

BUS SERVICE EVALUATION TOOLKIT

Central Bedfordshire Council has inherited a very diverse portfolio of supported local bus services from Bedfordshire County Council. Supported services range from rural shopper buses which operate once a week and cost less than £3,000 per annum to area-wide networks costing in excess of £¼ million.

Bedfordshire County Council policy was, broadly, to mitigate the effects of commercial service withdrawals by providing alternative services, thereby minimising the impact upon existing bus users. Because recent years have seen de-registration of commercial services on a large scale, Bedfordshire’s budget for supported services was continually under pressure, and a final round of cuts in the supported local bus network took place in June 2008. These cuts were planned by reference to the Bus Service Evaluation Toolkit (BSET), which identifies poor performing services. The toolkit is a model for evaluating the relative performance of local bus service contracts against a number of key criteria. That model needs to be updated for use in Central Bedfordshire.

The BSET evaluates services in respect of:

TABLE 1

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Current Weighting</i>
Accessibility	<p>Services are scored according to whether they carry people to the shops, to work, to school/college or to hospital/surgery.</p> <p>LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN OBJECTIVE #5:</p> <p><i>“To improve access to key facilities and services in Bedfordshire – particularly work and further education – through increased travel choices.....”</i></p>	12.5%
Congestion	<p>The total number of passengers carried per annum, as a proxy for each service’s value as a sustainable alternative mode of transport.</p> <p>LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN OBJECTIVE #4:</p> <p><i>“To minimise the growth of congestion in Bedfordshire, both in particular locations and on the overall network, and to manage its impacts on the transport system and the environment.”</i></p>	25%

Affordability	The annual cost of each service – expensive services score lower than those which cost less. BUS STRATEGY SECTION 5.9: “Where financial support is required, this provision will be subject to a test of affordability.”	25%
Value for Money	An effective measure of whether a supported service represents good value for money. BUS STRATEGY OBJECTIVE #7: “To ensure that public transport is widely perceived to offer good value for money.”	37.5%

After calibration, the model sorts supported services into four categories:

TABLE 2

<i>Category</i>	<i>Heading</i>	<i>Number of contracts in this category¹</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
D	<i>Urgent Action Needed</i>	2	Service performs poorly and fails to give value for money. Service needs thorough reassessment, as a prelude to curtailment or merger with another service.
C	<i>Plan for Improvement</i>	20	Service meeting policy objectives, but costs may be higher, or patronage lower, than we would expect. Some form of improvement called for, such as re-marketing or merger with another service.
B	<i>Satisfactory</i>	46	Service performs well, helps towards council’s policy objectives and requires relatively modest financial input to maintain viability.
A	<i>Good Value</i>	10	As B above, combined with very reasonable cost.

BSET is a useful means of assessing the relative performance of supported local bus services and of indicating those services which are most likely to be failing to perform.

¹ Using the weightings specified in Table 1