

Corporate Support For Community And Public Transport

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Purpose of the Report

The report informs Members of the on-going work being undertaken to develop transport schemes and local solutions to reduce isolation and reflect South Somerset District Council's corporate aims to improve the economy, environment, health and help for communities.

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 continuing to work with Somerset County Council (SCC), Public Transport operators and Community Transport to develop rural transport solutions.

Recommendation

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, through 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.

Report

Overview

SSDC continues to be engaged on the series of themes, initiatives and interventions. Those relevant to Area North and other emerging concepts are set out below.

¹ South Somerset District Council – "The Council Plan 2016 - 2021"

1. The Total Transport Pilot Fund

- 1.1. In March 2015 SCC successfully bid for £305,000 funding from the Department for Transport's (DfT) Total Transport Pilot Fund (TTPF). The bid required 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.
- 1.2. This required SCC to undertake analysis of current transport provision in Somerset, which involved a significant amount of work, including the mapping of passenger transport (including public buses, taxis, Demand Responsive Transport and Community Transport) as well as current 'non-public' routes for education health and social care trips. This work is now complete. The main element of the bid was to build a 'proof of concept' web portal designed to facilitate journey planning across all of the above modes, with smart application and ticketing. The portal would facilitate all transport rather than just the scheduled bus services currently on Traveline.
- 1.3. SCC has undertaken a feasibility study regarding the appetite for a web portal for transport, which included stakeholder engagement with a range of providers and users who were very keen on the concept and in particular the ability to view the details of unscheduled transport such as community transport along with the ability for users to post queries and/or requests for specific journeys onto an 'E notice board'.
- 1.4. It is recognised that at the current time many passengers may not have direct access to the portal and it is envisaged that other agencies including the various transport operators; GP surgeries; other healthcare providers; local advice/information centres etc. will be able to access the information on their behalf. The scheme would then offer the user the most suitable method of transport.
- 1.5. A specification has been written and SCC are about to go to procurement to secure a supplier to build the portal. The intention is to test the portal in the late Autumn with a possible 'go live' in Spring 2018.
- 1.6. SCC are working in partnership with Gloucestershire on this initiative and the Department for Transport has given a commitment to carry over the grant past the deadline originally set, as they are keen for this innovative work to be delivered and available to other Local Authorities.
- 1.7. The TTPF is specific to innovative approaches and this work has the potential for wide benefits in accessibility particularly in rural areas.
- 1.8. In addition to the development of the portal SCC is working with the NHS to increase car scheme availability, working with them to assist in accommodating these within larger GP practices and enable parking and pick up for all community based schemes at hospitals .

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

- 2.1. SDDC continues to urge the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) Network Rail (NR) and the Department for Transport (DfT) for improvements on all three of the train lines that serve South Somerset. These are:
 - London (Paddington) to Taunton, Exeter and the south west, operated by Great Western Railway (GWR).
 - London (Waterloo) to Exeter, operated by South West Trains (SWT).
 - Bristol to Weymouth; the Heart of Wessex Line (HoWL), operated by GWR.

- 2.2. Severe weather incidents in recent years have emphasised the vulnerability of the south west rail network to extreme weather conditions, which are occurring more frequently. This has been a particular issue on the main Penzance to Paddington line and has highlighted the need for greater investment in rail to deliver resilience and connectivity for the region. Both NR and the TOCs recognise that infrastructure improvements on the West of England Line (WoEL), between Exeter and Salisbury, could offer a realistic alternative east of Exeter when such disruption occurs. The degree of this resilience would also be dependent on the ability to improve the section on the Heart of Wessex line between Castle Cary and Yeovil and NR are currently assessing a range of options for consideration by the Department for Transport (DfT). There is also potential for these improvements to increase connectivity both locally and regionally.
- 2.3. SSDC has responded to both NR's 'Western'² (includes Paddington to Penzance main line & the HoWL) and 'Wessex'³ (includes the WoEL) route studies. Both studies considered various options to establish what infrastructure improvements would be required to enhance the existing timetables. The timetable improvements that could deliver a 'step-change' on the routes running through South Somerset are dependent on infrastructure improvements coming forward. However, whilst we have been supportive in principle, the implementation of these improvements is not envisaged until the later stages of their programme in 2043 and beyond. Nevertheless, given the planned growth both in South Somerset and regionally, it is important that we continually raise awareness of the economic and social benefits that these improvements would bring.
- 2.4. To this end SSDC has been engaged with West of England Line Route Strategy Group (WoEL SG) to raise awareness of the potential for improvements on this line both in Control Period 6 (2019 – 2024) and in the future. The West of England [Railway] Line is the route between Worting Junction (west of Basingstoke) and Exeter via Salisbury, Templecombe and Yeovil Junction and the WOEL SG has been focusing on how important these infrastructure improvements are to delivering good rail connectivity and frequencies to both the local and the wider regional network.
- 2.5. More specifically for South Somerset we are continuing to make the case for alterations to the train timetable to enable realistic commute journeys from Castle Cary to Yeovil and Taunton, as well as increased frequency of trains on the HoWL. This lobbying has seen some success this year with an improved Sunday service operating from Bristol to Weymouth from December 2016. However there is still no service arriving at Bath or Bristol until after lunchtime on Sundays and we are continuing to promote the benefits this much needed enhancement would deliver.
- 2.6. One of the current constraints to rail travel from Area North is the availability of car parking at Castle Cary Station. The station lies on the interchange of the both the main Penzance to Paddington line and the HoWL. The Great Western Railway (GWR) recognises that the car park at Castle Cary train station is currently operating at capacity and impeding passenger growth at the station. GWR has submitted a bid to the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the project is still being considered within that process. The Scheme has also been identified in the South Somerset Infrastructure Delivery Plan as Priority 2.⁴

² Western Route Study - Long Term Planning Process, Network Rail August 2015

³ Wessex Route Study - Long Term Planning Process, Network Rail August 2015

⁴ South Somerset Infrastructure Delivery Plan Update 2015/16 page 25 para 8.3. Priority 2 = infrastructure that is required to support new development proposed in the Local Plan, but the precise timing and phasing is less critical and development can commence ahead of its provision.

2.7. Members will be aware that there is a proposal for a new Railway Station for the Langport area. The shorter overall journey times between major centres of population, which the train can offer over the car, has been a significant factor in the growth of rail patronage in recent years. The proposal does not therefore advocate stopping the existing intercity service as this would delay intercity passengers and also require very long platforms. Instead the proposal suggests introducing an additional stopping service between Reading and Exeter, allowing intercity trains to run non-stop between Reading, Taunton and Exeter. Policy TA2 of the South Somerset Local Plan supports the delivery of rail infrastructure “*where there is robust evidence in support of developing infrastructure to widen transport choice*”. However the policy is clear that “*the prerequisite for Council support would be:*

- *A business case (to meet 'Network Rail' or successor body criteria);*
- *An active promoter;*
- *Evidence of financial wherewithal and a reasonable prospect of infrastructure implementation in the foreseeable future.”*

Experience elsewhere indicates that the best rail business cases are usually brought forward either by TOCs or very much with their support. The challenges in producing such a business case underpinned by robust evidence should not therefore be underestimated.

2.8. Members should also note that the South Western Franchise (WoEL) is due for renewal in 2017 and it is envisaged that the contract will be awarded in April with the new franchise commencing in August 2017. SSSC responded to the DfT’s consultation on the proposed new franchise in February 2016 emphasising the need for DfT to recognise the growth in South Somerset to 2028 and similarly that our stations (especially Castle Cary and Yeovil) are key to improving the resilience of the South West rail network as a whole. Our response also reflected the agreed objectives of the West of England Line Strategy Group (WoEL SG). These objectives include:

2.8.1. Two trains an hour west of Salisbury and east of Exeter, with no deterioration in journey times or current service levels throughout the line between Exeter and Salisbury.

2.8.2. Yeovil to London under 2 hours

2.9. There are 2 Community Rail Partnerships in South Somerset. The Heart of Wessex Rail Partnership (HoWCRP), on the Bristol to Weymouth line is an established joint venture between seven local authorities (including SSSC) and the train operator GWR. The core objective of the partnership is to increase awareness and use of the Bristol to Weymouth services, in turn contributing to economic growth, easing congestion and reduced vehicle emissions. The HoWCRP benefits from a rail partnership officer who, besides promoting the line overseas an army of volunteers who have achieved outstanding successes in enhancing the local stations. More recently a number of station adoption groups on the West of England Line have joined together with South West Trains to create the Blackmore Vale Line Community Rail Partnership. The new partnership launched in March 2016 is also supported by a Partnership Officer. The operating model is very similar to the Heart of Wessex Community Rail Partnership.

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

3.1. The core bus routes in Area North are:

- N9/N9A – Martock, Ash, and Tintinhull to Yeovil. Operated by Nippy Bus
- N10 – Martock, and Bower Hinton to Ilminster and Taunton. Operated by Nippy Bus
- 16 – Langport, and Aller to Bridgwater. Operated by Hatch Green Coaches

- 54 – Somerton, Langport and Curry Rivel to Yeovil and Taunton. Operated by The Buses of Somerset
- 77 – Somerton and Compton Dundon to Yeovil, Street, Glastonbury and Wells
- 81 – South Petherton and Stoke Sub Hamdon to Yeovil. Operated by South West Coaches.

Many journeys on the above routes are operated commercially by the operators (i.e. without subsidy). The on-going financial constraints have meant that SCC has been unable to continue to fund evening and Sunday services and there are consequently no Sunday services and virtually no provision in the evenings. Changes nationally in how the guidance for funding the reimbursement of Concessionary Fares to the bus companies and the rates for Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG) is also a concern for the bus companies.

3.2. Additionally Nippy bus operates the Demand Responsive N6, which links rural parishes with Martock. Passengers from settlements within a defined area which includes Barrington, Hambridge, Kingsbury Espiscopi, Long Load, Long Sutton, Lopen, Muchelney, Over Stratton, the Seavingtons. Shepton Beauchamp, South Petherton and Westport can travel to Martock or Ilminster by pre-booking on 01935 823888. The N6 also 'seamlessly' connects with the N9 Yeovil service and the N10 Taunton service, giving passengers numerous travel options throughout the day.

3.3. Isle Valley Transport also offer a valued service to some of the more remote areas:

- 901 – Isle Brewers, Fivehead and Curry Mallet to Taunton on Saturdays
- 904 – Isle Brewers and Drayton areas to Langport on Tuesdays and Fridays
- 903 – Aller, Henley, Long Sutton and Low Ham areas to Langport on Mondays and Wednesdays

3.4. SSDC are in regular and on-going discussions with SCC and the bus operators over bus service provision in the district. Enabling easy access to information regularly comes up as a challenge, especially for new users of public transport and it is hoped that SCC's ongoing work in respect of the Total Transport Pilot Fund (See section 1 above) will go some way to alleviate this.

4. Community Transport

4.1. Community Transport continues to play a vital role for those who have no access to a car and either no bus service or for whom accessing the bus is just not possible. The South Somerset Links transport service, operated by the SSVCA is available to anyone who is unable to access normal bus or taxi services in the locality of Langport and Somerton. The scheme operates on a not-for profit basis and is available to registered members.

4.2. The SSVCA also operates a fleet of 14 accessible minibuses for the benefit of not-for-profit organisations, community groups and people living in South Somerset area who experience difficulties accessing mainstream transport services.

4.3. Members may recall an initial proposal by SCC to reduce the 50% contribution (capped at £5.00) for Concessionary Pass Holders (Bus Pass) on Community Transport to 25% from 1st April 2016. SSDC responded to the consultation robustly challenging this proposal, which was subsequently dropped.

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

- 5.1. The Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP) sets out evidence on current and future infrastructure provision in South Somerset. It assesses infrastructure capacity and identifies any necessary improvements required as a result of the planned development in the South Somerset Local Plan (2006 – 2028).
- 5.2. The South Somerset Infrastructure Delivery Plan Update 2015/16 has now been published and is available to view on : <https://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning-policy/early-review-of-local-plan-2006-2028/evidence-base/>
- 5.3. In respect of specific infrastructure related to public transport, the IDP recognises the need to increase car parking capacity at Castle Cary Station and more generally it supports the need for rail infrastructure improvements and these are discussed in more detail in Section 2 (Rail) above.
- 5.4. In respect of specific highway infrastructure in Area North, the Local Plan housing allocation at Northfield Farm Somerton requires new junction arrangements to access the site on Bancombe Road and Langport Road (Priority 1). This benefits from an approved planning application, and should be delivered by the developer as the site is progressed.
- 5.5. SSDC continues to work with SCC and developers to secure public transport improvements when possible. However the extent to which funding can be levered in is very much dependent on the scale of the development and overall viability of site.

6. A303 Upgrade

- 6.1. The A303/A358 corridor is a vital connection between the south west and London and the south east. Highways England has three schemes already in development and 2 of these, the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester and the A358 Taunton to Southfields traverse South Somerset. Highways England anticipates that construction will start in March 2020 and are currently in the process of consulting on their proposals.

7. Looking to the Future

- 7.1. 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.
- 7.2. 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.
- 7.3. 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 North. 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.

7.4. 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 North. This will include discussions on the benefits and impacts for land-uses in the area.

7.5. 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.

Council Plan Implications

Increasing accessibility for all residents through enhancements to public and community transport reflects the Council Plan aims and priorities to improve the economy, the environment and build healthy 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:

None
