

Updated by	Date	Version	Comments
Jane Newell	2017		Original version.
Lucy Bath	29/11/2017	v1	Reviewed and added comments.
Lucy Bath	25/04/2018	v2	Formatted and added some rail narrative.
Mike O'Dowd-Jones	29/04/2018	v3	Review and update. Distributed for comment.
Mike O'Dowd-Jones	1/5/2018	v4	Updated rail elements.
Mike O'Dowd-Jones	8/5/2018	v5	Updated objectives and completed missing information for scrutiny publication.

NB: this document is not fully formatted as it is intended to be published in Publisher. Infographics may be subject to change.

Somerset County Council

Passenger Transport Strategy 2018 - 2026

Draft Strategy for Consultation: May 2018

Executive Summary

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.

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.

This Passenger Transport strategy forms part of the Local Transport Plan for Somerset (2011-2026) which we call the 'Future Transport Plan'. Public 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 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.

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.

The target audience for this strategy includes a wide range of stakeholders, including:

- Existing or potential customers of publicly-available passenger transport services.
- Businesses.
- Community organisations and voluntary groups.
- Town and parish councils.
- Local transport operators and Network Rail.
- Healthcare service providers.

- Other service areas provided by Somerset.
- Schools and Colleges.
- The Department for Transport and other Government departments.
- The Local Enterprise Partnership and other funding bodies.

Updated periodically, it forms the basis for the current and future implementation plans for the Local Transport Plan period to 2026. Whilst the strategic policies and aspirations cover a 15-year timescale, the Strategy sets out a realistic and achievable vision for the shorter/medium term.

The current aims for passenger transport in the FTP (2011-2026) are:

“To do what we [the Council] can to maintain essential services in the early years of this plan and work to improve the way services work together and provide better information during its later years”

“We will work in partnership with the rail industry and other stakeholders to encourage more people to travel by train. We will support better services, facilities, security, integration and improvements in the way people see train travel.”

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’.

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

Aims

The updated 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, community partnerships and the rail industry to achieve greater resilience & reliability, faster journey times and more capacity and connectivity in the rail system.

Objectives

- Improve accessibility to services by enabling informed transport choices and linking transport options for easier multimode journeys.
- Enable sustainable passenger transport services through encouraging more viable commercial services and supporting communities to meet their own local transport needs.
- Work with partners to help provide a better passenger transport experience and improve connectivity to locations outside Somerset.

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 are 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.

1. Introduction

This Passenger Transport Strategy forms part of Somerset's Local Transport Plan known as the Future Transport Plan 2011-2026 (FTP). For this document public transport is defined as all modes of road transport where passengers do not rely on their own transport. This includes bus and coach services, rail services and other forms of transport such as private coaches, school buses, taxis, Demand Responsive Transport (DRT), Community Transport (CT) and Community Car Schemes.

Passenger transport can make a huge contribution to the sustainable transport networks that are needed to deliver objectives supporting the economy, accessibility and quality of life. At the same time, it can help minimise transport's adverse environmental impacts, reducing Somerset's carbon footprint.

Historically health, education, social care and public bus routes have developed independently and thus can suffer from a lack of co-ordination. Somerset has been successful in achieving a more integrated approach through its integrated passenger transport unit 'Transporting Somerset' and is continuing to improve the level of integration and efficiency to make the best use of the resources available across the different areas of transport.

Developed at a time of financial restraint and economic uncertainty, this strategy sets out the issues that have influenced the present service and proposes an outline strategy that will help us deliver the most robust public transport service under the existing circumstances

2. Context

It is important to see passenger transport as a part of the Council's overall transport strategy in the context of what it contributes to wider agendas. A summary of the National and Local context is described below.

2.1 National Context

2.1.1 Transport Act 1985, Transport Act 2000 and Local Transport Act 2008

The Transport Act 1985 includes a duty for local transport authorities to secure such public transport services as they consider appropriate to meet the requirements of the local area where these would not otherwise be met; and to have regard to the transport needs of members of the public who are elderly or disabled.

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; namely a Local Transport Plan (LTP); and to carry out their functions to implement the policies of their LTP.

There used to be a separate obligation to prepare a 'bus strategy' under the 2000 Act but this was repealed by the Local Transport Act 2008 which also removed previous requirements to replace plans every five years and enabled transport policies to be published separately from the proposals to implement those policies (implementation plans).

2.1.2 Guidance on Local Transport Plans 2009

The Guidance on Local Transport Plans (Department for Transport (DfT), 2009) sets out the five overarching national transport goals:

- Support economic growth.
- Reduce carbon emissions.
- Promote equality of opportunity.
- Contribute to better safety, security and health.
- Improve quality of life and a healthy natural environment.

In addition, the current government has highlighted its key overarching transport priorities as helping economic growth and tackling carbon emissions. These sit alongside other priorities such as equality, affordability, accessibility and health & wellbeing.

2.1.3 The Equality Act 2010

This Act introduced a duty on public authorities to consider reducing socio-economic inequalities through strategic planning decisions on spending and service delivery. This involves tackling any gaps in the provision of public transport between low income areas and key public services. The Act also includes provisions that specifically aim to improve the accessibility of public transport for disabled people.

2.1.4 Creating Growth, Cutting Carbon¹ 2011

Following the change of government in 2010, a White Paper was published by the DfT which sets out the need to focus on low-cost, high-value interventions. A package approach is advocated, giving people choice at a local level for short trips and ‘nudging’ them towards sustainable choices. The Government challenges the bus companies to consider what improvement measures they can put in place to enhance the whole journey experience for users. The paper goes on to suggest that more needs to be done to enable partnership working between bus operators and local authorities as this has improved services for passengers in several locations. The document states that it has protected concessionary travel schemes in the Spending Review and is supporting low carbon buses through the Green Bus Fund.

2.1.5 A Green Light for Better Buses² 2012

The document sets out a series of reforms to improve local bus subsidy and regulation in England. The proposals have been formulated to attract more people onto buses, to ensure better value for money and to give local transport authorities more influence over their local bus networks.

2.1.6 Door to Door³ 2013

Door to Door sets out a strategy for improving sustainable transport integration allowing people to get from A to B using more than one mode of transport through integration of buses, rail, ferries and community schemes.

2.1.7 UK Industrial Strategy 2017⁴

The Government’s strategy to create an economy that boosts productivity and earning power throughout the UK. The Strategy is based on five ‘foundations of productivity’; Ideas, People, Infrastructure, Business Environment, and Places. The strategy also sets ‘Grand Challenges’ including the future of mobility seeking to become a world leader in the way people, goods and services move; and helping meet the needs of an ageing society. Passenger transport will play a key role in delivering the strategy, and local areas will be required to prepare local industrial strategies.

The industrial strategy comes at a time of increasing focus on innovation and investment in automation of road vehicles and in the modernisation of rail services to deliver higher capacity, speed and connectivity. New market entrants and new business models, such as ride-hailing services, ride sharing and ‘mobility as a service’, are challenging assumptions about how people travel, and new technologies will soon have the potential to transform public transport.

¹ Creating Growth, Cutting Carbon Making Sustainable Local Transport Happen, DfT January 2011.

² A Green Light for Better Buses (DfT March 2012 – only published on line)

³ Door to Door - March 2013

⁴ Industrial Strategy: building a Britain fit for the future, November 2017

2.1.8 Bus Services Act 2017⁵

The aim of the Act is to improve bus services for passengers by providing local authorities, the Secretary of State and bus operators with a new toolkit to enable improvements to be made to bus services in their areas.

The 2017 Act:

- Strengthened arrangements for partnership working between bus operators and local authorities in England, introducing new Advanced Quality and Enhanced Partnership schemes;
- Introduced, in England, bus franchising powers to replace previous Quality Contract Schemes;
- Modernised previous ticketing legislation and
- Provided the powers necessary to improve the information available to passengers through audio and visual on-board information (across Great Britain) and through the provisions of open data on timetable, fares and bus service arrival times (in England).

2.1.9 UK Strategic Vision for Rail 2017⁶

This document sets out the Government's vision for the railways including:

- A more reliable railway, rolling out joint teams for running day to day track and train operations;
- An expanded network, expanding commuter routes, opening routes to unlock housing and development and building a new generation of high capacity railways;
- A better deal for passengers, including smart ticketing, extending discounts, improving compensation arrangements, improving accessibility and wifi connectivity, consulting on the future of community rail, implementing new models for passenger services with long-term integrated partnerships between track and train;
- A modern workforce, with improved skills, diversity, training and development;
- A productive and innovative sector.

The vision 'challenges' partners to work with Government and the industry to develop compelling proposals for the next generation of rail schemes, identifying the places where rail is the right answer for local transport needs. The vision seeks to reduce the call on taxpayers by building commercially successful rail businesses and routes.

⁵ The Bus Services Act 2017 Commenced 27 June 2017

⁶ Connecting People: A Strategic Vision for Rail, DfT November 2017.

2.2 Local Context

2.2.1 Local Enterprise Partnership Productivity Strategy 2018

LEPs have been set up by the government to allow local areas to set up regional partnerships to plan and deliver economic growth in the region, working together to ensure economies of scale, joined up thinking and economic development.

The Heart of the South West LEP has recently published a ‘productivity strategy’⁷ based on three themes: Leadership and Ideas; Housing, Connectivity & Infrastructure; and Employment, Skills & Learning. Poor transport links to education and work opportunities are noted as a barrier to social mobility. The strategy aims to secure a bigger proportion of national investment in transport infrastructure and to work more cohesively as an area to agree priorities that will unlock growth.

2.2.2 The Local Transport Plan 2011-2026

There are a variety of planning and strategy documents which form part of the Council’s Local Transport Plan which we have called the ‘Future Transport Plan’ (2011-2026). These plans set out the Council’s transport policies. These include the Bridgwater, Taunton and Wellington Transport Strategy, The Yeovil Transport Strategy, the Active Travel Strategy all of which have clear transport objectives and policies. The FTP and its supporting policies were developed as live documents however, and it is recognised that a review and update is now required and is scheduled during the timescale of this strategy and associated Implementation plan.

2.2.3 Somerset County Council County Plan and Business Plan 2018

This sets out the Council’s emerging plans across four strategic outcomes as follows and this Passenger Transport Strategy aligns closely with these outcomes.

- 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.

2.2.4 Somerset Growth Plan 2017-2030

The Plan aims to:

- Create a shared ambition and vision for sustainable and productive growth
- Support the delivery of infrastructure and housing to enable growth to take place

⁷ Stepping up to the Challenge – Heart of the South West Productivity Strategy, January 2018

- Increase the scale, quality and sustainability of economic opportunity in Somerset
- Ensure participation and access to these opportunities for local residents

The growth plan objectives are for a productive and innovative business community and economy; a labour force with the skills that businesses need; and infrastructure to support productivity and innovation.

One of the key aims is that *“Strategic connectivity into Somerset, including road, rail and public/community transport, will be improved.”*

With regard to labour force and skills, the plan notes the difficulties experienced by young people travelling from rural areas to training and employment opportunities, given the rural nature of the County and the limited provision of public transport; and notes the importance of community transport solutions.

Somerset is a popular tourist destination. There is a need to ensure that there is appropriate transport in place to serve both tourists and employees during the tourist seasons.

The plan also notes the importance of improved rail services on the main lines to Bristol and London; improvements to rail stations and building the case for train service enhancements. Reducing journey times to London Paddington to 90 minutes or less from Taunton, and London Waterloo to under 120 minutes from Yeovil will support economic growth. North-south links are equally as important. More frequent services from Taunton and more frequent, faster services from Bridgwater will deliver improved sub-regional connectivity whilst supporting the significant housing and employment growth along the Bristol, Bridgwater, Taunton and Exeter corridor.

2.2.5 Peninsula Rail Task Force 20-year strategy

The Peninsula Rail Task Force (PRTS), is a partnership of local authorities including Somerset, LEPs and Stakeholders, that has developed “Closing the Gap” a twenty-year strategic plan for the development of the South West rail network.

The three key aims of the plan are:

- Resilience and reliability
- Faster journey times
- Improved connectivity with sufficient capacity and comfort.

After carrying out extensive research and study with the rail industry, ‘Closing the Gap’ sets out a long-term cascade of improvements needed to close the growing gap between the South West and the rest of the UK in terms of rail funding and improvements. Investment is expected to deliver over £8.4 billion in economic benefits over the next 20 years.

3. Aims and Objectives of this Strategy

3.1. Aims

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, community partnerships and the rail industry to achieve greater resilience & reliability, faster journey times and more capacity and connectivity in the rail system.

3.2 Objectives

The strategy has the following overarching objectives which guide the actions and initiatives set out in this document:

- Improve accessibility to services by enabling informed transport choices and linking transport options for easier multimode journeys.
- Enable sustainable passenger transport services through encouraging more viable commercial services and supporting communities to meet their own local transport needs.
- Work with partners to help provide a better passenger transport experience and improve connectivity to locations outside Somerset.

5 Bus Strategy

5.1 Background

Bus services across Somerset are provided by small, medium and large bus companies with First Group being the dominant provider. Due to the rural nature of Somerset a large proportion of the bus routes currently receive financial support for some or part of the route and are therefore run under contract to the Council.

5.1.1 Integrated Passenger Transport Unit

The Council set up an integrated passenger transport unit (Transporting Somerset) in 2003 to ensure that transport demands from several client groups are coordinated in the most efficient way. Transporting Somerset arranges and contracts transport for eligible social care clients and eligible health patients daily using a mixture of minibuses, taxi and voluntary drivers, as well as coordinating home to school transport, public and accessible transport, park and ride, and the concessionary fare scheme.

5.1.2 Dynamic Purchasing

The Council introduced dynamic purchasing in 2014 as a procurement mechanism to improve ease of access to Council contracts for operators of all sizes and to improve the efficiency and transparency of the tendering process for all parties.

5.1.3 SMART Ticketing

The Council has, over the past few years, worked closely with local bus operators to introduce SMART ticketing for concessionary travel and Further Education students. This has been challenging but is now completed. The Council is currently working with operators to roll out contactless payment on buses to improve loading times and provide ease of boarding for customers; and has provided a grant scheme to assist operators with the provision of necessary ticketing equipment.

5.1.4 Concessionary Travel Scheme

Somerset County Council administers the National Concessionary Travel Scheme across Somerset. This scheme allows for free travel for elderly and disabled pass holders on public buses. The bus operator provides the journey free of charge and the Local Authority reimburses the average return fare for the journey.

5.1.5 Park & Ride

Somerset currently has two Park & Ride sites to the east and west of Taunton. Silk Mills to the west can accommodate approximately 600 cars, and the Gateway site to the east has parking for approximately 1000 vehicles. A figure of eight service is run into the town centre and between sites every 12 minutes during peak time and 15 minutes off peak. Over 300,000 single passenger journeys are undertaken each year. Smart Ticketing on this service and card top ups to save handing over cash is

being introduced to improve boarding times. The level of patronage on the service remains insufficient to enable sustainable operation without financial support from the Council. Additional 'park and bus' sites (edge of town car parks on existing bus routes) are being considered in association with new 'garden community' development areas to the South West and North East of Taunton.

5.1.6 Demand Responsive Transport

Somerset financially supports a number of 'Demand Responsive' services across the County branded as 'Slinky'. These minibuses are run under contract by, in the main, community transport groups. These have been introduced to service communities and villages where there are no or few conventional buses. A fully demand responsive service was expensive to operate and under-utilised; so was changed to a semi-routed service, serving specific communities on set days of the week. This ensures coverage in areas where there is no longer a conventional bus service and improved patronage on each journey. The fare structure was also reviewed to ensure affordability for customers. Concessionary pass holders can use this service free of charge in line with conventional bus services as a discretionary policy in addition to the National Concessionary Scheme.

5.1.7 Community and Voluntary Transport

Community transport is defined here as transport that is operated by a community or voluntary organisation and not funded by The Council. There are currently two main types of scheme in Somerset:

- Community transport minibus schemes which are run by larger voluntary organisations and who usually employ drivers and office staff to run the scheme, and
- Community car schemes where volunteers provide lifts for people in need using their own private car.

There are currently 10 community minibus schemes in the county, undertaking approximately 130,000 trips per annum. The majority are small scale and locally based, providing a service predominantly for older and less able residents, including those who have to travel in a wheelchair, who cannot, or who find it difficult to, use ordinary public transport. Typical services are 'group hire', taking groups of residents to various activities such as luncheon clubs or days out, and regular shopping excursions to local towns along with provision to day care and health services. A few of the minibus schemes provide school bus services (mainly special educational needs students) under contract to the County Council (these have been allocated through the standard tendering process as are all services).

There are also 30 community car schemes operating across Somerset. These local village schemes provide access to services for residents. The schemes are run by volunteers who use their own cars to transport individuals to health appointments, shopping and a variety of other services.

5.1.8 Education, Social Care and Health Transport

Free home-to-school transport is provided for approximately 9,200 entitled children, including about 600 pupils with special educational needs, in accordance with statutory requirements. This is provided through contracts with a range of providers from large coaches to taxis. In addition, approximately 2,000 college students take advantage of the council's post-16 transport scheme, the County Ticket.

Home to school and college transport requirements are closely integrated with public transport where possible through the purchase of bus tickets for entitled students, this maximises resources and provides an efficient cost effective transport solution. Public transport bus services are also widely used by school children who are not entitled to free transport.

5.1.9 Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles

Taxis and private hire vehicles are an important part of the public transport network, playing a variety of roles in an integrated transport system. They can be particularly important in providing a flexible, demand responsive service at times or in places where a conventional bus is not available; acting as feeder services to the rail and bus networks, and providing door-to-door transport for people with mobility impairments or who need to carry heavy or bulky luggage. The Council also makes extensive use of them to transport school children, social care clients and eligible health patients.

5.1.10 Total Transport

The Council has largely completed development of a 'Total Transport' web portal and travel planning tool in partnership with Gloucestershire Council that will allow journey planning from origin to destination that includes all types of transport available; including community transport journeys and car schemes. The project will result in an online one-stop-shop and will eventually include the ability to pay for the journey online. The portal will also provide a 'noticeboard' facility which will allow individuals to offer lifts to others, join together to lift share or procure a taxi or bus to facilitate access to education, health and other services.

5.1.11 Publicity and Information

The council is an active member of the regional partnership that provides the 'Traveline' telephone enquiry service and travel information website. Printed timetable booklets are no longer provided in Somerset but information is available to download or can be requested should passengers not have access to a computer terminal.

Timetables are displayed at over 3000 bus stops, to complement the information provided by the commercial operators and to fulfil the Council's obligation to make sure that adequate local bus service information is available.

Somerset also has a website, Travel Somerset <https://www.travelsomerset.co.uk/> which in addition to providing live travel updates, also provides information on bus

services, community transport, car schemes and minibus services. This information will be reviewed once the Total Transport portal is fully up and running.

The Council has published a community car scheme toolkit to assist communities in setting up their own car schemes; using volunteer drivers and their cars provide a taxi-style, door-to-door service for residents who do not have access to their own or public transport. <https://www.travelsomerset.co.uk/community-car-schemes/>

5.1.12 Bus Buddies

Somerset County Council currently has a training programme for children and adults with learning or physical disabilities to help them use public transport. Training is undertaken over a period of weeks or months to train individuals on safety, boarding and disembarking the bus, ticketing and general awareness of situations. This programme reduces social exclusion but it is not a statutory requirement and is fully funded by Somerset County Council.

5.2 Key Challenges Opportunities and Risks

The Council is currently facing challenging times with reduced funding, increased population and more demand for individual, local services such as social care. The tension between increasing expectations, more choice for services i.e. the NHS 'Choose and Book' service and Social Care Person Centred Planning means rising costs and demands whilst funding diminishes.

The council has undertaken several major strategic reviews over the last few years, challenging how passenger transport services are delivered. A major review in 2002 led to the implementation of the Integrated Passenger Transport Unit; a passenger transport strategy review in 2005 formalised the core network and rural demand responsive/ community transport operations model; a strategic review in 2012 resulted in a wide range of outcomes driving greater commercialisation and procurement efficiency; a cross-cutting review is currently underway as a key theme within the corporate Medium Term Financial Planning (MTFP) process, establishing a corporate response to the need to reduce demand for transport focusing particularly on changes in policy and practice in adults and children's social care and opportunities to provide transport to mixed client groups.

The table below summarises the key challenges, looks at the opportunities these may bring and identifies some of the risks relevant to developing the public transport strategy.

Figure 5.1 Key Challenges, Opportunities and Risks

Challenges	Opportunities	Risks	How do we maximise the opportunities?
Maintaining adequate levels of service with reduced funding.	Work with operators and 3 rd sector partners to develop new, innovative services, stimulating demand for commercial services	Transport operating costs continue to rise therefore reducing the appetite for innovation amongst operators.	Develop enhanced partnership to improve bus services whilst working with our own fleet and community services to create

	which are sustainable for the future.		'feeder services' into the main bus routes.
Viability of the bus market. Despite a buoyant taxi market in Somerset the bigger coach and bus market has dwindled.		Increased cost through changes to bus service operators grant; increasing accessibility and emissions requirements; driver training requirements, maintenance and licencing requirements, running costs and driver availability.	The Council has undertaken a great deal of work to encourage new entrants onto our dynamic purchasing system, but there appears to be a genuine lack of operators in the market locally.
The number of paid passengers on public transport has diminished with approximately 75% of trips now being undertaken by concessionary pass holders.	Many concessionary pass holders have commented in local consultations that they may be prepared to pay a proportion of the cost of travel in order to ensure that a service is available to their local community.	This cost pressure has the unintended consequence in the current economic climate of contributing to the difficulty in maintaining the frequency and convenience of services that customers would prefer.	Pressure will remain unless the Government changes national policy.
All public service buses should be accessible to people with disabilities including those who need to remain in wheelchairs.	Requirements have been introduced to various classes of vehicle over the last few years, with coaches remaining the only remaining class requiring compliance by January 2020.	In a rural bus market where margins are low these requirements may unintentionally reduce the number of available bus services as operators reduce frequency and number of routes to reduce costs. May reduce flexibility to utilise a range of vehicle types to provide socially necessary transport services.	Seek freedoms and flexibilities in order to maintain services for some members of the community where there would otherwise be no transport option even if not fully accessible.
Potential changes to section 19 & 22 permits issued to 'not for profit' community transport organisations that use these permits to undertake transport contracts following concerns that current approach is not compatible with EU legislation on competition & PSV license requirements.	Since 1985, all community transport groups that are operating on a not-for-profit basis have been able to apply for permits to carry passengers in a bus or minibus without first holding the Public Service Vehicle operator's licence (PSV licence) that would otherwise be required. Many of Somerset's community transport providers rely on a proportion of contracted	Likely to result in increased costs for CT groups and a much-reduced volunteer driver pool due to enhanced training requirements. CT groups may struggle to remain viable and their withdrawal from the Market is likely to lead to significantly increased costs for delivery of statutory school and social care transport services.	Respond strongly to Government consultation setting out likely impacts of proposed changes.

	work to enable them to deliver wider community transport services.		
Meeting the transport access needs of an increasing elderly population.	Working in partnership with bus and community operators to increase the use of public transport services. Increase the number of sustainable community car and minibus schemes across Somerset	Lack of funding and staff time which could limit the ability to improve quantity and quality of service.	This would improve the sustainability of bus operators and help to improve access for rural opportunities.
Reducing car use/dependency to improve public transport sustainability.	Increases in fuel and insurance costs may help to influence travel change.	Public transport network not comprehensive enough to ensure change.	Total transport web portal will provide better information on options for travel including car sharing.
Improving punctuality and reliability of bus services as car ownership continues to grow.	Higher fuel costs and growing environment issues may increase more use of public transport. SCC will work closely with operators to review networks and develop services in areas of high demand	Disability requirements compliance and legislation relating to wheelchair access could make less well used routes financially unviable for operators.	Enhanced partnerships will encourage operators to improve on board ticketing, introducing contactless payments and real time information through ticket machines to improve boarding times.
Maintaining/ improving public transport infrastructure with reduced funding.	Ensure developer contributions to public transport through planning obligations. (Community Infrastructure Levy and S106). Develop business cases for infrastructure that benefits public transport journey times. New funds such as Housing Infrastructure Fund.	CIL funding limited to general infrastructure, limited funding available through 106 agreements for buses.	Employ 'smarter' processes to ensure passenger transport is considered on major developments linking to Garden Town Plans for Taunton and District Strategic Transport Policies.
Creating cost effective transport to meet demands which are increasingly dispersed i.e. individual care plans for social care clients.	New legislation allows for more flexibility in operating community transport services New public health awareness of the need for good public transport.	Further requirements for individual services could outstrip the transport available.	The Total Transport portal will enable users to see transport options and allow individuals to connect through the notice board.

Finding new funding streams to maintain a public transport network when local government funding is reduced.	Working with other Authorities to share best practice, work together to reduce costs and bid for funding at a regional level. Working with District Councils and developers to raise awareness of transport issues and bid for developer funding.		Working closely with DfT, other Local Authorities and Districts to prepare and bid for resources along with improved marketing of services through incentivising systems and ticketing offers. Seek freedoms and flexibilities from Government within a partnership for innovation.
Improve information and technology on and off bus to improve the users experience and reduce boarding times.	Working with operators to ensure a consistent approach to allow interoperable ticketing on journeys across Somerset. Creation of a web portal for travel information across a range of public transport services	Operators may not work together to share information and revenue. IT infrastructure unable to provide a stable environment to enable a variety of travel modes to be shown in a clear, readable format.	Implementation of contactless payments of bus and smart card top-up off-bus. Through EP's improve next bus and stop time technology on and off bus. Total Transport provision for ticket options an information.
Ensuring adequate access to Further Education as the school participation age rises with no additional funding provided.	Review and implement changes in policy and provision, equalising charging across FE provision.	Several FE SEN students may choose adult social care services rather than remaining at school/college.	Undertake a review of commercial and supported provision to ensure access to education and implantation of a fair charging policy for all.
Managing Policy and organisational change within the organisation.	Structural change within the Council could lead to a transformational review of transport provision.	Speed of change could increase costs in the short term i.e. some individuals receiving direct payments could leave space seats on previously full buses.	

5.3 Proposed Bus Strategy

5.3.1 Network strategy and integration

The Council intends to continue to develop the current strategic approach which is to promote a core network of commercial or semi-commercial services linking the major settlements with fixed route operations, and to fill in the gaps with demand responsive services, community & voluntary transport and community car schemes.

Due to the challenges in achieving commercial operations the Council's funds for supported services are likely to continue to be utilised in supporting many of the semi-commercial core routes and the demand responsive network.

We will actively work with public transport operators and community groups to encourage joint working to create a 'hierarchy' of vehicles to match the service provision to the demand and social need.

We will explore the role of smaller market towns as interchange locations to allow rural villages to be served, where possible, by sustainable community transport schemes such as community car schemes, community transport and car sharing. Larger buses would then provide an onward journey along the main corridors into the larger conurbations. This solution would improve the sustainability of larger public vehicles, reduce journey times and improve punctuality.

We will work with Community Transport organisations to explore areas where schemes can be changed or enhanced to deliver more provision across the County

We will work with communities and Parishes to explore car scheme, car sharing and car club opportunities. We will continue to enhance our current car scheme 'toolkit' to assist in the development of new schemes.

A longstanding network of services providing access to Further Education Colleges continues to be provided, funded through provision of the County Ticket which offers student's a negotiated rate and access to services provided by several operators. FE services are subsidised by the Council and Colleges.

The public transport network is not sufficient to meet home to school transport needs, so a home to school transport network is funded by the County Council through tendering individual routes based on demand driven by pupils' legal entitlement to free transport. Spare seats on home to school transport are offered if available as pay seats for those who do not have a legal entitlement to free transport.

Opportunities to achieve a greater level of integration between public and school transport services are being considered and will be further developed as part of this strategy.

We will work with Health, Social Care and Education providers to try reduce the 'peak' times for transport. Facilitating discussions around changing school times, changing care times and providing health clinics which service set geographical areas at certain times.

We will work towards a more integrated passenger network to allow people options for transport, reducing downtime of vehicles and improving patronage on bus services and community transport. We will work with bus and coach operators to explore utilisation of school buses outside of peak school times, allowing public access on contracted vehicles and making use of the DfT's relaxing of legislation on permit vehicles.

In the mid to longer term we will work with rail and railway stations to promote joined up interoperable services to link workers and tourist to town centres

5.3.2 Total Transport- information and access

We will launch our Total Transport web portal as a one-stop shop for travel information and passenger transport journey planning, and will continue to build and develop the portal to improve the way people access transport in Somerset. We will also use intelligence from the portal to inform our assessment of transport need.

We will provide access to information via mobile devices which will allow the same information to be visible on a mobile phone for those who do not own or have access to a computer.

We will work with operators, other Local Authorities and smart ticketing companies to continue the roll out of Smart Ticketing across Somerset. In recent years we have implemented smart ticketing for concessionary travel and more recently for our further education student ticket. We plan to develop this further to encourage

- Smartcards for the Park & Ride service, allowing on line top up tickets or on line purchase and top up on site
- Interoperable smart tickets on public transport services across the County allowing individuals to change buses using one ticket

Our longer-term aim is to facilitate rail and public transport operators to work together to develop an interoperable ticket to make it easier for individuals entering Somerset or travelling across Somerset to use the network of services.

We will also where possible improve bus stop information with next bus texting and clear information of services.

We will introduce 'real-time' information boards in urban areas and work with public transport operators to introduce on bus stop and fare information.

5.3.3 Assessment of need and financial support

Ongoing reductions in the Council's overall funding settlement from Government have led us to adopt a strong commercialisation strategy with operators. Over the last 5 or 6 years we have engaged in an annual process of rebalancing our budgets in the context of the full range of statutory services and competing duties/ risks that we are required to fund, resulting in a reduction in funding available for supported public transport services.

We have managed this reduction through an annual conversation with communities and operators to identify where our available financial support is most needed based on the likely availability of other transport choices for communities. Our withdrawal of financial support for individual routes has often resulted in services continuing to operate but on a more commercial basis, or through support from other bodies such as town and parish councils.

We will continue to update our information on the public transport needs of our communities in the light of available commercial provision and other transport opportunities before making any changes to the supported transport network. We will map the network of current services against the needs of the community to ensure the best coverage possible across Somerset within the resources we have available; and will consult with communities to ensure that the potential impact of any changes to Council funded services are fully understood and inform our choices about where to utilise our available resources.

5.3.4 Market stability and stimulation

We are currently in dialogue with bus operators to review the stability of the bus market considering the issues and risks discussed in section **5.2 above**; and to discuss mechanisms which will enable sustained and stable commercial operations to continue.

We will work to stimulate new entrants into the passenger transport market in Somerset to ensure the existence of a competitive market for cost effective transport service provision.

5.3.5 Bus Infrastructure and Services for new housing and economic development

The Development Planning Process

Only a small proportion of the journeys to work in Somerset are currently made by public transport with 3 out of 5 residents using a car or van to access employment⁸. In areas where new development is proposed it will be essential to ensure that these areas are fully served by accessible bus services and attractive facilities for bus users. These may include park and ride services and should be supported, where appropriate, by bus priority schemes and parking restraints.

⁸ <http://www.somersetintelligence.org.uk/transport-statistics-briefing-paper-2013.pdf>

We will work with developers and planners to ensure access to and from services for new housing and commercial developments is discussed at an early stage of the planning process. Where appropriate we will secure such planning obligations or contributions for public transport infrastructure and services as are necessary to ensure the development is acceptable in planning terms with regard to its accessibility and congestion impacts.

Our transport requirements in the context of the development planning process are set out in our 'Transport and Development' policies 2011 (accessed from <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/policies-and-plans/plans/future-transport-plan>) including assessment of development impacts, operational design and layout to facilitate bus access and bus priority, and safeguarding routes.

Travel plans offer opportunities to increase the proportion of journeys to work and business trips made by public transport. These are usually a blend of physical measures (e.g. enhanced services and facilities) and soft measures (e.g. information, leaflets and marketing). Travel plans also encourage developers and employers to adopt a supporting set of travel policies and targets for increasing the use of public transport for commuting and business travel.

Our guidance to developers preparing travel plans as part of the development planning process can be accessed from <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/policies-and-plans/plans/new-developments/planning-guidance>

A38 Bus Priority Corridor

The A38 corridor between Bridgwater, Taunton and Wellington is a particularly important link in supporting the growth and development of the County. Significant levels of employment, retail and residential development are proposed along this corridor within the three towns including urban extensions at Comeytrowe, Monkton Heathfield, South Bridgwater and North East Bridgwater. Congestion is already an issue along sections of the corridor and it will be important to increase the proportion of people who travel to and from the new development areas by public transport compared to current typical travel choices if severe congestion is to be avoided; and to enable the development areas to be fully built-out in due course.

We will therefore progress proposals for a bus priority corridor on the A38 initially focusing on a first phase between Monkton Heathfield and Taunton town centre.

The bus priority corridor is identified in Taunton Deane Borough Council's core strategy and infrastructure delivery plan as well as the Bridgwater/ Taunton/ Wellington transport strategy and the emerging Taunton Transport Strategy refresh.

Early feasibility studies have been undertaken to consider the routeing options and broad nature of the works that will be needed to enhance the existing roads to provide faster bus journeys and better passenger facilities to ensure that bus

services maintain an attractive journey time compared to other traffic as congestion grows. More detailed feasibility studies are shortly to be commissioned.

We will continue explore opportunities to secure the funding needed to design and construct the bus priority scheme and are currently pursuing a grant under the Housing Infrastructure Fund for construction of the first phase of the scheme.

5.3.6 Partnership for innovation

We will initially seek to develop an informal bus partnership to work with the main bus operators and Government to develop a more sustainable model of rural bus service provision for the benefit of our communities. We will then consider whether provisions for more formal partnership arrangements under the Bus Services Act 2017 would be an appropriate mechanism to secure improved services.

We will actively engage in bidding for new monies, when they are available, to enhance connectivity and access, and when suitable work with other local authorities to bid jointly for funding across the South West.

6 Rail Strategy

6.1 Background

Although Somerset County Council does not provide rail services itself it does have a role in helping to improve services through partnership working with rail providers and interest groups and in communicating the case for rail investment in the area to Central Government and the rail industry.

Somerset has four rail lines (excluding heritage and private freight lines), served by three Train Operating Companies; each of these lines are described below.

6.1.1 Bristol to Exeter & Penzance Line

Services between Taunton and Bristol Temple Meads also serve Bridgwater, and Highbridge and Burnham-on-Sea. Great Western Railways (GWR) run a local stopping service and some older trains are used, but are being replaced as GWR upgrades its fleet. The line is supported by the Severnside Community Rail Partnership and the Council provides financial support towards this group.

Cross Country run longer distance services between Penzance and Edinburgh, calling at Taunton between once and twice an hour, offering a faster service to and from Taunton.

6.1.2 London Paddington to Penzance - Great Western Main Line & Reading to Taunton (Berks and Hants Line).

GWR runs services approximately once an hour between Taunton and Paddington, with two services per hour to London in the morning and from London in the evening. Services call at Castle Cary around once an hour during these peak periods but are less frequent at other times. One service in each direction calls at Frome per day. The line is not supported by a specific stakeholder group.

6.1.3 London Waterloo to Exeter – The West of England Line

South West Trains operates services between London Waterloo and Exeter, serving Templecombe, Yeovil Junction and Crewkerne in Somerset. The line has an hourly frequency, running a clockface timetable⁹. The section of the line in and around Somerset is supported by the Salisbury to Exeter Lineside Consortium of Authorities (SELCA) although the Council does not provide financial support towards this group.

6.1.4 Bristol to Weymouth – The Heart of Wessex line

⁹ In a clockface timetable services run at a consistent time throughout the day, for example at twenty minutes past the hour. for much of the day

GWR operates services between Bristol and Weymouth calling at Frome, Bruton, Castle Cary and Yeovil Pen Mill in Somerset. Trains tend to run every two to three hours, although they run more frequently at certain times of day. Some older trains are used, but these are due to be replaced. The line is a designated community railway supported by the Heart of Wessex Community Rail Partnership, and the Council provides financial support towards this group.

6.1.5 Peninsula Rail Task Force 20 Year Strategy and ‘Speed to the West’ study

The Peninsula Rail Task Force (PRTS) was set up by several local authorities across the South West Peninsula to develop a long-term rail investment plan for the area with the rail industry and to press for increased levels of investment. Somerset has been a member since its inception and is joined by Cornwall Council, Devon County Council, Plymouth City Council, Torbay Council, Cornwall and Isle of Scilly LEP and Heart of the South West LEP. In November 2016, the group published “Closing the Gap” a strategic plan for the development of the South West rail network where it outlined the long-term aspirations for rail in the South West Peninsula.

<https://peninsularailtaskforce.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/prtf-closing-the-gap.pdf>

A key evidence base for the PRTF strategy is the ‘Speed to the West’ study undertaken by GWR to examine in detail the opportunities to improve journey times on various sections of the line between London and Penzance. This demonstrates that there are significant opportunities for valuable ‘marginal’ journey time gains to be achieved through incremental renewals programmes as well as larger journey time savings from major infrastructure enhancement.

6.1.6 Rail Re-franchising

The Department for Transport (DfT) determines the specification for train services in the UK and awards franchises to train operating companies to run services in line with the required specification. Franchises are often awarded for long periods of time and re-franchising processes are a significant opportunity to influence the specification of rail services operated. The specification can include a range of outputs including timetables, requirements for rolling stock, car parking and many other matters.

In late 2017 the Government decided to extend the current franchise for the Great Western franchise which covers a many of the services used by Somerset Communities with the current operator GWR, until March 2020 (and may further extend this to 2022 via a direct award), while several upgrades are being undertaken on the service. The DfT recently consulted on several matters related to a replacement franchise, including whether to split the franchise into smaller areas.

The Council’s consultation response noted that it was not apparent what the passenger benefits of small franchise areas would be and that this would introduce problems with potentially fragmented journeys and difficulties with interoperability of ticketing.

We will continue to respond to franchise consultation processes to influence the franchise specification.

6.1.7 Network Rail Strategic Business Plans

In February 2018 Network Rail published its strategic business plans for Control Period 6 – 2019 to 2024. This comprised a family of documents, including thematic plans, individual route plans, and a system operator plan. They are all available on the Network Rail web site; the plan for the Western Route can be found at:- <https://cdn.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Western-Route-Strategic-Plan.pdf>

6.1.8 Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline (RNEP) Framework

The Department for Transport issued the RNEP framework as a ‘New approach for rail enhancements’ in March 2018 to move away from the previous rigid five-year cycle towards a rolling programme of investment for enhancements to the railway. This will not affect the current investment cycle for operations, maintenance and renewals activities carried out by Network Rail to keep the existing railway running. Government’s intention is for more enhancements to be promoted, funded and/or financed by a range of parties, for example the Transforming Cities Fund, Local Enterprise Partnerships, Sub-national Transport Bodies, Local Authorities, Metropolitan Mayors, and the private sector.

Enhancements must provide outcomes that meet one or more of the following priorities:

- Keeping people and goods moving smoothly and safely.
- Delivering the benefits from committed programmes and projects already underway.
- Offering more: new and better journeys and opportunities for the future.
- Changing the way the rail sector works for the better.

The case for all enhancement schemes will need to be supported by a robust business case including value for money and affordability, a focus on the outcomes for rail users and the taxpayer, impact on the existing network, demand, balance of the portfolio & opportunities for private investment.

Development of the pipeline of enhancements will follow five stages of activity separated by formal investment decision gateways. The first three stages, “Determine”, “Develop” and “Design” are characterised by increasing levels of detail and understanding. The final two stages are, “Deliver” and “Deploy.” By the time these latter stages are reached, all investment decisions have been taken and the focus is on building and operating the Enhancement and realising the benefits that are anticipated.

6.1.9 Partnership Plan for the West

In March 2018, the rail industry partners published a plan entitled “In Partnership for Britain’s Prosperity – The West of England”. This outlines four commitments for change along with a detailed narrative on the current and planned investment in improved infrastructure and services:

- Strengthening the partnership railway’s contribution to the economy in the West of England
- Increasing customer satisfaction by creating better journeys
- Boosting our communities through localised decision making and investment
- Attracting diverse talent and providing rewarding careers

6.2. Proposed Rail Strategy

Somerset’s aims for rail improvements follow those set out in “Closing the Gap”¹⁰ with the addition of other localised aims which are equally important for Somerset but fall outside of the direct scope of the PRTF strategy.

We will continue to work with our partner authorities, the rail industry and other stakeholders to press for improvements to rail service and infrastructure which will benefit Somerset communities and the South West as a whole.

6.2.1 A Resilient Network.

The South West is dependent on a limited strategic transport network, and this is particularly so to the west of Taunton. The network suffers from deteriorating infrastructure resulting from a history of underinvestment and damage caused by extreme weather such as the flooding on the Somerset levels.

Network Rail warns that there will be an increase in disruption and closures while the south west already suffers from fewer than 50% of long distance trains arriving on time⁴. The network currently has no alternative route in the event of the mainline west of Exeter being closed for maintenance. Improvements to the diversionary route between Exeter and Castle Cary, allowing both London and local services could create economic benefits of £50m over 30 years⁴.

The development of future freight, distribution and of logistics hubs such as seen in Bridgwater, and indeed the continuation of existing activity, can only occur if the network is resilient.

The PRTF strategy outlines the following requests for rail industry investment in Somerset:

Improvements requested by 2019:

- Completion of flood resilience works on the Somerset Levels, building on existing schemes such as those in the Somerset Flood Action Plan.

¹⁰ <https://peninsularailtaskforce.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/prtf-report-document-final.pdf>

- Completion of Exeter – Yeovil – Castle Cary route development study to conclude how best to improve the resilience of route which plays an important role as a diversionary route for the Berks and Hants line. We are seeking journey time improvements and the ability to maintain an hourly service between Yeovil and Bristol whilst accommodating the diversionary role.

Improvements requested by 2029:

- Castle Cary to Exeter capacity upgrade: Additional double track sections on the routes between Castle Cary and Yeovil and Yeovil and Exeter St Davids.

Requests for rail industry investment in resilience which fall outside the direct scope of the PRTF proposals:

- Improved connectivity between the West of England Line and the Heart of Wessex Line (and improved connectivity between Yeovil Pen Mill and Yeovil Junction stations); including consideration of a Yeovil South Chord which provides potential for increased train frequency and greater passenger volumes as well as relieving congestion on the Heart of Wessex line during Great Western diversions.

6.2.2 Journey time improvements

Journey time improvements, in particular to London but also to Bristol and the Midlands, have a huge potential to improve connectivity and productivity and therefore are key to increasing economic growth. Work undertaken by PRTF demonstrates a decrease of 6% in productivity for every addition 100 minutes travel time from London.

The South West suffers from poor earliest arrival and average journey times from London compared to many destinations in the UK. Within the peninsula economy Gross Value Added (GVA) per head is significantly below national average and is over-reliant on public sector and seasonal employment. It is estimated that a journey time improvement of 15 minutes can lead to an increase of £300 million in GVA and additional 1500 jobs.

Improved connectivity and faster journeys provide an opportunity to enable modal shift to rail and its connecting services (such as buses) and relieving congestion on the roads.

The PRTF strategy outlines the following requests for rail industry investment in Somerset:

Improvements requested by 2019:

- Development of the Paddington route infrastructure schemes with strong business cases to a feasibility design stage, covering Paddington to Penzance.

- Exeter-Waterloo timetable study and infrastructure development to feasibility design stage for redoubling of track and passing loops between Salisbury and Yeovil.
- Exeter-Bristol timetable study and initial options appraisal to identify specific infrastructure and service improvement proposals on this section of the line including options for improved connectivity at Bridgwater.
- Intercity express trains introduction, sleeper upgrade and major frequency improvements supported by depot and station capability works.
- 2 direct trains per hour between London and Plymouth, Major service improvements through hourly semi-fast services supported by electrification to Bedwyn and major capacity and linespeed improvements between Newbury and Westbury (Forecast to reduce journey times to Taunton by 4 minutes).

Improvements requested by 2029:

- Further infrastructure improvements to save a further 7 minutes to Taunton as set out in the PRTF 20 year strategy and speed to the west study.
- Implement proposals for improved journey times and connectivity on the Exeter – Bristol- Birmingham rail line including improved connectivity at Bridgwater to support Hinkley Point and housing growth.

6.2.3 Increased Capacity and Comfort

Passenger growth within the Peninsula over the last 21 years is twice the national average at 128%. In the last 15 years passenger numbers at Taunton have increased by 114%. Growth has continually been greater than the industry forecasts and this has resulted in over capacity on rail services.

The average age of trains is over 32 years old and is the oldest high speed and regional fleet in the UK. Rolling stock is unable to meet equality regulations required by 2020 making it unsuitable for passengers with disabilities.

The development at Hinkley provides an opportunity for rail to improve supply chain links which also helps to provide improved sustainability.

The PRTF strategy outlines the following requests for rail industry investment in Somerset:

Improvements requested by 2019:

- Improved customer experience facilities on trains and at stations including major Wi-Fi capability upgrade and on-board entertainment, as a minimum standard.
- Development and enhancement of connections and services to the Midlands and Bristol.

Improvements requested by 2024:

- Improvement to Cross-Country services between Bristol and west of Exeter. Timetable to deliver 2 trains per hour to meet passenger growth.
- Further capacity upgrades Newbury to Westbury.

Improvements requested by 2029:

- Castle Cary to Cogload Junction capacity upgrade. Additional signal sections to increase capacity by reducing headways.
- Exeter to Waterloo line redoubling of track and passing loops between Salisbury and Yeovil.

Improvements requested by 2030 and beyond:

- Inclusion in the long-term rail industry electrification programme to the South west peninsula.

Requests for rail industry investment in resilience which fall outside the direct scope of the PRTF proposals:

- Additional train sets to increase the frequency of service on the Heart of Wessex line to achieve a 'clockface' departure pattern, hourly at peak times and two-hourly off-peak. This will provide improved arrival and departure times for Yeovil bound commuters and students from North and South and deliver much needed additional capacity at Bristol, Cardiff and Westbury.
- The Government consulted recently on potential of further Community Rail Partnerships which have proved very effective in other rural communities. Much of the existing main-line rail network operates to connect Somerset outwardly with the wider region with very limited rail connectivity within the county connecting the more rural parts of Somerset. There may well be future opportunities for new Community Rail Partnerships within Somerset. In the context of this Strategy, the County Council would support further exploration if the Government come forward with more detailed proposals in the future.

6.2.4 Rail Station Improvements

We will progress rail station improvement projects where funding packages have been secured by the Council or partners; and will continue to provide advice to communities seeking to secure securing the necessary funds for early-stage feasibility and development of improvements rail station improvement projects.

Taunton Station: In early 2015 the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) approved £4.6M from the Local Growth Fund to match-fund sums of money allocated to the Great Western franchise to improve Taunton Train Station. The planned improvements include:

- Building a 400 space multi-story car park;
- Changing the location of the main entrance to better integrate with the town centre and routes through the new Firepool development;

- Forecourt enhancements to improve the quality and functionality of the public space; and
- Improved transport interchange.

The Council are working closely with Great Western Railway (GWR) who are delivering the project which is scheduled to be complete by mid-2019.

Bridgwater Station: Funding, including £800,000 from the Department for Transport and £400,000 from a developer funding agreement with EDF Energy, has also been secured for Bridgwater Station rail improvements. These include:

- Public realm enhancement
- Car parking, and
- Public transport interchange.

The Council has a funding agreement with GWR to deliver the improvements.

Castle Cary Station: This station is a key rail head for eastern Somerset and the Somerset levels providing connectivity to London and the South East with a journey time of less than 2 hours to London Paddington provided by 8/9 trains in each direction per day. Lack of parking capacity is a key constraint on use of the station and may be discouraging potential passengers from using the station. GWR are concerned that an increasing number of potential new passengers will be lost as they cannot be accommodated in the existing car park creating a gap in demand and supply of around 20% by 2020. GWR have submitted funding bids (for instance to the LEP Local Growth Fund) to increase the car park by 100 spaces but have so far been unsuccessful. We will continue to work with GWR to explore funding opportunities for provision of additional parking space.

Other station improvements: A range of rail station facilities require improvement at each of Somerset's stations including parking, cycle parking, step free access to platforms and a range of other facilities. We will continue to bid for funds for improvements to rail station facilities where opportunities arise, where the bidding process is affordable, and where we consider that bids are likely to successfully meet the funding criteria.

6.2.5 New Stations and lines.

Several communities are actively promoting opening or reopening rail stations in Somerset. In line with the Government's approach to new rail investment set out in 6.1.8 above; The Council supports the principle of reopening stations where there is sufficient demand to make the service viable and where the necessary timetable changes can be accommodated without detriment to existing services or desired future service enhancements.

Business cases following rail industry requirements are necessary to demonstrate the feasibility and economic benefit of any proposals. The first step would be to understand what the demand/ market and potential patronage is for a new rail

service, and the second step would be to undertake a timetable study to see if the desired service can be accommodated before progressing and detailed engineering feasibility activity.

The Council is currently unable to provide funds towards feasibility studies and business cases of this nature for new rail stations or lines; but will insofar as we are able, continue to provide advice to communities seeking to secure the necessary funds for early-stage feasibility and development of improvements rail station improvement projects.

Current proposals which are known to be promoted locally are highlighted below although other opportunities may also arise in the future:

Wellington Station: The Council supports the proposal to reopen a rail station at Wellington (in conjunction with a station at Collumpton). Early stage feasibility work including a demand and timetable study have been progressed largely funded by the District Councils. The next step is for the funding partners to commission the production of a Strategic Outline Business case for each station, including desk top initial feasibility studies to meet the requirements of the new DfT Rail Enhancements process. The Council will continue to dedicate officer time to working with the rail industry, local authority colleagues and communities to help them move proposals forward.

The Council's recent response to the Great Western Franchise consultation (February 2018) requested that the new franchise further develop the business case for reopening a station at Wellington. Our response urged DfT to make available development funding for the required early stage feasibility studies to enable bids into capital funds such as new stations fund.

Langport/ Somerton Station: The Council is supportive of the proposal to open a new rail station between Castle Cary and Taunton noting that there is a 28 mile stretch of line without a rail station with significant travel distances by car for local communities to access their nearest station; and has facilitated positive talks between the local community and the rail industry.

Current signalling constraints mean there is insufficient capacity to accommodate stops between Castle Cary and Taunton. Fast trains are often delayed by slower trains on this section of the line, and timetabling associated with introducing a stop would need careful consideration to avoid worsening the situation. A potential service strategy would be to introduce a new local stopping service in addition to the current hourly fast intercity service and semi-fast stopping service (every 2 hrs from Dec 2018) that stops at Castle Cary. Considering the geometry and gradient of the existing line a new station at Langport East may be feasible rather than at Somerton which has more constraints.

Early stage passenger demand and timetable studies are now needed to move the proposal forward.

The Council's recent response to the Great Western Franchise consultation (February 2018) requested that the new franchise further develop the business case for reopening a station at Langport. Our response urged DfT to make available development funding for the required early stage feasibility studies to enable bids into capital funds such as new stations fund.

Chard Junction Station: The Council is supportive of the proposal to open a new rail station at Chard Junction and has provided advice to local communities who are actively promoting the proposals. As with other proposals early stage passenger demand and timetable studies are now needed to move the proposal forward.

The Council's response to the Network Rail Wessex Route Study draft for consultation (2014) supports Devon County Council's case for extending trains to Axminster and the associated proposal to provide a new loop at Whimple. As this would necessitate expensive construction of turn-round facilities at Axminster, we requested that Network Rail explore a potential extension to Chard on the basis that it may be more cost effective to re-instate a platform at Chard Junction rather than new infrastructure at Axminster with added benefits for communities in South Somerset.

West Somerset Railway: The Council is supportive of community proposals to introduce non-heritage rail services running between Taunton and Bishops Lydeard; and potentially to Minehead. Whilst main-line services have run on the line from time-to-time, it is not clear whether a regular service is feasible, viable or sustainable given the engineering constraints and uncertainty over commercial demand.

The service would need to run without negatively affecting the operations of the West Somerset Railway and the Council would also wish to ensure that any services were not detrimental to plans for improving journey times on the main line. In addition, any service would need to be commercially viable.

Detailed studies are needed to explore these issues and develop firm proposals.

The Council's recent response to the Great Western Franchise consultation (February 2018) requested that the new franchise explore opportunities to introduce regular mainline services utilising the West Somerset Railway between Taunton, Bishops Lydeard and Minehead.

Shepton Mallet Parkway: Mendip District Council is in the early stages of exploring the feasibility and long-term potential of utilising existing freight lines re-connecting Shepton Mallet in the heart of the district to Frome, London, the South Coast, Bristol and beyond, bringing the opportunity for residents in a significant part of the District to access the rail network via a parkway station.

6.2.6 Community Rail Partnerships

Community rail lines are local railways supported by a local partnership organisation who work with and engage local people, public authorities, volunteers and the rail industry in the development and promotion of rail services and stations.

The Government is currently reviewing the role of community rail partnerships and launched a consultation in 2017 to inform updated policy in this area, further details of which are expected later in 2018.

There are currently two community rail partnerships in Somerset covering the Severnside and Heart of Wessex lines. Currently only the Heart of Wessex line is formally designated by the Department for Transport as a community rail line. Other opportunities may also emerge, especially in the east of the County which is currently poorly served by rail transport.

The Council will maintain existing financial contributions to support the work of these partnerships.

Severnside Community Rail Partnership: This is a community interest group that works with local communities to encourage the use of local trains, ensure easy access to local stations and where possible enhance them. Somerset County Council is a principle partner and funder along with North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council, South Gloucestershire Council, Great Western Railway and Cross Country Trains.

Heart of Wessex Community Rail Partnership: This partnership operates under a memorandum of understanding (from 2010) between Bath & North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, Dorset County Council, Somerset County Council, South Somerset District Council, West Dorset District Council, Wiltshire Council and Great Western Railways. The partnership aims to build the case for additional services on the line, promote use of the service, improve facilities, act as a community forum and involve communities in the provision and maintenance of facilities. This line is one of the 41 formally designated 'community railways' in the UK.

7. Monitoring the outcomes of the strategy

In order to monitor the outcomes of this strategy and ensure the aims and objectives are achieved, it is important to establish a means of measuring progress therefore:

- We will monitor the number of people using the passenger network through the collection of patronage data from the bus and rail companies, where available.
- We will monitor user satisfaction of services through the National Highways Transport satisfaction survey (NHT).
- We will monitor bus punctuality using figures collected by the Council.

- We will monitor the effectiveness of partnership working through the number and type of new community based transport operations and increased use of existing services.
- We will work with the Peninsula Rail Task Force to develop a set of metrics to monitor successful delivery of the PRTF 20-year strategy by DfT and the rail industry.

8. Conclusion

This document sets out the Council's overall passenger transport strategy including our strategic approach to working with transport operators, communities and other stakeholders to maintain and where possible improve access to basic services such as education, employment, healthcare and food shopping; and our strategic requirements and ambitions for improved rail connectivity, journey times, capacity and comfort.

The strategy reflects and responds to the challenges faced by a large rural area with dispersed communities, increasing demographic pressures and reducing financial provision from central government.

Accessibility in Somerset is constrained by limited public transport services as is the case in many rural areas, and a lack of comprehensive information about transport options. Better integration of services, whether between different modes or between towns and villages, has also been highlighted and is an area that this strategy needs to address to tackle rural exclusion.

The document sets out our current wide-ranging approach to operating, managing and co-ordinating a range of bus, taxi, and community-based accessible transport; and our approach to maximising investment in our bus and rail networks through engagement with new development proposals and working with partners to press for investment in key infrastructure projects.

Our aim is to maximise commercial provision, ensuring public bus subsidy is used where it is most needed. Our Network strategy is to further develop a hierarchy of solutions based on core commercial routes and feeder services, strengthening the coherence, coordination and interchange between the routes and building more community based solutions.

The strategy sets out how we will pursue funding opportunities, improve information and technology and look for new and innovative ways to support transport access in the future. We will do this in partnership with operators, community groups, businesses and Somerset residents.

Key initiatives are to explore how we can reduce peak demand and make better use of available vehicles, for instance by staggering start times for key services such as health and education, and through further integration between client groups.

Improving access to all transport options is an important strand within the strategy with a particular focus on our new 'Total Transport' one-stop-shop web portal which will enable people to view and book transport for a wide variety of purposes and also enable communities to organise their own transport solutions. Improving information about available services including real time information; and developing ticketing solutions such as interoperable tickets are other important initiatives.

The Strategy will ensure that we have an up to date view on the social need for transport to inform decisions about use of our financial resources on an ongoing basis so that we can respond effectively to changes in commercial provision and utilise our resources where they are most needed.

We will also work closely with planning authorities and developers to ensure that new development is suitably accessible by public transport, and critical bus infrastructure schemes are progressed.

Our strategy is to work in partnership with bus operators to ensure there is a stable commercial network and a joined-up approach to Government to make a case for innovation and flexibility in how bus services are delivered in a rural area for the benefit of our communities.

The strategy also discusses our four mainline rail connections and sets out our future rail investment needs to improve resilience, improve journey times and increase capacity and comfort in support of economic growth and increased productivity.

The strategy discusses our current rail station improvement projects, aspirations for further rail station investment and new rail projects being promoted by our communities.

We welcome comments on this consultation draft of the strategy prior to finalising the document later in the year.