

Questions by Members of the Council under Procedure Rule 10.0

Council – 18 October 2021

Question from Councillor Bell Received on 13 October 2021

Question:

1. Can I have the figures for usage of the 'On Demand Arriva click' minibus service since the start of its operation?

Obviously separating the residents who have had to utilise it to attend their vaccinations.

2. Is it possible to count how many residents are using the service multiple times?

I would be happy with these figures as near as possible to the present time.

It is important that as Council Tax payers money is being invested in this project that we are able to know these figures.

3. In addition, not only how many users but how much money has been taken for fares separate from the free travel for those using it to get to vaccination points?

Answer:

The council as part of its commitment to encourage more sustainable transport undertook a public contract regulation compliant procurement exercise in 2019 to obtain a demand responsive transport provider. The stated objectives of procuring the service were:

- Encourage a change in the way we use local transport as 'a way of life'
- Improve Watford as a sustainable transport town
- Improve accessibility and mobility within the town
- Improve health and wellbeing

The winning bidder was Arriva Click and the council entered into the contract with them in November 2019 with an envisaged operational date of April 2020.

The premise behind Arriva Click is that it provides an additional, greener transport option for Watford, offering greater convenience offering greater convenience than the standard bus service with virtual pick up and drop off points but not the personal door to door journey offered by a taxi service.

Covid 19 impact

Unfortunately, in March 2020, before ArrivaClick could start to operate in Watford, the Covid 19 pandemic hit the country, severely impacting all forms of public transport. This was a critical point for ArrivaClick. For any new service, a successful, high profile launch is vital to building a customer base from which to grow awareness and demand.

Since March 2020, the country has experienced further lockdowns and restrictions on travel, work and leisure activity, affecting people's choices and behaviours in terms of transport options.

The pandemic and its impact, clearly, could not have been envisaged when the council entered into the ArrivaClick contract. Even now we are still living with the pandemic and, whilst restrictions have been lifted, this is not resulting in a return to pre-pandemic behaviours, particularly relating to a mass return to the office.

Across all public transport modes there have been many fewer passengers than pre-pandemic levels with, at some points, bus use outside of London dropping to 11 per cent of pre-Covid19 levels. (<https://www.local.gov.uk/systra-lga-bus-report>). All of this has naturally had an adverse effect on the operation of the Arriva Click service.

The data on the service below, therefore, needs to be seen in the context of the unforeseen impact of Covid 19 and the limitations this has placed on ArrivaClick in establishing a regular customer base and promoting the service, particularly to business.

Whilst the opportunities for promotional campaigns have been limited since launch, ArrivaClick has provided:

- Free travel to and from vaccine centres
- £1 promotional offers, most recently during Great Big Green Week
- 20% off rides for all events as part of Stage in the Park
- Promotion of the service to local businesses and discussions have taken place with West Herts College and West Herts Hospitals NHS Trust
- Advertisement of the service in the local business newsletter

Usage figures

1. 13,878 passengers have used the service from June 2020 to mid-October 2021 including 285 passengers who have utilised the service to attend their vaccinations
2. 320 passengers have used the service more than twice, with 150 passengers using it more than 10 times
3. Arriva Click has received £35,713.70 in fares

Given that national restrictions relating to the pandemic did not ease until September 2021, and the way people travel has fundamentally changed, the number of passengers above correlates with revised predictions relating to passenger usage.

Improvement plan

In order to drive the performance of the ArrivaClick service, the council has developed an improvement plan for the service and with the contractor. The improvement plan is focused on results orientated objectives to enhance the success of the service. This is to ensure that, despite the pandemic, ArrivaClick delivers the strategic objectives set for the service in 2019, including a subsidy free demand responsive transport solution for the town by March 2024.

In summary, this improvement plan requires Arriva Click to:

ACTION	DELIVEREY
Introduce market insights from their wider client base and benchmark performance against other demand responsive transport providers to inform improvements.	Initial analysis: to be submitted to the council by December 2021 Bi-annually thereafter.
Undertake customer satisfaction surveys to deliver improvements to customer experience.	Initial survey: December 2021 Quarterly thereafter.
Develop customer retention improvement plan including a B2B (business to business) plan to engage businesses and drive corporate memberships	Submitted to the council for approval by December 2021.
Develop a monitoring and evaluation plan for customer complaints to improve performance	Submitted to the council for approval by December 2021.

Deliver a new marketing and campaigns strategy	Submitted to the council for approval by December 2021.
Introduce a revised performance dashboard to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • details of customer journeys per month • vehicle hours per month • vehicle utilisation 	Submitted to the council for approval by December 2021. Submitted to the council on a monthly basis thereafter.
Revise the passenger journey demand predication model with the objective of achieving 11,500 passenger journeys per month and seven buses in operation by no later than May 2022	Submitted to the council for approval by December 2021.
Develop a continuous improvement plan to ensure the original contract specification and ridership is delivered in full by December 2022	Submitted to the council for approval by March 2022.

The council meet with ArrivaClick on a monthly basis to review results and progress towards the delivery of the improvement plan. This contract management meeting also tracks the strategic objectives of delivering a subsidy free model by March 2024 and the stated objectives of the service to:

- Encourage a change in the way we use local transport as ‘a way of life’
- Improve Watford as a sustainable transport town
- Improve accessibility and mobility within the town
- Improve health and wellbeing