

Appendix A

South Somerset Community Accessible Transport

2021-2022 Update for Area East Committee

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic it is over two years since SSCAT last issued a report to Area East Committee to let them know how we are managing our day-to-day operations. It is now appropriate to provide a current update to keep everyone in the picture.

Operations were severely impacted by the pandemic following the Prime Minister's announcement of the first national lockdown on 23rd March 2020. SSCAT suspended all operations and furloughed most of its staff; all hirings and trips for local community groups ceased. A small staff team continued to work from home. By 7th September 2020, after completing all risk assessments and procuring sufficient PPE and sanitizing items, it was deemed sufficiently safe to commence offering a reduced service. This service was limited by social distancing rules which restricted carrying capacity to 50% and demanded a rigorous cleaning routine. As a large section of SSCAT members are elderly, many with long term health conditions placing them in the 'at risk' category, some were reluctant to re-start using our services again. This was exacerbated by second and third national lockdowns. It was only in July 2021 when most restrictions were lifted following the national vaccination programme that life slowly started to revert back to normal. There was a small setback in Dec 21 early Jan 22 when the Omicron variant appeared and we experienced a few cancellations over this short period, however our users were more resilient this time around and bookings gradually picked up again by late January. Throughout the entire COVID affected period it was necessary to keep all vehicles routinely serviced and maintained to keep them legally compliant for safe operational use.

SSCAT has enabled numerous passengers to attend their COVID-19 vaccination appointments at various centres in the SE Somerset area. This has continued throughout the whole of 2021 and into 2022 as the vaccination stages have progressed, including the third (booster) vaccinations.

As part of structured vehicle replacement programme, one of our ageing minibuses was sold in February 2021 and a new 9-seater wheelchair accessible minibus ordered as a replacement. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, delivery of this vehicle was delayed considerably due to a shortage of semi-conductors. We have only recently received confirmation that this new vehicle is expected at our provider for conversion works at the end of January 2022. We anticipate it being available for use following conversion and signwriting by mid-March 2022. We were also fortunate to acquire the Winibus when that charity ceased trading in 2021 as a consequence of the pandemic and it transferred its assets to SSCAT. When we take delivery of the new vehicle, SSCAT will have a full complement of 5 minibuses.

We did not increase our fares in 2021 as it was considered inappropriate under the existing circumstances. However, we have increased fares from January 2022 which was essential for SSCAT to cover its ever increasing running costs, in particular, fuel and maintenance. We are

under increasing pressure to be seen to be ‘paying our way’ and providing evidence of financial sustainability.

Fundraising is key to our survival. We are extremely grateful to the Friends of Wincanton Community Hospital who have supported SSCAT very generously over the last few years, which has been a lifeline under current circumstances. We also made a successful bid for £15,000 to the Charity Aid Foundation’s Coronavirus Resilience Fund which proved invaluable over the lockdown periods. We have also established a ‘donate’ button on our website southsomersetringride.org.uk which is beginning to show some return; in addition, we can in many cases reclaim 25p in every £1 through Gift Aid.

The support of local town and parish councils, through an annual precept allocation, is now even more important. In 2021/22 SSCAT received 15 positive responses from the 25 councils in the SE Somerset area, amounting to £8800. This support has proved invaluable in providing much needed certainty and continuity of funding.

We have, once again, looked at our costs and made small savings in a few areas. However, our largest costs are vehicle maintenance, fuel and salaries, all of which will increase and are unavoidable.

Our revised (for COVID) budget for 2021/22 with the above action and support, is aiming to hit break-even. Budgeting, and keeping income and costs aligned to forecasts, has proved especially challenging over the past 18 months and will continue well into 2022.

We have raised over £42,000 over the last 3 years for the smaller 9-seat wheelchair accessible minibus mentioned earlier; this currently represents a restricted fund whilst we await delivery of the vehicle.

In terms of journey statistics, due to COVID we cannot make side by side comparisons with previous years to measure performance, but we can supply the following April to September 2021 figures:

	<u>2021</u>
Total mileage	15632
Total single passenger journeys	2514
Total Social Car journeys	111

SSCAT continues to be the main provider of transport for the neediest members of our geographical area and is an invaluable service in the provision of community transport for SE Somerset. Without our accessible vehicles many people would be socially excluded as there is no public transport alternative that is affordable for many of our passengers.

There is little doubt that funding of the SSCAT ‘Ring & Ride’ service to cover all operational revenue costs, even with the current support from councils and other funders, will continue to be challenging. Local community support is therefore an essential component to our survival and is very much appreciated. We hope to receive your continued support.

Finally, after four and a half years managing CAT Bus operations, Mike Rowlands, our Operations Manager, has decided to retire and he will be leaving the organisation in late January/early February. He will be handing over to Ian Broad who will be the main point of contact in the future.

Mike Rowlands
Operations Manager

20 January 2022