

Area North Committee – 26<sup>th</sup> September 2007

## 11. Somerton and Langport Links Service

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### Purpose of the Report

For members to receive a progress report for the Somerton and Langport Links project, following the award of a grant to the project by the Area North Committee in April 2007.

### Recommendations

- 1) Members are requested to note the report
- 2) That a further report in 6 months be included in the forward plan
- 3) That Members consider any issues relating to community transport to be included in the October report from the SSDC transport officer

### Background

Members will recall that in April 2007, the Area North Committee awarded £12,500 for 2007-08 to the South Somerset Voluntary and Community Action, who host and manage the *Langport and Somerton Links* Community Transport Project. This had followed a period of financial uncertainty for the project when corporate SSDC and SCC grant funding was reviewed, to the detriment of the project. At that meeting a number of grants conditions were agreed, and an update is included in the report below.

### Introduction

The Langport and Somerton Links provides an essential service over and above that provided by commercial passenger transport operators. Operating with vehicles that can accommodate wheel chair users, providing a door-to-door service and flexibility with the times of travel have all helped the service to grow significantly since 2003. Indeed, many of the passengers transported by Links would describe the service provided as a life line.

The service has carried 7,079 passengers in 2006-07 and for the first four months this year, 2,810 passengers. Please see Appendix B for a breakdown of passengers carried.

The service covers a wide area around Somerton and Langport, and maintains an office base in the Langport Community Office (Bow Street). Customers use a booking service, in addition to a regular contract from SCC social services.

### Progress to meet SSDC grant conditions

- **The Somerton and Langport Links service produces a three year business plan within four months, which includes the proposed structure for providing replacement vehicles and explore the range of possible additional services.** South Somerset Voluntary and Community Action has developed a draft business plan for the whole organisation with a separate focus for each of its services, a copy of the plan

relating to the Links service is included in Appendix A of this report. Many of the actions for the first 6 months are completed and the steering group will continue to develop and deliver the plan. A detailed budget has been established for the current year, which is achievable. A 3 year forecast of income and expenditure is being prepared using regular management reports to the steering group. A draft business plan including service objectives, governance, financial arrangements, marketing and customer service standards is being prepared, as part of the SSVCA corporate business plan.

- **Non-contributing Parish Councils in the areas of service are again approached for a financial contribution.** This has been partially completed, and action planned to complete this before precept setting. Further analysis of area of benefit and areas under using the service to be undertaken to identify potential funders and customers.
- **An independent steering group is established and first meets within four months.** Completed – has met 3 times since April with community and agency representatives. Langport & Huish ward member appointed from SSDC. The remit of the group is to take responsibility for future sustainability, vehicle replacement, marketing, overall budgets and business planning.
- **Prior to any further funding applications being made to Area North, that a service level agreement is sought between the Links service and SSDC Area North.** This will be developed over the next few months if the completed business plan still identifies a financial need, which cannot be met in other ways.

## Progress on main aspects of the service

- **Financial management** – the steering group receives regular financial accounts, which includes the current years budget. Using this financial information a 3 year budget will be prepared by SSVCA, endorsed by the steering group, ready for the start of the 2008-09 financial year. Fees and charges have been reviewed, although no increases are proposed at present.
- **Management and Governance** – in addition to the new steering group, the South Somerset VCA has undertaken a full audit of all its services and separated each into projects which can be individually accounted for and monitored. *Langport and Somerton Links* is one of these projects. The management and governance of the SSVCA provides the framework for employment, insurance, vehicle maintenance, driver checks and training, records systems, financial audit, and other legal and financial obligations arising from the provision of community transport services.
- **Staffing and administration** – the comprehensive review carried out by SSVCA has included the appointment of all voluntary drivers on to contracts of employment ensuring greater security and sustainability of the service. This appears to have been welcomed by all involved and increased the capacity of the service. Following the resignation of the current project administrator, a new administrator has been appointed and the steering group looks forward to working with him in the future. The work of the previous administrator (Dianne Poll) has been of immense value to the many customers of *Langport and Somerton Links*.
- **Vehicles/replacement vehicles** – one of the aspects of the financial problems experienced, leading to the award of the Area North grant, was the lack of a sinking fund for vehicle replacement. The revised budget includes this, and together with higher than anticipated income from fees, the project has been able to replace one vehicle. *Links* has

also greatly benefited from a donation of a second hand vehicle in good condition from Notara Homes.

- **Marketing and communications** – improved access to information has been planned by the steering group including advertising in local parish magazines, websites and using the local media to celebrate recent successes. Customer information is maintained and will be used more in the future to provide management information to steering group. It has been suggested that local presentations by supporters would help promote the service (as when it was first started). Some in kind staff time from SSDC has been offered if required for preparing publicity material.
- **Local support and financial contributions** – a number of surrounding parish councils have made contributions to the service as well as those in Langport and Somerton. A further approach will be made in the next few weeks to allow parish's sufficient time to allocate a precept amount if appropriate. Consideration has also been given to business sponsorship to certain aspects of the service, e.g. Vehicle image, drivers' uniforms and leaflets. A balance needs to be struck between levels of fees to maintain an accessible service for customers on a low income, and the availability of local financing.

### Summary and conclusion

Following strong concerns raised as to the future viability to this service, the efforts of the local supporters, SSVCA and SSDC Area North has ensured the continuity of this vital service for many local residents. Whilst a number of actions remain to be completed as a part of the business planning process, the emerging picture of the Langport and Somerton Links as a stand alone project is most encouraging.

No action is recommended, other than to continue to support the development of a detailed and costed 3 year business plan through the steering group.

### Financial Implications

None

### Corporate Priority Implications

- Helps to improve the health and well-being of our citizens  
Work in partnership with others to improve the health prospects for all
- Helps to ensure safe, sustainable, cohesive communities.
- Increase economic vitality and prosperity  
Identify and address the particular issues affecting rural areas

**Background Papers:** *Area North Grant file and Area North Committee Report 25<sup>th</sup> April 2007*