

Area West Committee – 15th October 2008

6. Update on Transport Issues in Area West

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Purpose of the Report

To update members on the work programme currently being carried out by the Transport Strategy Officer that either specifically relates to Area West or where wider schemes are likely to impact on Area West.

Recommendations

That members note the contents of this report.

Background

This report summarises the current transport developments, issues and projects that relate to Area West and also informs members of the work that the Transport Strategy Officer is undertaking regarding the review of the SSDC Travel Plan.

Report

Community Transport

Crewkerne Welfare Transport (CWT), which is staffed completely by volunteers continues to provide a bespoke and invaluable service to those who are unable to access public transport either because of their mobility problems or because such public transport is not available. The scheme's previous administrators retired in December 2008 and the organisation is currently based at the Henhayes Centre in Crewkerne.

The 2 Links vehicles provide essential journeys for hospital and medical appointments and both buses (11 and 15 seaters) are very well utilised offering transport solutions to a wide range of groups. This includes giving access to computer education and sport in Crewkerne for some of the village children, regular runs to the Henhayes Centre for the elderly and disabled and regular shopping trips for 3 sheltered housing groups (Merriott, Chubbs Lawn and Barn Crescent) and for the community at Wadham Park.

Crewkerne Welfare Transport has also recently benefited from a grant from "Opportunity Crewkerne" towards a new computer system to aid with administration.

The Ilminster & District Community Transport similarly continues to provide accessible transport. At the time of writing this report the current administrator has retired. A replacement administrator has been appointed and they are currently in the process of handover.

Rural Accessibility

Members will recall that the Chard & Ilminster "SLINKY bus" commenced operations in October 2006. The service, which is funded by "Transporting Somerset" (the passenger transport Unit at Somerset County Council), also received a £10,000 contribution from

SSDC, £5,000 from the Area West Capital budget and £5,000 from the SSDC Transport Miscellaneous projects budget.

The “SLINKY bus”, which is operated by Linkall (SW) Ltd, has grown steadily since inception, although to some extent this has now been tempered by the fact that there is only one vehicle available. In many ways the scheme has been a victim of its own success and is currently experiencing a “growing pain” that is common to most demand responsive type bus services that are well used in as much that heavy bookings in one area can mean that it is not always possible to then accept requested bookings in other areas. Whilst the ideal solution to this is obviously an additional vehicle, the effective doubling in cost that this would initially entail precludes this option at this stage. In an attempt to alleviate this problem in the interim, however, Linkall have allocated specific timeslots to certain parishes to ensure that at least a minimum level of service is maintained.

The Passengers carried per month for the year to date are as follows:

April 2008	671
May 2008	585
June 2008	595
July 2008	651
Aug 2008	572

The service is frequently used by a diverse range of people to access local facilities and employment. Examples include enabling residents of a sheltered housing scheme at the “Maltings” to visit social events at Crowshute, Chard, and a disabled gentleman from Iminster who has now gained employment at the Laurel resource centre in Chard. There has been a notable change in the type of journeys undertaken with significant growth in trips to and from work in the early mornings and late evenings and also in Social Welfare transport, which includes people visiting relatives who are in nursing/residential homes.

A breakdown of journeys according to the purpose of travel is shown in the figures for August below:

Purpose of Travel	Passengers Carried
Shopping	176
Leisure	0
Employment	85
Social Welfare	144
Education	0*
Health	14
Social	127
Other	13
Recreation	13
Total	572

Around 80% of the passengers travelling are holders of the new English National Concessionary Travel Pass (bus pass) entitling them to free local bus travel. (*Generally some education journeys are undertaken, although unlikely in August).

A replacement vehicle, a new Mercedes Sprinter minibus (12 seats or 11 + 1 wheelchair) was acquired in the summer of 2008 and this has now received the Slinky logos and livery. The vehicle, which has low floor and wheelchair access will be available for members to view at the Henhayes Centre from 4.30pm prior to the commencement of the Area West meeting.

Journeys need to be booked with a minimum of 24 hours notice and can also be made up to 4 weeks in advance. You can also book regular journeys in advance in one call. The area covered by the Chard & Ilminster Slinky is:

Chard, Ilminster, Buckland St Mary, Ashill, Donyatt, Combe St Nicholas, Whitestaunton, Wambrook, Tatworth and Forton, Winsham, Cricket St Thomas, Cudworth, Chaffcombe, Knowle St Giles, Horton, Broadway, Ilton, Whitelackington, Puckington, Barrington, Stocklinch, Shepton Beauchamp, Seavington St Mary, Seavington St Michael, Kingstone, Dowlish Wake, Chillington and Dinnington.

Local Bus

There have been no major changes in provision and timetabling to local bus routes in Area West since the last update report on transport issues to Area West in April 2007.

Transporting Somerset, the Passenger Transport Unit at Somerset County Council have indicated that there is an overall increase in patronage across the district due to a combination of factors including the concessionary fare scheme, the recent fuel increases and improved awareness in green issues.

One change since the last report relates to the 60/61 route that connects Ilminster, Chard, Crewkerne and Yeovil. The revised service, which was introduced in July 2005 and was until recent weeks managed by Stagecoach Devon, is now managed more locally by Stagecoach Cooks Coaches. Members will recall that they have previously instructed the Transport Strategy Officer "to undertake further work to move forward the possible provision of low floor buses on this route in liaison with Transporting Somerset." The work to encourage this is still ongoing, although in the current economic climate options to fund such improvements are becoming more difficult and members should note that the provision of low floor vehicles will be a requirement from 2015. Having said that the contract for providing this service is due for renewal in 2010 and Transporting Somerset will be seeking low floor vehicles as an option at that time, with the proviso of course that the cost is realistic.

A new public transport timetable booklet for the South Somerset Area has just been produced (September 2008) by Transporting Somerset and this has been distributed throughout the district. Members of the public can also obtain copies of this publication direct from Transporting Somerset. They can also request to be included on the mailing list to ensure automatic receipt of updated versions.

In addition "Crewkerne in Motion" a transport information booklet specific to Crewkerne has been produced by the local regeneration group ABCD (A better Crewkerne & District) with the support of the SSDC Community Regeneration Officer and Area West team working in close liaison with Transporting Somerset. The booklet gives advice on how to access all types of transport including public transport and community transport and was launched at an event in Crewkerne on Sat 27th September.

Moped Loan Scheme

The Moped Loan Scheme operated by the Somerset Rural Youth Project continues to offer rurally isolated young people the chance to have a moped on loan at low cost over a period of 6 months to enable them to access education or employment. (The Transport Strategy Officer's report to Area West on 18th April 2007 gave a full explanation on how the scheme works).

The Moped Loan Scheme has acquired 4 new bikes this year and now operates a fleet of 32 machines. 12 young people have benefited in South Somerset in the year to date with 8 actually benefiting at present. Currently in Area West we have someone who is doing an apprenticeship at Westlands and also attending Yeovil College and who because of the timings would otherwise find it difficult to access these facilities.

The Moped Loan Scheme receives financial support from Somerset County Council as well as a variety of funding partners over the years. South Somerset District Council contributes £5,000 per annum to this scheme from the Transport Miscellaneous budget. However in recent years the Moped Loan Scheme has had difficulty in obtaining adequate funding and would have run at a financial loss if it had not received funding directly from the Somerset Rural Youth Project itself.

To this end SCC in conjunction with other partners including the Learning and Skills Council and the District Councils will be commissioning an independent party to undertake the development of a business case and review of the service in order for potential funders to be confident in being able to provide a longer term funding solution.

Concessionary Fares

Members will recall that the new English National Concessionary Travel Pass (bus pass) was introduced on the 1st April. The new national pass uses the latest "smartcard" technology and for this reason they were produced by a national contractor Fujitsu. Prior to the issuing of the new pass it was essential to ensure that our database including photographs was as up to date as possible and held in compatible formats required by the national scheme.

22,181 passes were produced and distributed to South Somerset residents in time to meet the 1st April deadline and the number of "South Somerset" passes in circulation as at 31st August 2008 totalled 26,266. In terms of actual bus patronage feedback from the operators to date indicate that the increase is likely to be in the region of 14% in the current year. However the poor weather this summer may well have influenced the numbers travelling and the Somerset Travel Pass partnership (the 5 districts in Somerset together with Transporting Somerset who administer the scheme) generally feels that we are more likely to see a natural scheme growth of around 20-25% by 2009.

Members will be aware of the concerns regarding the funding of the scheme, which resulted in an inescapable bid of £554k to cover a shortfall for the funding for the original free local bus scheme (i.e. for journeys within Somerset) made through the Revenue Support Grant. Whilst the additional separate Department for Transport funding for the national scheme may well provide for the extra costs entailed, the overall Government funding will still fall significantly short of the total scheme cost.

With regard to ongoing card production, the current contract with Fujitsu runs to 31st March 2009 and SCC are currently investigating future production on behalf of all 5 districts either continuing through Fujitsu or through "in-house" production at SCC. Similarly Transporting Somerset has indicated their intention to the Government Office for the South West to participate in any study into the roll out of the ITSO (Integrated Transport Smartcard Organisation) compliant smartcard (i.e. bus pass) throughout the region. This would be in terms of on-bus readers to aid in the assessment of concessionary usage, enhanced ticketing opportunities and also to consider the potential for offering other local authority applications.

In response to members' requests for an extension to the scheme in South Somerset to include acceptance of the pass for 24hrs, Scrutiny Committee resolved on 14th August that the Transport Strategy Officer submits in August/September 2009 a fully costed

proposal outlining the full cost and service implications of introducing a relaxation in timings for the existing scheme. The national off peak times are from 9.30am until 11.00pm Monday to Fridays and all day at weekends. Within Somerset the pass is currently accepted from 9.00am on weekdays.

The Stop Line Way

The Chard to Ilminster section of the Stop Line Way Coast to Coast cycle route was opened in 2003 and continues to be popular and well used. The Stop Line Way Steering Group partnership comprising Sustrans and the District and County Councils along the whole proposed Coast to Coast route have recently appointed a project officer to provide some necessary additional capacity to help deliver the remaining sections of the route, where progress has been slow.

The SSDC Travel Plan

The existing SSDC travel plan was approved by the District Executive on 7th November 2002. Since that time there have been dramatic improvements in the development, implementation and effectiveness of travel plans. Best practice through exemplar projects has evolved and it is intended through this work to emulate those examples, which have delivered workable alternatives to single occupancy car journeys on the ground.

As a Planning Authority it is important that we lead by example and our own Travel Plan needs to be proven to work if we are to persuade others to follow suit. PPG 13 (paragraph 87) expects local authorities "to set an example by adopting their own plans." Whilst the existing SSDC Travel Plan may have reflected the guiding principles at that time its review and upgrade is long overdue if it is to continue to fulfil the aspirations of PPG13 in light of more recent guidance and the emerging Local Development Framework. It is also a key piece of work identified in the Carbon Reduction and Climate Change Adoption Strategy recently endorsed by the District Executive on 4th September.

Transport is the fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions, and commuter and business travel constitute nearly 40% of miles driven by car. At the same time we need a transport system that can support the movement of people and goods in order to ensure a growing and vibrant community. Travel Plans look at ways of achieving effective transport systems that can deliver a choice of travel options to the user that could save money, give opportunities to build healthy exercise into daily life, ease stress and often make journey times to work faster. It is about leading by example and thinking of ways to make alternative travel patterns a viable option for all staff.

An important initial stage in working up an effective Travel Plan is to establish current travel patterns and to identify the potential of alternative options. To this end a questionnaire is being sent to all staff in October to evaluate how people currently get to work and to meetings, and to ask about the various alternative options. Whilst this is a questionnaire that we are sending out to staff we would really appreciate it if members could also participate. Paper copies will be put in the Members' Room and electronic copies will shortly be e-mailed to you. It is intended that an interactive questionnaire will also be put on the member's pages of the website.

The Travel Plan project team will then research, analyse & evaluate the alternatives, which broadly fit into 7 options: Walking, cycling, public transport, responsible car use, information technology, zonal travel planning and personalised travel planning. Zonal travel planning will consider options for working with neighbouring organisations to assess the potential of achieving the critical mass necessary to deliver or enable cost

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benefits for delivery in terms of economies of scale. Personalised travel planning looks at raising awareness of the alternatives and the benefits that can be achieved for individuals or specific groups.

The Carbon Reduction and Climate Change Adoption Strategy envisages that this work will be completed by December 2009.

Financial Implications

There are no direct Financial Implications to Area West arising from this report.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

The schemes referred to above support all of the corporate aims and objectives.

Other Implications

None.

Background Papers: *None*
