

Area West Committee – 15th February 2012

9. Update on Somerset County Council's Proposals for Bus Subsidy Reductions

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Purpose of the Report

To update members on Somerset County Council's proposals for bus subsidy reductions, the potential impacts in respect of Area West and progress following South Somerset District Council's formal response to the County Council's consultation.

Public Interest

Somerset County Council (SCC) has agreed to make savings of £1.5m by reducing bus subsidies. SCC has recently undertaken a consultation (from 12th December until 15th January) on how these cuts will be implemented and their proposed list of bus routes that will be affected. Concern has been raised by Area West members about the impact of SCC's proposals in terms of accessibility especially for rural communities. South Somerset District Council (SSDC) has made a formal response to SCC's consultation, which has suggested ways to lessen these impacts and this report seeks to update members on subsequent discussions with the County Council.

Recommendations

That members:

- (1) note the contents of this report,
- (2) recommend that the Transport Strategy Officer continues to liaise with the County Council to endeavour where possible to lessen the impact of the impending reductions in bus subsidies.

Background

As part of their consultation to determine the options and reductions in subsidies for specific routes needed to achieve their previously agreed 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. A significant number of Town and Parish Councils attended and the views of this council were by and large echoed by their representatives. At that meeting the deadline for final written responses was extended to 20th January and SSDC's formal response following that meeting is attached as Appendix 1.

The main concerns encompassed in SSDC's response include:

- The lack of timing to assess and implement alternatives. The proposal advocates making the £1.5m saving in 2012/13, whereas the initial proposal was to introduce over 2 years. Introducing changes from mid-May as suggested by SCC does not give time for key stakeholders to "restructure and reshape" as recommended in

Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) guidance. Additionally Parish and Town councils have now set their precept for 2012-13.

- The current costs of the Taunton Park and Ride (£500,000 per annum). Other options to reduce these costs should be considered with the savings used to reduce the overall cuts in subsidies for other routes.
- Whilst education contracts (School buses) are a statutory requirement, SCC should be considering efficiency savings on these routes through greater vehicle utilisation. Similarly this should also apply to further education routes, which although not statutory are essential.
- The lack of Economic Assessment with potential knock on effect for retail and service providers and the hidden cost of getting services out to people in the rural areas.
- SCC's general approach suggests that Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) such as the Slinky or Nippybus routes could compensate for any route withdrawals (by conventional bus). However these DRT routes themselves have been earmarked for funding reductions.
- Confirmation of the amount to be received for enhancements to Community Transport following the announcement by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport and assurance that this funding will be used for this purpose.

Following the public consultation SCC's Transporting Somerset team (the public transport department) have been assessing responses, considering mitigating measures to reduce the impact of the likely cuts in service and preparing a final impact assessment prior to their Cabinet Member's decision on 20th February.

Implications for routes in Area West

The routes affected in Area West should these proposals go forward are:

Service No.	Route	Days	Operator	Frequency	Proposed Subsidy reduction
N8	DRT* – offers links from the Chinnocks, Haselbury Plunknett, Hinton St George & Merriott to Yeovil	Mon – Sat	Nippybus	Approx hourly – advance booking required	16% funding reduction
N12	West Chinnock, Hinton St George & Merriott to Crewkerne	Mon – Fri	Nippybus	2 return journeys	All funding withdrawn
90	Chard, Forton, Winsham, & Clapton to Crewkerne	Mon - Sat	Stagecoach	Every 2 hours	All funding withdrawn
91	Chard, Donyatt, Iminster, Merriott, & Hinton St George to South Petherton Hospital & Crewkerne	Mon – Sat	Stagecoach	Every 2 hours	All funding withdrawn

Service No.	Route	Days	Operator	Frequency	Proposed Subsidy reduction
Chard & Ilminster Slinky	DRT* - Villages in the Chard & Ilminster area	Mon – Sat	SSVCA	08.00 to 18.00 – advance booking required	16% funding reduction

*Demand Responsive Routes.

Whilst the DRT routes (N8 and Chard & Ilminster Slinky) should be able to pick up some journeys that are currently being made on the N12, 90 and 91, the 16% funding reductions on these DRT routes is likely to mean that the level of service would be severely limited. We are already aware of demand pressures on the Chard & Ilminster Slinky and the withdrawal of the fixed routes will exacerbate this. One Slinky minibus would not be able to serve communities either side of Chard or Ilminster simultaneously and the N8 only provides journeys to Yeovil. Clearly there is a case for the additional funding recently promised by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport being used for enhancements to the DRT services in this area.

Potential Measures to reduce impact

The District Council has continued to liaise with Transporting Somerset to:

- Seek a more measured timescale for implementation to give time to put other alternatives in place.
- Consider other alternatives for routes in particular with regard to Winsham (Service 90), access from Merriott area to South Petherton Hospital especially in relation to the new South Petherton Doctor's Surgery (Service 91).
- Lobby for improvements to DRT journeys using the recent funding from the Department for Transport to ensure more comprehensive coverage, especially in those areas where traditional bus services are being withdrawn.
- Assess how their 'protected' services (Taunton Park & Ride, School and Further Education Transport) are operated to improve efficiency.

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

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications for Area West budgets.

Corporate Priority Implications

Unless adequate measures to mitigate are in place then reductions in funding for public transport by SCC runs contra to the SSDC Corporate aims to:

- 1) Increase Economic Vitality and Prosperity.
- 2) Enhance the environment, address and adapt to climate change.
- 3) Improving the housing, health and well-being of our citizens.
- 4) Ensuring safe, sustainable and cohesive communities.
- 5) Deliver well managed cost effective services valued by our customers.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

A reduction in the level of public transport is likely to 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*