to meet the needs of 20% of the Highland population. A 30-minute drive-time principle will be deployed wherever possible in the development of a 3-5 year plan for putting in place the re-designed Public Dental Service (PDS). There is a PDS unit in Golspie which will fall within this re-design.

NHS Highland is also consulting on the delivery of other of their services: residential care (currently two centres potentially to be closed and a new centre constructed) and the provision of GP/health centre service delivery and locations. The care home proposals are likely to emerge at the end of 2015 and the GP/health centre recommendations are likely to be produced by the end of summer 2015.

#### 4. Have other options or adjustments been considered?

E.g. co-location, mobile services, telephone/internet access, new transport links, re-location of some centralised functions to off-set local impact, transfer of assets, local groups providing the service instead.

Some suggestions were made during the consultation process:

- With regard to how to make school bus services more cost-effective the most common suggestion was to make more or all services mixed use (where there are extra seats and where it is safe and practical to do so). This has been built into the Invitation to Tender, where feasible.
- Some respondents felt that free transport should only be available to families that cannot pay, there needed to be stricter rules on who can use the school service and that parents should be more involved in transporting their children to school. There are, however, legal obligations and national criteria which Highland Council must abide by in the provision of home-to-school transport. These are defined in Highland Council's [School Transport Policy](#).
- It was suggested that free transport to Gaelic schools needs to be re-assessed: the full impacts of this would need to be analyzed to ensure that families are not discouraged from using Gaelic schools. Highland Council provides Gaelic Medium education in 22 primary schools and Gaelic Medium subject teaching is provided in 7 secondary schools, whilst Gaelic language courses, fluent or learners are offered in a total of 16 secondary schools, and basic Gaelic language and awareness is taught in over 52 primary schools. Within Sutherland there are 6 Gaelic home-to-school transport contracts serving Tain Royal Academy, Tongue Primary and Bonar Bridge Primary. As part of Highland Council's approach to supporting Gaelic Medium Education (as well as Denominational Education) schools, the defined geographic catchment areas approach does not apply and so transport is often provided for longer home-to-school journeys.
- Community groups felt it was important that local transport is well coordinated with other transport services as this would encourage more people to use public transport and maintain links to other parts of the country. This important feature of public transport has been reflected in the Invitation to Tender: for example through options invited for Route 804, Durness – Inverness or Lairg, where an option has been included to start either in Durness or Inverness; and through Route 806 where an option for a Friday evening link-up with the train arriving at Ardgay has been invited. Additionally, the Assynt Subsidised taxi specification has invited options for running services on two evenings per week for organized social/leisure activities.
- There was support for increasing fares as suppliers felt this money could be reinvested in services and make them sustainable. However it is important to consider if an increase would limit the accessibility of services for some groups, or be an unfair increase targeted at people living in rural areas. An increase of approximately 5% on the Council's maximum fare scale has been applied within the Invitation to Tender documentation, with the increase being slightly biased towards longer journeys. As noted in Section 1 above, whilst this may result in potentially higher fares, particularly for people living further away from larger settlements there is potentially benefit in lower contract costs for Highland Council (if contractors feed the fare increases into their tender prices) enabling the retention of services.
- It was suggested that services need to be better advertised: the best way to advertise services may differ between communities and the Council should not assume that all communities can access this information in the same way (e.g. online will not be an option in areas with poor broadband connections). Clear guidance is being provided in the contract documentation concerning the range and quality of information provision and dissemination. It provides instruction that timetables and other information shall be

designed in accordance with the 'Public Transport Information Good Practice' guide issued by the Association of Transport Coordinating Officers.

- There was a suggestion that car sharing schemes should be introduced. This should be considered alongside the increased cost of running a car in rural areas. Highland Liftshare (<https://highland.liftshare.com>) is a portal to the national Liftshare network, and HITRANS (the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership) in association with ZetTrans (the Shetland Transport Partnership) has established a transport sharing portal at <http://ifyoucareshare.com>.
- There was a suggestion that the Council should encourage local providers to start up although it was acknowledged that funding would be needed.

#### **4 options – please detail which of the 4 options relates to this proposal**

1. No impact
2. Negative impact but mitigation identified – please state nature of mitigation - or positive impact identified, again state what this is
3. Potential rural impact – further consideration required
4. Other – under development, rural impact assessment required at later stage

Option 3, 'Potential Rural Impact' is most likely to pertain, as the true impact cannot be accurately ascertained until the contracts have been awarded and the resultant impact assessed.

Option 2 'Negative Impact' would also be relevant, the mitigation being route specifications based on the statutory requirements, listening to the results of the consultations undertaken and purchasing as extensive a set of transport services as the budget will permit.

Mitigation is also served by either the delegated Community Services Committee authority granted to the Director of Community Services and the Chair and Vice Chair of Community Services Committee or by the full Community Services Committee to undertake decisions on the range of public bus services to 'buy'.