

Agenda Item No. 4(b)

DERBYSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**MEETING OF CABINET MEMBER – HIGHWAYS, TRANSPORT AND
INFRASTRUCTURE**

10 September 2020

Report of the Director – Economy, Transport and Environment

**PETITION – REQUEST THAT THE COUNTY COUNCIL KEEPS B-LINE
CARDS AND TRAVEL DISCOUNTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN
DERBYSHIRE**

- (1) **Purpose of Report** To consider a petition requesting that the County Council continues the b_line travel discount scheme for young people in Derbyshire.
- (2) **Information and Analysis**

Background

At the meeting on 9 July 2020, the Cabinet Member acknowledged receipt of a petition signed by 355 persons requesting the retention of the b_line travel discount scheme for young people in Derbyshire (Minute No.29/20 refers). The wording of the petition reads as follows:

“Request to keep b_line cards and travel discounts for Young People in Derbyshire. Many young people in Derbyshire have to travel long distances to access education, training, work, friends and leisure. The 33% and 25% travel discounts for 11 to 19 year olds are essential for them, especially young people from poorer families. Please keep b_line cards and substantial travel discounts for all young people in Derbyshire to help them gain the opportunities and quality of life they need”.

The Council currently offers two concessionary travel schemes for Derbyshire residents, b_line and Gold Card. Withdrawal of b_line was included in the Council’s budget saving proposals for 2020-21. Since the time the budget was set, the UK has been subject to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic which has impacted significantly on the local economy and specifically, access to employment and training opportunities for young people.

The Council’s COVID-19 economic recovery work has identified 16 – 25 year olds as being specifically vulnerable to unemployment as a result of COVID-19 and within the emerging Economic Recovery Strategy, action to ensure

bus and rail services are maintained has been taken by the Council as part of the early 'rescue and recover' phase (0-6 months), including continued payments to bus operators for contracted services. As the Council moves into the 'revive' phase of the Recovery Strategy, improved access to jobs and learning has been prioritised and this includes targeted support for young people.

The B_Line Scheme

The b_line scheme is a discretionary concessionary travel offer for young people aged 11 to 19 and has been revised a number of times in recent years. The current scheme offers proof of age cards for commercial child travel concessions from 11 years of age up to the 16th birthday and a second card providing a Council subsidised concession from age 16 up to the 19th birthday. As a discretionary scheme, there is no obligation on the Council to provide a young person's travel concession.

Gold Card forms part of the statutory English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS) for eligible older and certain categories of disabled persons. Gold Card offers pass holders free off-peak travel on local bus services across in England. There are a number of potential discretionary enhancements to supplement the statutory minimum offer currently provided by Gold Card and a separate petition seeking to add companion passes will also be considered at this meeting.

Officer Comment

b_line is a discretionary travel scheme first introduced in 2001 to encourage greater use of public transport by young people in Derbyshire and Derby City, and as a benefit to those who decided to stay on in education after the age of 16. The original scheme offered a common minimum half fare rate on buses and trains for anyone in full time education up to their 19th birthday. Up until this point, the age when bus operators started charging young people adult fares had varied considerably.

The scheme has been modified in recent years, beginning with the minimum discount for card holders reducing from 50% to 33% in 2011. Further changes were introduced in 2015, when the current arrangements started. Since August 2015, the age at which the Council provides a subsidised concession has increased from 14 years to 16 years. To offset this change, all bus operators now offer child fares up until the 16th birthday (previously some operators only offered child fares to the 14th birthday). The subsidised concession remains from age 16 up to the 19th birthday, although the discount offered has been further reduced from 33% to 25%. The subsidised concession was retained from age 16 as there are few commercial concessions offered to this age range.

Despite these changes, the scheme has remained popular with users and the 2015 scheme amendments further boosted this by including all young people over 16 for the first time, rather than just those remaining in full time education. This was to overcome the perceived unfairness to young people who go into employment, apprenticeships or other forms of training, rather than staying in full time education.

There are currently over 60,000 b_line cards issued to young people in Derbyshire and Derby City.

The current scheme offers the following benefits:

- All 11 to 16 year olds receive the b_line1 card, which acts as a proof of age card, enabling the card holder to access the bus and train companies' own commercially provided child fares. All bus operators now offer at least a 33% discount for child fares, whilst all train operators, and some bus operators, offer a 50% discount.
- From age 16 up to the 19th birthday, a b_line2 card gives a 25% discount on adult single and return bus and train fares in Derbyshire and Derby City, including cross boundary journeys where the journey starts or finishes in Derbyshire. It also gives a 25% discount on certain bus company day and period tickets such as High Peak's Adult Day Tickets and Trent Barton's Zigzag. In addition, the card also gives a 25% discount on rail fares in Derbyshire and Derby City and for certain journeys into adjacent areas, such as Manchester and Sheffield.
- All b_line cards act as a library card for young people at Derbyshire and Derby City libraries.
- More than 500 businesses in and around Derbyshire and Derby City, also provide discounts for b_line card holders, including certain shops, gyms, cinemas and restaurants.

Before 2019, the b_line card administration and distribution system consisted of a photography service capturing students' images in local schools. This took place twice a year, with cards distributed by the photography company through schools. Any students attending colleges, out of County schools or colleges, or those who needed replacements for lost cards, applied by posting an application to the Council supplying their own passport style photograph.

In 2019, the b_line card administration was completely overhauled and modernised. Cards are now issued through applications either made online or by post utilising the same software and Card Management System used by the Gold Card scheme. B_line cards have also been migrated to a smart card

platform and are produced and posted out by the same company who produce Gold Cards for the Council.

These changes have reduced the cost of producing b_line cards by nearly half and will further reduce waste by ensuring that, in future, b_line cards are only issued to those who want one.

Although the smart card functionality of the new cards is not currently utilised, this functionality will be enabled once all the older b_line cards produced by the previous method, which are not capable of being used as a smart card, expire in 2022. This will further improve the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the b_line scheme as, for example, it will enable the blocking of lost or stolen cards to prevent their use. It also offers the potential for season tickets or other ticketing products to be electronically stored on the b_line card, enabling fully cashless transactions to take place.

Due to the impact of COVID-19 and the restrictions placed on use of public transport, overall use of bus services fell to a low point of around 10% of normal use (March/April/May/June) and currently ranges between 30% and 50% of normal use across the County. As part of its economic recovery efforts, the Council is working closely with bus and rail operators to encourage a return to pre COVID-19 levels of public transport use in Derbyshire, and critically to help support 'return to learn' and return to work programmes for all residents, especially those young people who are disproportionately at risk of unemployment.

It is anticipated the recovery period for public transport, and the restoration to previous passenger numbers, will be a medium to long term (18 to 24 months) ambition, particularly whilst social distancing measures remain in place. It is, however, essential that passenger numbers are supported to return as the future viability and sustainability of all bus and rail services in the County will depend on this and sustainable transport remains a key element not only of the COVID-19 recovery plan but of the Council's climate change framework.

In view of the current circumstances, it would therefore seem counterproductive to withdraw a travel scheme primarily designed to encourage greater use of public transport by young people at a time when access to jobs and learning is paramount and when the need for sustainable travel has never been greater. Continuation of the scheme would also enable the full efficiency benefits of the changes to card administration implemented in 2019 to be realised.

(3) Financial Considerations The b_line scheme in Derbyshire and Derby City is administered by the Council, with the cost of the scheme in Derby recharged to Derby City Council.

The cost of the b_line scheme has reduced significantly in recent years, whilst still retaining scheme benefits valued by card holders. The reduction in cost is a result of the changes to the scheme implemented in 2011 and 2015, and has resulted in the annual scheme cost to Derbyshire falling from a high of £1,547,671 in 2011-12, to £125,000 in 2020-21. Due to the changes in scheme administration implemented towards the end of 2019, should the scheme continue, then the ongoing full year cost is anticipated to fall further to around £88,000 per annum.

Whilst the cost of b_line is significantly lower than the cost of providing many other public transport services (for example, the cost of providing the statutory Gold Card scheme for Derbyshire is over £9 million per annum), should b_line be retained, this would add further financial pressure for the Council's already stretched public transport budgets.

The Council receives ongoing requests for additional transport services and support, as demonstrated by the separate petition also being considered at this meeting, seeking to introduce companion pass entitlement as an additional discretionary concession to the Gold Card scheme. Given the higher cost of discretionary Gold Card concessions, it would be extremely difficult to finance any of these, regardless of any decision on the continuation of the b_line scheme. Should b_line continue, it would certainly be the case that the Council would not be in a position to fund companion passes, or any other potential discretionary Gold Card concession from within existing budgets and this should be taken into account when reaching a decision.

(4) **Legal Considerations** As the Travel Concession Authority for Derbyshire, the Council has discretionary powers to establish a concessionary travel scheme for young persons through the 1985 Transport Act.

Although there is no statutory duty to provide the b_line scheme, it is a long established service provided by the Council. Any proposals for significant changes to the scheme would need to be consulted on first before reaching a final decision on these.

Other Considerations

In preparing this report the relevance of the following factors has been considered: prevention of crime and disorder, equality and diversity, human resources, environmental, health, property, social value and transport.

(5) **Key Decision** No.

(6) **Call-in** Is it required that call-in be waived in respect of the decisions proposed in the report? No.

(7) **Background Papers** Held on file within the Economy, Transport and Environment Department.

(8) **OFFICER'S RECOMMENDATIONS** That the Cabinet Member agrees:

8.1 The Council should not proceed with the proposed withdrawal of the b_line scheme.

8.2 The lead petitioner be informed accordingly.

Tim Gregory
Director – Economy, Transport and Environment