

Corporate support for community and public transport and South Somerset Community Accessible Transport

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Purpose of the Report

The report updates Members on the current work being undertaken to reflect South Somerset District Council's corporate aims to help communities to develop transport schemes and local solutions to reduce rural isolation.

Public Interest

South Somerset District Council (SSDC) recognises the challenges in providing good transport and accessibility in our rural areas. This report sets out how we are working with Somerset County Council (SCC), Public Transport operators and Community Transport to develop rural transport solutions. See report appended at Appendix a

Recommendation(s)

That members note the contents of this report.

Background

SCC is the transport authority and for the most part has control over the prioritisation, funding and delivery of larger-scale transport schemes in Somerset. This is important context and provides a necessary reminder as to the extent to which SSDC can influence how transport improvements can be delivered. SSDC's main roles are:

- a) As the local planning authority, though liaison with SCC, to ensure that appropriate infrastructure which is commensurate with the scale of a development is provided.
- b) By facilitating how people can access goods and services. In rural areas the latter is becoming more of a challenge, especially for those without access to a car and this report focuses how we are helping to overcome these hurdles.

There is widespread recognition of rural isolation issues and also that the traditional approach to rural bus provision is not sustainable. Simply subsidising rural bus routes with declining patronage cannot be maintained and yet these services provide a valuable service for those who have no alternative. Other 'smarter' ways of enabling people to get around need to be progressed, whilst ensuring that those bus routes that are viable are maintained and where possible enhanced. This report outlines the work being undertaken, which can assist in the delivery of our corporate aims as set out in the Council Plan¹.

¹ South Somerset District Council – "Our Plan – Your Future 2012 to 2015"

Report

Overview

Over the last 12 months SSDC has engaged on a series of themes, initiatives and interventions. Those relevant to Area East are set out below.

1. Wincanton Transport & Accessibility Hub

- 1.1. A report was presented to the Area East Committee on Wednesday 10th September 2014, which outlined the proposal put forward by South Somerset Together (SST) to establish a pilot Transport and Accessibility Hub in Wincanton. The pilot aims to:
 - 1.1.1. Take the people to the service/facility i.e. Create a transport hub in Wincanton linking people together with transport solutions, or
 - 1.1.2. Take the service/facility to the people i.e. Delivery of services locally to reduce the need and cost of travel and improve community cohesion.
- 1.2. The first stage of the work has been completed. This included a new more easily accessible shelter, seating, painting the safety barriers and easier to understand bus information with maps. Work is now progressing with on-going dialogue with service providers examining where services may be able to be provided more locally or where there may be potential to 'cluster' journeys to reduce travel costs. Improvements to information, both electronic and traditional, are also being explored with the aims of raising awareness of what is available locally and enabling easier links between community and public transport.
- 1.3. SCC has successfully bid for £305,000 funding from the Department for Transport's (DfT) Total Transport Pilot Fund (March 2015). The bid requires an initial analysis of the data including the journey patterns from Community Transport & Health Sector transport providers to identify gaps in provision and also what's happening in adjoining areas. Once that work has been undertaken it is hoped that some of this funding could assist in moving forward the next stages of the Wincanton pilot scheme.

2. Working with Train Operating Companies and Network Rail for Rail Improvements

- 2.1. There is continuous dialogue with the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) and Network Rail (NR).
- 2.2. SSDC has recently responded to both NR's 'Western' (includes Bruton & Castle Cary) and 'Wessex' (includes Templecombe) draft route studies. Both draft studies consider various options to establish what infrastructure improvements would be required to enhance the existing timetables. Whilst we have been supportive in principle, our primary concern has been with their suggested timing for implementation. Many of the measures relevant to South Somerset are towards the later stages of their envisaged programme, which culminates in 2043. Our case for bringing these improvements forward is based on the need to recognise the growth in South Somerset to 2028 and the recognition that our stations (especially Castle Cary and Yeovil) are key to improving the resilience of the South West rail network as a whole. Resilience in the network is increasingly important given the significant upheaval caused by bad weather in recent winters. Network Rail is currently assessing the responses received and updated versions of both studies are due later this year.

2.3. SSDC has unremittingly urged the TOCs, NR, and the DfT for improvements on all three of the train lines that serve Area East. These are:

- 2.3.1. London (Waterloo) to Exeter, operated by South West Trains (SWT) - Templecombe Station.
- 2.3.2. London (Paddington) to Taunton, Exeter and the south west, operated by First Great Western (FGW) – Castle Cary Station.
- 2.3.3. Bristol to Weymouth; the Heart of Wessex Line (HoWL), operated by FGW – Bruton and Castle Cary stations.

2.4. More specifically for Area East we are continuing to make the case for alterations to the train timetable to enable realistic commute journeys from Castle Cary to Yeovil or Taunton, as well as increased frequency of trains (including improved Sunday services) on the HoWL.

2.5. First Great Western (FGW) recognises that the car park at Castle Cary train station is currently operating at capacity and impeding passenger growth at the station. FGW has submitted a bid to the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to contribute towards extending the car park. The total scheme is estimated to cost £800,000 with £300,000 being sought from the LEP.

2.6. FGW are also considering improvements that may be able to come forward from their own Customer & Communities Improvement Fund (CCIF) that will be introduced from April 2016. Whilst this will not be able to deliver the desired frequency levels SSDC, along with other stakeholders are pressing for a reasonable Sunday rail service from South Somerset to Bristol, Bath & Weymouth.

2.7. In addition, SSDC has been liaising with the South West Trains-Network Rail Alliance. The Alliance has since submitted proposals for timetable improvements that could take effect from December 2015. **It is important to recognise however that these changes are subject to consultation responses and regulatory approval by the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR).** If the proposals are implemented the benefits for South Somerset could include:

- 2.7.1. Increased services between Yeovil/Templecombe and London Waterloo.
- 2.7.2. New train connections between Yeovil Junction and Yeovil Pen Mill that would enable greater connectivity in the South West between Weymouth, Dorchester, Exeter, Westbury and Salisbury, Bath, Bristol and London.
- 2.7.3. More trains on the HoWL between Yeovil and Westbury.

3. Working with Bus Operators and SCC for Bus Service Improvements

3.1. Again, SSDC are in regular and on-going dialogue with all bus operators and SCC over the future of bus service provision in the district. Specifically for Area East, the following conclusions and issues have emerged:

- 3.1.1. Some Saturday journeys on the 667 (Wincanton to Street) have been withdrawn (from 23rd May). These are an early morning departure from Street to Wincanton, a 'lunchtime' journey in either direction and the 17.30 departure in each direction. The timetable remains unchanged for Mondays to Saturdays.

- 3.1.2. First (The Buses of Somerset) is making some minor timetable adjustments to Service 54 (Taunton – Yeovil via Ilchester) with effect from Monday 10th August. Some journeys will run 5 minutes earlier from Ilchester in both directions. There are no changes to the route or frequency.
- 3.1.3. The majority of journeys in Area East are now commercially operated (i.e. without subsidy) and as such subject to 56 days notice of change by the operator to the Traffic Commissioner.

4. Working with SCC and Developers on Travel Plans and Demand Management Solutions Linked to Developments

- 4.1. Alongside working with third parties, SSDC has a role in shaping and influencing measures funded and delivered by the development industry in conjunction with their residential or commercial schemes. This normally involves smaller-scale initiatives associated with 'demand management' rather than more traditional or large-scale infrastructure investment. That being said, changing attitudes and behaviour can have a significant impact on shifting people from car to public transport, and can have a substantial benefit for the local area and so will continue to be an important workstream for the Council.
- 4.2. A recent example of where SSDC has been intervening is at Deansley Way, Wincanton. Here, the Transport Strategy Officer is currently in discussions with SCC's Principle Travel Plan Officer to press for a prompt distribution of the Sustainable Travel Packs as agreed by the developer. A verbal update on the latest position will be given at Area Committee.

5. Community Transport

- 5.1. Community Transport has a vital role to play especially for those who have no access to a car and either no bus service or for whom accessing the bus is just not possible. It can also provide a cost effective means of serving areas, which are not viable for conventional public transport.
- 5.2. South Somerset Community Accessible Transport (SSCAT) operates Community Transport in Area East and the Transport Officer SSCAT has produced a separate Information report for this committee, which is attached. His report highlights the importance of their demand-responsive door-to-door Ring and Ride Service and Social Car Scheme. Both provide essential life lines often to more vulnerable members of the community.
- 5.3. However members will note the apprehension in the concluding paragraph of the SSCAT report (attached) regarding the need for on-going revenue funding and this will need to be addressed to ensure the scheme's long term survival.

Looking to the Future

The Council appreciates that there will be a number of local and community aspirations for transport improvements, for example, the re-opening of local railway stations. Given the current financial constraints within which Government and SCC operate, it is important to remember that any future transport scheme (either road, rail, bus, or community based) will have to be supported by a robust business case outlining how the scheme is cost effective; realises social, economic and environmental benefits; and can be sustained in the long term without the need for long term subsidy.

Depending upon the type of proposal it will also likely be subject to detailed scrutiny at a local-level by SCC, at a sub-regional level by the Heart of the South West LEP, and/or at a national level by DfT or equivalent funding body. As such, it is vital that the rationale for such schemes can be properly evidenced and justified.

Where appropriate, SSDC will continue to work alongside and lobby SCC to examine future grant-based schemes that can bolster the public transport and community transport programme in South Somerset and Area East. As above, the release of funds for schemes is likely to be a part of a competitive process, where schemes across the district and across Somerset are compared and examined to determine which is the most effective.

SSDC will continue to engage with likes of Network Rail and Highways England on major schemes (e.g. the upgrade the A303) and to relay the implications for Area East. This will include discussions on the benefits and impacts for land-uses in the area.

As well as continuing with the work set out above, SSDC is aiming to improve its understanding of local transport issues to help influence decision-making by preparing a new Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP). The transport chapter of the IDP will consider infrastructure across the district to identify if it is capable of accommodating the growth set out in the Local Plan (2006 – 2028). It will also document known transport infrastructure improvements. The IDP will be presented to DX and will be a document that we seek to update regularly, and at least annually. The new IDP is expected to be presented to DX in Summer/Autumn 2015.

The Council continues to welcome positive local input and engagement. Parish and town councils, as well as communities, have a vital role to play in owning and helping deliver the existing measures that have already been secured, as well as identifying further enhancements.

Financial Implications

No new financial implications resulting from this report.

Corporate Priority Implications

Improving public and community transport meets a range of corporate priorities and specifically Focus Four to – *“Work with and lobby partners to help communities to develop transport schemes and local solutions to reduce rural isolation and inequalities to meet existing needs of those communities”*.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications

Improvements to public transport, including the easier interchange between bus and rail and better access to information, offer the potential to reduce the number of car journeys and thereby reduce CO₂ emissions.

Equality and Diversity Implications

Improvements to public and community transport reduce inequality and improve service accessibility for all.

Background Papers:

Report to Area East Committee - Wednesday 10th September 2014 “Wincanton Transport & Services Hub Update”