

Community Bus Review

Frequently Asked Questions

Why are you transitioning away from your current bus model?

A community bus trial found that the service continues to be underutilised, and operating the fleet is a significant increased cost to ratepayers.

Bus trips decreased by 18.5% from 151 in 2022 to 123 in 2024, despite a wide-reaching promotional campaign last year.

Our four 12-seater buses are due for replacement, which is estimated to cost \$413,000. They also do not meet accessibility requirements

We investigated expanding the eligibility criteria to enable more community members, groups and organisations to utilise the buses, and to allow commercial use. We also investigated a commercial group/third party managing the buses.

These options were not recommended due to significant risk including:

- Driver risk and safety issues.
- A \$5,000 bond for insurance excess which could be too expensive for community groups.
- Misuse of the bus, and the hirer gaining a financial profit.
- Reputational damage to Council.

An expanded eligibility criteria also wouldn't align with the buses being for community benefit.

Also, hiring of community buses is not a mandatory offering for local government.

When will you stop the current model of being able to book the community buses?

Eligible community groups and organisations can continue to book Council's community buses until 31 August 2025.

From bookings for September 2025 onwards, Council staff will assist community groups and organisations to ensure they will not be financially disadvantaged.

I have utilised the community bus previously and I was planning to make a booking in the near future. What should I do now?

You can continue to book the buses as you have previously, as long as your trip is before 1 September 2025. Any bookings from September 2025 will be made through the new model.

When and how do I apply for the subsidy to go towards bus hire fees?

An eligibility checklist and booking form will be available on Council's website from August 2025.

We will promote the webpage before it goes live.

Groups will also be able to call **5261 0600** to speak to a Council staff member.

What is the subsidy?

Eligible priority groups – such as older people and people with a disability – will receive a 100% subsidy for each booking, totalling a maximum \$1,500 each financial year.

All other community groups – including community groups, sports clubs and schools – are eligible for a subsidy of 50% towards the value of each booking, with a maximum \$250 per claim and totalling a maximum \$750 each financial year.

The subsidy will be available from September 2025 and will end on 30 June 2027.

Will I be able to use any commercial bus provider?

Applicants will only be able to use approved transport providers that will be listed on Council's website.

Our group/organisation hasn't used Council's community bus before. Can we apply for the subsidy?

Yes, the subsidy for commercial bus hire will be available to groups which haven't hired Council buses in the past, if they meet eligibility requirements.

Did you talk to bus users before making this decision?

We consulted 14 frequent bus hirer groups on the potential transition to a subsidised model. Some user groups who experience disadvantage have said they need support to access to buses, but some others (e.g. schools and sports clubs) can access different forms of transport.

The two-year transition period has been introduced to help the groups who require support to access buses and provide them with time to consider alternative options from 1 July 2027, when our subsidy will end.

What will happen to the Winchelsea Bendigo Bank Community Bus that Council manages bookings for?

The Winchelsea bus is owned by Bendigo Community Bank, while Council manages the bookings. Council decided to transition the bookings and maintenance for the Winchelsea bus back to Bendigo Community Bank.

Did you consider expanding the eligibility criteria so more community members, groups and organisations can utilise the buses, and also to allow commercial use?

This is not possible due to significant risk, safety, financial, legal and insurance requirements.

We're already seeing other organisations cease their community bus services because of these requirements, which fall under ongoing federal and state bus safety reforms in the wake of the Hunter Valley bus crash.

New bus safety requirements could include licensing and testing changes for drivers and the introduction of stricter hire agreements.

How much does it cost to run the buses, and how much income do they provide Council?

The annual fleet operating cost - which includes registration and insurance - is about \$50,000.

The annual community bus hire income has declined from \$18,000 in 2022, to \$14,000 in 2023, to \$10,000 in 2024.

Given the fleet is due for replacement, how much would a new fleet cost?

A new fleet of four 12-seaters would cost approximately \$413,000.

The approximate value of the depreciated fleet is \$118,000.

What if a community group wants to put in to buy a bus?

A community group could do this. If the buses are no longer required, Council has a policy for selling and/or gifting of assets. It's done via an expression of interest from buyers, or by transfer to an entity.

How much money will the transition to the new model save?

More than \$1.4 million. This estimate is based on total savings to Council over the 10-year long term financial plan period.

Why have you introduced the subsidised model? As a ratepayer I'd prefer you to simply sell the fleet and ask community groups to cover their own commercial bus hire costs.

We want to see a greater use of active and public transport on the Surf Coast. Buses are a great way for community members to connect, and also mean less cars on the roads.

A two-year transition period with the subsidy model will support community groups with their transport needs, and still save more than \$1.4m in the long-term.

What will you do with the community buses?

We will sell them. If we instead gifted them to community groups, it would forego the income we receive by selling them.