

Public Transport Task and Finish Group – Final Report

15th February 2023 – Executive

Chair – Cllr Loretta Whetlor
Scrutiny Officer Support – M Prouse

Thank you

A big thank you to all officers and representatives who engaged with the work of the review.

- *SCC/SWT Officers*
- *Buses of Somerset/First Bus SW*
- *Richard Huish College/ Bridgwater and Taunton College*
- *Travel Watch SouthWest*

Membership

Councillors John Hassall, David Mansell, Anthony Trollope-Bellew, Derek Perry, Brenda Weston, Keith Wheatley and Loretta Whetlor - **Members of the Review into Public Transport Task and Finish Group**

Dates of meetings (Notes of all attached to the Agenda):

- **1st Meeting – 19th August 2020**
- **2nd Meeting – 1st October 2020**
- **3rd Meeting – 5th January 2021**
- **4th Meeting – 8th February 2021**
- **5th Meeting - 26th April 2021**
- **6th Meeting – 11th August 2021**
- There were also sub-group meetings with College reps in February and March 2021.

Background

- In the summer of 2020 the then Managing Director of First Bus South West was invited to appear before the Scrutiny Committee to discuss Bus Provision in the light of the recent closure of Taunton Bus Station.
- In a follow up meeting, both Cllrs Kravis and Rigby as the relevant Portfolio Holder's were invited. A detailed discussion took place which covered both a temporary opening of the recently closed bus station in light of the Covid-19 pandemic to enable greater social distancing when using public transport; in addition to the long term solution of a bus station.
- At the conclusion of the item the Scrutiny Committee resolved **to examine the current provision in relation to public transport in the district and what is required to increase provision and improved modal links including consideration of carbon neutrality.**

Purpose

‘examine the current provision in relation to public transport in the district and what is required to increase provision and improved modal links including consideration of carbon neutrality.’

What we did

The group has considered what action is within SWT's powers to address the reasons for the under-use, and dissatisfaction of bus users with the current service and associated facilities in order to increase public transport use.

This Task and Finish Group undertook the following;

- Reviewed the changes that have occurred and continue to evolve in this area.
- Examined the evidence presented by invited guests (SWT Officers, SCC Officers, academics and external consultants), including the current provision of bus transport.
- Been a critical friend.
- Reviewed SWT policies and practices.
- Developed a Survey (did not use due to SCC request not to clash with existing)

Implications

Links to Corporate Aims / Priorities

This is in line with the Corporate Strategy of the Council and the Climate Emergency Declaration of the Council.

Finance / Resource Implications

Funding requirements from this Council to ensure the delivery of recommendations requires confirmation.

Climate and Sustainability Implications (if any)

The recommendations contained within this report would benefit the District's aims and aspirations in relation to Climate and Sustainability.

As it states in the SWT Carbon Neutrality and Climate Resilience Plan “As the authority responsible for highways and transport, this Council must rely on Somerset County Council (SCC), to deliver on many of the actions and aspirations relating to transport. This Action Plan has been developed alongside the Somerset Climate Emergency Strategy so that it is informed by its emerging strategic direction and actions. SCC have been kept abreast of this Action Plan and its contents, but have not been involved in its detailed development and have not adopted it as their own policy. The Council will work closely with SCC to ensure the transport elements of this Action Plan are delivered”.

Process

Process

The task and finish group has produced this report to the Scrutiny Committee to outline details of the review process undertaken, the evidence gathered, conclusions and subsequent recommendations for action. The Scrutiny Committee can if so wished refer this report to the Council or Executive and/or the appropriate partner organisation, and ask them to consider the recommendations arising from the review.

The Task and Finish Group has gathered evidence through a variety of ways and referred to the following background documents. The Group held five meetings. Background documents are annexed to this report.

College Transport Case Study

- Led on by Cllrs Wheatley and Perry - Case Study Proposal
- **Who would we speak to?**
- Staff at RHC who deal with transport, plus principal on macro issues
- Transport Commissioner at SCC
- Education officers at SCC (if student transport is part of their remit)
- Bus operators regarding routing matters

Desired outcomes?

- Identify various problems at RHC and vicinity caused or exacerbated by the current model of student transport
- Identify possible solutions and improvements to these problems, especially where SWT could help.
- Extract any wider lessons from the case study relevant to urban/rural public transport in the district

Examining Provision – info provided by SCC

- There were at the time of the Group meeting 17 fully or partially subsidised bus routes operating in or through the SWT area and 2 Slinky services operating in the area.
- Patronage figures on the Park and Ride service were provided.
- Rural Mobility Fund
- Community Transport

Picture since meetings

Due to officer capacity and changes in the Governance Team a final report as is customary was not able to be prepared at the conclusion of the Group's Work.

There have been a number of events that have taken place since the Group last met in August 2021 which have superseded events, e.g. BSIP funding J25 Pedestrian/cycle improvements.

Conclusions have been identified which would need to be investigated further by the appropriate Council teams/PFH/ Place Scrutiny of the new Somerset Council

Picture since meetings

BSIP funding has also been allocated to deliver:

- Bus priority measures (bus lanes and bus priority signals at junctions) in Taunton and Bridgwater
- The £1 single fare within the Taunton Town Zone (commenced 5th December 2022)
- The trial of evening services into Taunton with last buses being between 10 and 11pm – these are due to commence 30th January 2023 and include:
 - Service 28 – Minehead to Taunton
 - Service 21 – Bridgwater to Taunton
 - Service 22 - Wellington to Taunton
 - Service 30 – Chard/Ilminster to Taunton serving Gateway P&R site
 - Service 1 – Priorswood town service serving Silk Mills P&R site
- A mobility hub in Somerton – acting as a rural test bed and providing a bus interchange facility for services from Somerton/Yeovil to Taunton
- Development of the Think Travel journey planning site to incorporate ticketing options
- Marketing of the BSIP specific schemes

Bus Service Improvement Plan Picture

To confirm the BSIP related activity:

- SCC in consultation with key stakeholders developed the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)
- SCC established a Bus Advisory Board
- SCC has entered into an Enhanced Partnership with all local bus operators in Somerset
- The DfT awarded BSIP funding to Somerset for various schemes

Conclusions

Conclusion 1

- SWT Council to write a letter to Government and specifically the Department of Transport asking them to trial future transport/bus schemes in Somerset.
- That the Council seeks endorsement from the County Council and the Districts and MP's for the letter's contents.

Conclusion 1 – further comments

BSIP funding has been awarded to Somerset to trial a number of schemes. The funded schemes have been selected to demonstrate how effectively the funding can be used to deliver the results the DfT are wishing to see and hopefully prove the case for more funding to deliver similar schemes in other areas of the County.

Conclusion 1 – further comments

- The letter needs to include references to;
- LTA resource
- Refer to Enhanced Partnerships and opportunities these create (SCC has entered into an Enhanced Partnership with all local bus operators in Somerset)
- Specifically mention unique rurality of Somerset and DRT as a solution supported
- Build on Community Transport e.g. Watchet and Wivey Link

Conclusion 2

- We heard from Officers at South Somerset District who were exploring the potential to trial a Digital Demand Responsive Transport scheme working with SCC.
- The Group encouraged officers at SWT to investigate/opt-in to this scheme and it was pleasing to see in the Somerset Recovery and Growth Plan include a pledge to deliver a digital Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) solution for the residents of Somerset.

Conclusion 2 – further comments

Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and Govt funding will be used to trial a Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) service in the Somerton area, feeding into the proposed rural mobility hub, also funded by BSIP. This will help to facilitate access to and onward travel via the public bus network and help to increase patronage to support the public bus services. This initiative is already in the pipeline.

Conclusion 2 – further comments

- Direct Response Travel (DRT) is a practice carried out by at least three local authorities Milton Keynes, West Midlands and N.E Lincolnshire. The first two are mostly conurbations and the third being largely rural. Ours is a mixture of urban and rural and the rural areas suffer most from a lack of bus services. DRT involves bus and coach companies working together to provide a service on demand.
- It was understood that Somerset has the 4th lowest area of the UK with each resident using the bus 10 times each year on average.

Conclusion 3

- The Group considered that the closure of the Bus Station in Taunton had created an issue and the lack of a proper bus interchange needed to be addressed.
- The Group looked to Gloucester and Swindon as an example of recent exemplar developments in this regard and hoped that this could be looked at as a priority project for any successor Council.

Conclusion 3 - comments

BSIP funding has been awarded to develop a mobility hub in Taunton, on the former bus station site. This will provide an interchange facility, not just for buses for other modes of travel as well. Stage 1 of the feasibility study is complete and this will shortly move to stage 2 which involved more detailed design and shortlisting the components to be delivered through the hub.

Conclusion 4

- The Group discussed SWT facilitating and potentially trialling electric community car club schemes. The Group was aware there are examples of this in Watchet and elsewhere.
- The Group hoped the Council could promote ride sharing wherever possible, especially perhaps benefitting Students driving in from neighbouring authorities such as North Devon to get to College.
- The Group discussed ensuring existing schemes were expanded to try and get a complete coverage.
- The Group was pleased to hear that SWT is in the process of developing a Car Club pilot which aims to deliver eco-friendly shared transport in the heart of Taunton. Its project partner, Co Cars, was at the Coal Orchard event to showcase the electric cars that will be available to hire via the scheme which is expected to go live by the end of 2022.

Conclusion 5

- The Group investigated a Workplace Parking Levy, which is in place in Nottingham and being considered in other areas. The levy on employers gives an incentive to walk, cycle and use public transport instead of cars for commuting to work. It also raises funds to improve these alternatives.
- The new Council should set up a feasibility study into it's practical application across the area and its effect on businesses.

Conclusion 6

- SWT Council to write to Butlins and First Group to request extra 28 services to alleviate pressure on the single bus due to the normal 28 bus being overfull, if able to do so without subsidy.
- Request the relevant PFH to meet with them to discuss feasibility.

Conclusion 7

- It was discussed that the Council needed to take an active communications role alongside SCC in promoting the use of public transport as a safe option in the re-opening from Covid-19 via its Communications team to ensure that Public Transport use is encouraged.

Conclusion 7 -comments

- SCC in conjunction with the Somerset Bus Partnership launched the 'Bus It' campaign in August 2022, to encourage travel by public bus. This focussed on the potential cost savings when looking at the cost of fuel and running costs of a car. The campaign also focussed on bus pass holders to encourage this cohort to use their bus passes and travel more.
- We are happy to receive suggestions and work with colleagues to understand any other promotional activities/communication streams that would be beneficial.

Conclusion 8

- The Group investigated the history of the Student Bus Ticketing Scheme - 'County Ticket' and believed there needed to be a greater flexibility in the ticket prices to ensure it is well used in future, if ever brought back into use following its suspension.
- The Group hoped there could be some form of subsidy to the Student County Ticket for one year as a trial to get the county ticket down to sub £500 (It was over £800) and see if this increases usage.

Conclusion 8 - comments

- Development of a young persons ticket was submitted as part of the initial BSIP funding bid but money was not allocated for this scheme. This remains an initiative we will continue to review and re-visit in the future should funding opportunities arise.
- The County Ticket has not been re-introduced, with the various ticket types available direct from operators, it is more cost effective for students to purchase tickets that are suited to their travel requirements, direct from the operator.
- College transport included as part of Bus It £2 Somerset County Wide scheme.

Conclusion 9

The Group would encourage regular working together with the Council and Local Colleges to encourage their students to opt for public transport following successful meetings with all parties to understand each others issues/priorities.

Conclusion 9 - comments

The operational team meets with the FE Support Group throughout the year – which includes representatives from the main FE Colleges in Somerset and transport features on the agenda. We are happy to discuss particular issues/opportunities with individual Colleges

Conclusion 10

The Group expressed a wish that the Planning department looked at strengthening enforcement of its travel plan enforcement in future.

Conclusion 10 - comments

- The Local Transport Authority should monitor and improve the outcomes of Travel Plans for new housing developments. Consideration should be given to replacing 'Travel Vouchers' with significant funding for additional bus services or for Park and Ride improvements serving the new housing from their first occupation.
- The Local Transport Authority needs to monitor the implementation of Travel Plans and publish any evidence on the benefits achieved. The task and finish group expects any benefits are currently small and may have arisen without the Travel Plan.

Conclusion 10 - comments

- Provision of information on active travel and public transport to new occupiers is low cost and should be worth continuing. The benefits of green vouchers seem more doubtful.
- It could be better to instead invest directly in additional bus service provision for new housing developments, which is available once more than a quarter of the new dwellings are occupied. Where this is impractical, equivalent funding should be provided instead to improve Park and Ride services that could be used by new occupiers. It is important planning policies require new housing to be located where active travel options and public transport can be available to residents.

Conclusion 11

- The Group discussed the under-utilisation of the Park and Rides in Taunton.
- The Group believed they could be better marketed as destinations and the Council look to implement amenities on their site.

Conclusion 11 - comments

- SCC decided in August 2021 to make the Park and Ride free during the construction of road improvements associated with Creech Castle Junction/A358/Toneway. > Patronage rose significantly
- On completion of the works, the free fares came to an end but through BSIP funding SCC have managed to reinstate fares at a lower rate (£1 single, £2 return) and free for bus pass holders after 9.30 am. Patronage numbers have been retained at a good rate and are still much higher than before the free fares were introduced.
- This coincided with the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic and the temporary pedestrianisations of Town Centre.
- Use of enhanced real time Car Parking Information Signs
- Late Night Service introduction on 30/01/2023
- Bus it Campaign - £1 fares in Taunton

Conclusion 12

- The Group identified that the Somerset Climate Strategy says that the Council would work with operators to improve provision.
- The Group supported this ambition.

Any questions?

Somerset West
and Taunton