

Area North Committee – 25 April 2012

8. Update On Changes To Local Bus Services Following Somerset County Council's Decision On Bus Subsidy

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Purpose of the Report

To update members on the impact on local bus routes in Area North following Somerset County Council's decision about bus subsidy reductions and progress to date on measures to mitigate the effects.

Public Interest

Somerset County Council (SCC) has agreed to make savings of £1.5m by reducing bus subsidies. This has resulted in changes to some bus routes, which are scheduled to take place in the week commencing Monday 28th May. The decision on which routes are affected follows a consultation undertaken by SCC (from 12th December until 15th January). Concern has been raised by members about the impact of these reductions in terms of accessibility, especially for rural communities. This resulted in South Somerset District Council (SSDC) making a formal response to SCC's consultation, which suggested ways to lessen these impacts and this report seeks to update members on the results of subsequent discussions with the County Council.

Recommendations

That members:

- (1) Note the contents of this report.
- (2) Recommend that the Transport Strategy Officer continue to liaise with the County Council to endeavour where possible to lessen the impact of the impending changes to bus routes and consider appropriate alternatives when these are necessary and feasible.
- (3) Recommend that the Transport Strategy Officer work with the Area North Development team, the County Council and key stakeholders to raise awareness of the services available, particularly with regard to bus links to the new Doctors' Surgery and Hospital at South Petherton.
- (4) Recommend that the Transport Strategy Officer seek confirmation that the additional Department for Transport grant of £315,434 received by SCC for 2012/13 for "establishment and development of Community Transport" will be used for the purpose intended and seek the appropriate apportionment of this fund to Area North recognising its rural nature and to ensure social inclusion.

Background

As part of a programme to reduce Somerset County Council's budget gap of £26m for 2012/13, the subsidies made to bus services were reduced. **Appendix 1** contains the contextual information for the cuts, including SCC's methodology in selecting routes and on-going mitigation measures.

As part of the consultation to determine the options and reductions in subsidies for specific routes needed to achieve the saving of £1.5m, SCC held a special meeting at the Brympton Way offices for District Councillors and Town and Parish representatives on Wed 11th January 2012. A significant number of Town & Parish Councils attended and the views of this council were by and large echoed by their representatives. SSDC's formal response following that meeting is attached as **Appendix 2**.

SCC's Transporting Somerset team (the public transport department) reviewed SSDC's response, together with those submitted during the public consultation and considered mitigating measures to reduce the impact of the likely cuts in service prior to their Cabinet Member's decision on 27th February 2012.

The subsequent changes to bus routes are scheduled to take place in the week commencing Monday 28th May 2012 and SCC will be putting revised timetables on their website, once these have been finalised with the operators.

Implications for routes within Area North (see **Appendix 3**).

- It is clear that SCC has taken note of some of the points raised during the consultation, with some routes now suffering no reductions and others operating at a reduced level.
- Links to South Petherton Hospital/new surgery:
 - There were concerns that, with the withdrawal of service 91 (Chard/Crewkerne to South Petherton), bus links to South Petherton Hospital and the new doctors' surgery (when built) would be curtailed. However, SCC has now procured an agreement with South West Coaches to extend the existing 81 (Yeovil, Montacute, Stoke-sub-Hamdon and Norton-sub-Hamdon to South Petherton) which should alleviate the problem. However, whilst the 91 will operate its last journey on Saturday 26th May, the earliest anticipated start date for the 81 is Mon 11th June.
 - The DRT N6 can also cover many of the journeys to the hospital, though this is not well known locally and would benefit from improved publicity. Although journey times from the western section of the DRT area are longer than would be ideal, nevertheless the service offers the potential to give excellent coverage to what would otherwise be very isolated communities.
- The coverage of DRT routes within South Somerset is shown on **Appendix 4**.
- Some areas within Area North such as Somerton and Langport are well served in comparison with other areas of Somerset by traditional "fixed" bus routes.
- There is a conventional minibus service operated by Isle Brewers Transport as follows:

- 903 (Mondays and Wednesdays) High Ham/Aller/Long Sutton areas to Langport
 - 904 (Tuesdays and Fridays) Isle Brewers/Fivehead/Drayton areas to Langport
 - 850 (Thursdays) High Ham and Lambrook/Kingsbury areas to Langport
 - 901 (Saturdays) Isle Brewers/Fivehead/Curry Mallet areas to Taunton
- South Somerset Links operates in and around Langport and Somerton.
 - The change in the level of bus subsidy has also prompted operators to look at their commercially operated (i.e. without subsidy) routes and this is likely to continue as the impact of the changes filters through.
 - First Bus has made minor timetable changes to the 377 (Wells via Somerton-Yeovil) from 1st April 2012.

The Transport Strategy Officer will give a verbal update to the Area North Committee should we become aware of any further changes.

Potential Measures to Reduce Impact

In cases where services are either being withdrawn or curtailed there will clearly be instances where some journeys currently made by bus will still be socially necessary. This is likely to increase demand on Community Transport Providers such as the South Somerset Association for Voluntary and Community Action Ltd (SSVCA), which operates South Somerset Links from the Langport Information Centre. The District Council is therefore continuing to liaise with Transporting Somerset to lobby for improvements to DRT and Community Transport journeys to ensure more comprehensive coverage, especially in those areas where traditional bus services are being withdrawn.

One way of enhancing this type of service would be to make use of the additional funding as announced by the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport on the 8th December 2011 to provide additional support to local transport authorities in respect of the “establishment and development of Community Transport” in 2012/13. This is a repeat of the 2011 grant of £315,434. Clarification that this funding is being put to this use is currently being sought from SCC.

Some residents do not appear to be aware of the varying forms of transport available to them, and it is suggested that the Area Development Team work with local organisations to raise the profile of local services across the area.

Other options to alleviate social exclusion could include working with taxi operators using taxi bus schemes, which have proved successful in other areas.

This mitigation work is ongoing and the Transport Strategy Officer will give a verbal update to the Area North Committee on progress to date.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications for Area North budgets.

Council Plan Implications

Focus Four: Health & Communities

- 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 (NI188)

A reduction in the level of public transport will increase the number of car journeys and subsequently also increase CO₂ emissions.

Equality and Diversity Implications

A reduction in the level of public transport will have negative impacts on the levels of access available to South Somerset residents. Unless adequate measures to mitigate are in place there is every possibility the most significant impact will fall on those least able to afford the alternatives to the bus resulting in increased social exclusion in rural areas. People living in rural locations that belong to one of the protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and rely on public transport may be more vulnerable and disadvantaged. This is particularly significant for people with disabilities, older population, and people with childcare responsibilities who are mainly women. SCC should be taking this into account.

Background Papers: *None*
