

Somerset's Passenger Transport Strategy

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Cabinet Member: John Woodman

Division and Local Member: All members

1. Summary

- 1.1. The current Passenger Transport Strategy was developed as part of the Local Transport Plan for Somerset (2011-2026) which we call the 'Future Transport Plan'. The Strategy was developed to be a living document and updated and reviewed when needed.

This report seeks the views of the Scrutiny Committee on a new draft Passenger Transport Strategy 2018 to 2026, before it is taken to public consultation

- 1.2. The document links to the 2018 County Plan and Business Plan outcomes of:
- A county infrastructure that drives productivity, supports economic prosperity and sustainable public services.
 - Vibrant and well-balanced communities able to enjoy and benefit from the natural environment.
 - Fairer life chances and opportunity for all.
 - Improved health and wellbeing and more people living healthy, safe and independent lives for longer.

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1. The Committee are asked to consider and comment on the document prior to taking for public consultation.

3. Background

- 3.1. Somerset is a challenging area in which to provide viable and sustainable passenger transport services. Owing to its rural aspect it has high car ownership and usage, which leads to congestion 'hot spots' at peak hours. The diverse array of settlements, ranging from small rural villages to the densely populated urban areas of Bridgwater, Taunton and Yeovil; and the dispersed population mean that commercial bus operation is extremely marginal or non-viable in many areas. However, Somerset County Council strives to deliver an integrated quality bus, community transport and rail network by working with public service operators, community transport groups and other transport providers within the County and where possible to promote sustainable community solutions to enable improved access in rural areas.
- 3.2. This Passenger Transport strategy forms part of the Local Transport Plan for Somerset (2011-2026) which we call the 'Future Transport Plan'. Passenger transport is defined as all modes where passengers do not rely on their own transport. This includes bus, coach and rail services, and other forms of transport

such as private coaches, school buses, taxis, Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and Community Transport (CT). The principle underpinning this strategy is to provide services and develop infrastructure that meets the needs of our customers: the residents of, employees based within, and visitors to Somerset. An effective passenger transport network is essential in order to give people, in both the urban and rural areas of Somerset, access to the opportunities and benefits that contribute to the enjoyment of a better quality of life.

- 3.3.** Developed at a time of severe financial restraint and economic uncertainty, this strategy sets out the issues that have influenced the present service and proposes an outline strategy for the future direction of service delivery. It will provide guidance for developers and assist the Council in assessing various schemes. It will also be used to inform Somerset County Council funding bids to Central Government, or other relevant funding opportunities and to inform conversations with government departments, operators and other stakeholders about the issues faced in our area. Most importantly it will inform residents of Somerset of the strategic direction for public transport in Somerset.
- 3.4.** The council has been successful in managing a severe reduction in the grant funding available to deliver the full range of services that it has a duty to provide, and has worked closely with bus operators and communities to reduce cost in this area in line with financial constraints; whilst ensuring the available budget continues to support those services that are most essential in meeting transport needs that would otherwise be unmet by the commercial market. The Council has worked closely with operators and communities to find alternative solutions where Council subsidies have had to be reduced.

We have also formed successful alliances with other authorities in the area and the rail industry to develop ambitious plans and proposals for improvements to the rail network in the form of the Peninsula Rail Task Force 20 year strategy 'closing the Gap'.

- 3.5.** This refresh of the passenger transport strategy sets more ambitious aims for bus and rail travel whilst still reflecting the current financial realities.

The aims for the Passenger Transport Strategy (2018-2026) are:

- **Bus Strategy:** Maintain services that are most essential in meeting transport needs where the commercial market is unable to provide viable services; and work closely with communities, operators and Government to change established models of rural bus service provision for the benefit of our communities.
 - **Rail Strategy:** Work closely with other local authorities and the rail industry to achieve greater resilience, faster journey times and more capacity and connectivity in the rail system.
- 3.6.** In order to achieve this, the authority will undertake to continue to offer the best possible passenger transport service and passenger network throughout Somerset, deliverable within the financial constraints of the current economic climate.

Summary of the key elements of the Bus Strategy:

- **Network strategy and integration:** Building on our well-established bus network strategy to develop new and innovative solutions which improve access for our communities, including more community based options.
- **Total Transport- information and access:** Improving information and technology for users of public transport based on our emerging Total Transport web portal.
- **Assessment of need and financial support:** Ensuring that we direct our available financial resources where they are most needed in line with a clear understanding of our communities' transport needs.
- **Market stability and stimulation:** Ensuring that existing operators maintain essential services on a commercial basis where possible and encouraging new entrants to the local public transport market.
- **Bus Infrastructure and Services for new housing and economic development:** Ensuring that new developments have good public transport access from the outset and that bus infrastructure and services needed to support development is put in place.
- **Partnership for innovation:** Developing partnerships with operators to take forward joint proposals to overcome rural transport challenges.

Summary of key elements of the Rail Strategy:

Working with other local authorities to ensure the rail industry delivers the Peninsula Rail Task Force 20-year strategy and other important investments outside the direct scope of the PRTF strategy:

- **A Resilient Network:** Rail studies, infrastructure and services needed to improve the resilience of the rail network.
- **Journey time improvements:** Rail studies and infrastructure improvements needed in the short, medium and long term to reduce journey times to and from key destinations.
- **Increased Capacity and Comfort:** Enhanced passenger facilities required to create a productive working environment and infrastructure enhancements needed to provide additional capacity on the network in the short, medium and long-term.
- **Rail Station Improvement Projects:** Improvements to Taunton and Bridgwater rail stations and approach to securing improvements at other stations.
- **New Stations and lines:** Our approach to providing advice to communities seeking to open new rail stations and lines; including new stations at Wellington, Langport/Somerton and Chard Junction; and introducing main-line passenger services onto the West Somerset Railway.
- **Community Rail Partnerships:** Partnerships which involve communities in developing and promoting particular lines including the Severnside and Heart of Wessex Partnerships; and aspirations for new community rail partnerships

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1. Through our ongoing partnership working the views of partners have been considered when completing this strategy. However a full public consultation will

be undertaken following consideration of the Scrutiny Committee.

5. Implications

- 5.1. Financial:** There are no financial implications at present. The Passenger Transport Strategy sets out how we intend to utilise funding that the Council has been allocated. Any activity taken forward as part of the strategy that requires additional funding will be subject to further decisions at the time.
- 5.2. Legal:** Publication of a Passenger Transport Strategy, or bus and rail strategies is not a specific statutory requirement; but The Transport Act 2000 requires local transport authorities to develop policies for the promotion and encouragement of safe integrated efficient and economic transport to, from and within their area.
- 5.3. Business Risk:** There is no business risk in adopting the proposed strategy.
- 5.4. Due Regard Implications:** The needs of people with protected characteristics have been considered in preparing the Passenger Transport Strategy. Programmes developed through the strategy will help meet the needs of people with poor mobility, people with disabilities, younger and older people who may be vulnerable road users or suffer from isolation. The Strategy also aims to provide improved services that promote more sustainable travel and associated health & wellbeing through physical activity.

6. Background papers

- 6.1.** Appendix A - Somerset's Passenger Transport Strategy 2018-2026

Note For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author