SUTHERLAND PUBLIC TRANSPORT TENDERS

RATIONALE FOR OPTIONS INVITED

General

Many suggestions were received during the consultation process. Within the constraints of a target of a 15% budget saving, timetable options have been designed to include as many suggestions as possible. However, some proposals would have involved significant extra cost and could not be accommodated.

In all cases, tenders have been invited for the existing level of service, and almost all routes have at least one other option. These may be for lower cost operation or to provide for proposals received in the consultation. Where specific needs for school routes to be opened to the public have been identified, these have been included. A summary is attached.

Options for wheelchair accessible vehicles have been invited on all routes where these do not already exist.

This paper describes the rationale for the tender options invited. Decisions on awards of contract will be made in the light of tenders received, and affordability within the budget.

Contract 800: Melvich – Bettyhill

This has been converted from a school bus contract (which the current contractor, Stagecoach, has made available to the public) to a public service contract. An option including school holiday operation was also invited, but the number of fare-paying passengers has been found to be around one per day, so a school holiday service is unlikely to be awarded.

Contract 802: Durness – Thurso (Saturdays)

An option was invited for a Durness – Tongue bus which would connect with another bus (Contract 803) to/from Thurso. Taking these two contracts together, this allows various levels of Saturday service along the north coast to be considered. The present days of operation are retained, being the second Saturdays January, February and March, and the second and fourth Saturdays of other months.

Contract 803: Melness – Bettyhill (- Thurso)

The present contract is only the school bus to Farr High School, but is tendered as a public service. Other options include Tuesday, Friday and Saturday services to Thurso which are currently part of a Caithness-based contract. This allows for continuation of these services. Various Saturday options are included:

* Service limited to Contract 802 only
* Operates when Contract 802 is not operating
* Operates every Saturday, with 802 becoming a connecting service.

This enables costs of different methods of provision to be compared.

Contract 804: Inverness – Durness (summer only – “bike bus”)

In response to requests made during the consultation, an option has been included for this route to be Durness-based. Sunday-only options, with a slightly longer season, have also been included (both Inverness-based and Durness-based) to provide a service when there is no other transport available.

Two options for a Durness – Lochinver – Ullapool – Lairg service have also been invited, to run:

* Mondays to Saturdays during school summer holidays only, or
* Saturdays from June to September, plus Tuesdays and Thursdays during school summer holidays.

These options provide connections with ferries at Ullapool and with trains at Lairg. They also restore, during the summer, a link between Ullapool and Lairg which was one of the consultation requests.

However, it was not feasible to provide a service to Ullapool for onward connections to Inverness, due to the early starts and late returns involved. Also, the timetable for the Ullapool options which have been invited are not feasible for a year-round service as they would conflict with school journeys and would therefore impose a significant extra cost.

Contract 805: Durness – Inverness (Saturdays)

Options have been invited for enhancing this route to operate every Saturday and for a later return to allow attendance at football matches. It is expected that if the service was increased to operate every Saturday, there would be no Saturday service on Contract 806.

Contract 806: Durness – Lairg

As at present, all options include the Durness – Kinlochbervie High School transport as part of the contract.

In addition to the present timetable on Mondays to Saturdays, and the present timetable with Saturdays withdrawn, other options invited are:

* Lairg service reduced to three days per week, as although the passenger numbers have been increasing, they are still relatively low at around 4 each way per day, and a less frequent service may meet the needs (this also makes a bus available for the Tuesday/Thursday service option to Ullapool in summer – Contract 804);
* Connection from Ardgay Station to Durness on Friday evenings (this is quite tight to schedule within drivers’ hours regulations and would not be feasible more frequently);
* Year-round service to Lairg on 3 days and Ullapool (via Lochinver) on 2 days; although this allows for visits to Ullapool it does not provide for onward connections, due to the need to include school transport to Kinlochbervie.

Contracts 804 and 806 illustrate the possibilities for linking Durness with Ullapool within limited resources.

Contracts 807, 809 and 815: Lochinver - Ullapool

Consultation emphasised the importance of the existing level of service, and a retiming of the late afternoon return from Ullapool was requested, to give more time for pupils doing after-school activities. Options are therefore designed to allow different methods of operating a broadly similar service.

All options invited provide for:

* School transport between Lochinver and Ullapool
* Mid-day return from Ullapool to Lochinver
* Late afternoon journey from Ullapool to Lochinver (retimed slightly later than at present in most options, due to requests received)

but do so in different ways. Contract 807 also provides for an Ullapool – Inverness return; this is currently provided commercially by Stagecoach but they would not continue it if they lost the Lochinver – Ullapool contract.

Currently the route has a large coach (mainly for school needs, but available to the public) and a small bus (for extra school capacity plus public use and additional journeys) awarded under separate contracts. An alternative approach is to use two midi-buses (approx. 33 seats each), with one starting its school run at Inverkirkaig and the other at Culkein. One bus could then do the Inverness run while the other does the mid-day Ullapool – Lochinver return. Timetables have been invited to allow this.

In most options, buses return to Lochinver (or Culkein/Drumbeg) at the end of the school day so are not available for a later return from Ullapool. Therefore a separate contract (815) has been invited for that journey, which could be operated by an Ullapool- based bus after doing a more local school run.

Contract 814: Drumbeg – Lochinver

Various options are invited to provide the school feeder services from Drumbeg and Culkein; these complement the various options in 807 and 809. In some options, 814 would also provide some off-peak journeys. Along with the other contracts in this area, the overall purpose is to enable different operating methods to be priced as alternative methods of providing a broadly similar service.

Contract 900: Tain – Lairg

Requests were received for a better level of service in the afternoon, and as this is a well-used route, this option was included.

Passenger figures show that the early morning journey (0620 from Lairg) is poorly used, so it has been withdrawn in some options.

In order to allow more effective use of vehicles, two options merge this service with the Ardgay – Tain school buses, which involved retiming of some journeys.

Contract 901: Lairg / Ardgay – Dornoch

In response to requests, this has been converted from a school transport contract to a public bus service. Options have been invited for limited school holiday services, but no information is available on the potential level of use of these.

Contract 906: Lairg – Helmsdale

Analysis of passenger figures shows that usage is spread fairly evenly through this route, but the early and later buses are better used than those in the middle of the day. Options have been invited for:

* Reduction from 3 to 2 journeys each way;
* Route shortened to Lairg – Golspie, as commercial Stagecoach services are available between Golspie and Helmsdale;
* Reduced to 3 days per week on existing route, with the bus used to provide a mid-day return between Lairg and Dornoch on the other two days. (This link was requested but the level of demand for it is not known.)

In general the reduced options allow for working between school journeys and therefore more efficient utilisation of vehicles.

T.01: Kinlochbervie subsidised taxi

In response to requests, this has been integrated with a local school transport contract, which would make it available for public use at school times. Otherwise the level of service remains unchanged.

T.02: Assynt subsidised taxi

Analysis of passenger figures shows lower levels of use on Tuesday afternoons and Saturdays, so these have been withdrawn in two options. The evening service has also been withdrawn in one option.

T.05: Dornoch dial-a-bus

No alternative proposals were made, and no potential for more efficient operations were identified, so the invitation was for the existing service level only.

T.06: Lairg / Ardgay / Rosehall dial-a-bus

Complaints have been made about inability to access this service in Rosehall. Therefore a separate contract (T.19) has been invited for Rosehall on one day per week, with Rosehall removed from most options for this contract. As passenger numbers are low, an option for a smaller vehicle has also been invited, with the same service level.

T.12: North Sutherland subsidised taxi

Analysis of passenger figures on the scheduled bus service in this area (currently Contract 916, but possibly part of Contract 803 in future) has shown that almost all journeys are to or from Thurso, with very little short-distance use in Sutherland. Therefore, in two options the time restrictions on the taxi have been eased, which should make it better able to meet demands. However, the taxi may still have times when it is unavailable in order to provide a school journey.

In one option, the taxi is allocated to the Bettyhill area on 3 days and the Melvich area on 2 days, to improve availability in these areas on the specified days and to reduce dead mileage. Early morning and evening journeys remain available throughout the area.

In two options the availability of the taxi for social events in the evenings is withdrawn. Usage of this is low, and its availability for work-related journeys or connections with long-distance buses and trains is retained.

T.13: Durness area dial-a-bus

In one option the evening journeys are withdrawn. Otherwise the service remains as at present.