

Public Transport in SWT Task and Finish Group

01.10.20

Attendees: Cllr L Whetlor (Chair), Cllr J Hassall, Cllr D Mansell, Cllr A Trollope-Bellew, Cllr B Weston, Cllr K Wheatley

1. Apologies and Declarations of Interest

No Apologies were received.

No Declarations of Interest were made in relation to any item on the Agenda.

2. Notes of previous Task and Finish Group – 19/08/2020

These were noted. It was commented that the link of Park and Rides with the Bus and Train network was mentioned and should be added.

3. Round table discussion with Paul Browning (Somerset West and Taunton Strategy Specialist), Mike O'Dowd-Jones (Strategic Commissioning Manager – Highways and Transport – Somerset County Council) and Natasha Bates (Passenger Transport Commissioner, Somerset County Council.)

- The Chair welcomed the officers and thanked them for attending.
- It was queried as to how many bus routes in SWT and those that passed through ran without subsidy?
- It was confirmed that 60% of 103 routes in Somerset were fully or partially subsidised. The statistics for SWT could be provided.
- A map of coverage across Somerset of the Community Transport Groups in operation would be interesting to view if that could be provided.
- The County Council saw those groups as part of the network and worked closely with providers.
- The County Council also provided advice and guidance to the 32 community car schemes across the District.
- They also delivered the demand responsive service and worked to avoid conflict.
- It was confirmed that when a route was changed the operator had to notify residents but not consult.
- It was confirmed that the County Council spent in the 2019/20 budget £3.2m on bus subsidies.
- Councillors noted that in Devon they spent 80% more - £5.3m.
- Passenger Transport was a high priority for the County Council, however the balancing act between Highways maintenance and that was difficult. In contrast the County Council received 25-30 million pounds a year from central government to maintain 7000km of the network.
- In the last couple of years the Bus budget had been specifically protected, with additional money spent on demand responsive and college routes.
- A clear issue was the lack of Government funding for revenue projects to run services.

- Councillors sought clarity from SCC officers on the funding provided from central government for the Better Deal for Bus Users.
- This pot of £445,000 had not yet been spent due to Covid but was looking to be prioritised on bolstering services and potentially adding additional evening services to support the flexible working lives of people during the pandemic and night time economies. The County Council had also been given extra funding to support Schools and College routes.
- Officer O'Dowd-Jones led on bidding for funding for schemes.
- The operational service was managed by Bus Operations Manager John Perrott.
- Councillors raised queries about the County Council benefitting from the Bus Services Act and how other Local Authorities had ran a more strategic service, however there were legal differences.
- It was confirmed that any company could register to run a commercial route.
- Where the County Council wished to run a service it would go through procurement. The Council would encourage other operators to come in however there was a limited market.
- Clarity was sought over a comment made at Scrutiny about FirstGroup sending their old stock to Somerset?
- The County Council could specify stock on a tendered route but not on a Commercial route, however the balance needed to be struck between provisions.
- A recent bid had gone to Government on Rural funding mobility which would hope to trial a different market to the buses and this could be shared for Councillors information only afterward.
- A lot of customers are concessionary and there was a need to see more working age people use the buses.
- The County Council assured Councillors that they followed up every grant funding opportunity.
- Recent grants e.g. £56 million for Portsmouth were specifically limited to cities to bid for, which Government funds tended to focus on with sustainable travel.
- It was commented that rural transport was often overlooked and underfunded.
- Councillor Hassall suggested that the Task and Finish Group recommend that a letter was written to the Department of Transport/responsible Government minister drawing their attention to this issue.
- Officers supported the idea of a letter and suggested that it be shared with them and could offer the opportunity for this area to trial schemes and for the relevant key people to come and visit the area.
- It was queried as to how the move to Electric buses could be undertaken.
- The County Council officers confirmed that fleet electrification was being explored and a Strategy was coming forward on this but a pilot project would be needed. Hydrogen buses were also an opportunity.
- A Transport Strategy at SWT would need to address the current convenience of getting into the centre of Taunton.
- A Car Parking Strategy for Taunton would also be required to understand cross-town movements.
- Draft work had been undertaken on introducing a car parking levy at Deane House before the Covid issue.

- The County Council had introduced bus priority and bus gates and would do so in new areas such as Monkton Heathfield where it made sense.
- Decarbonising car travel and pay per use parking were also discussed.
- The scattered scarce population of Somerset made public transport planning difficult and expensive.
- The need to protect retail in Taunton Town Centre was recognised.
- It was stated that a holistic case needed to be made for a bus service that was attractive and climate friendly.
- It was recognised that the current financial funding model needed reviewing and was not fit for the future
- A briefing note on the Total Transport Portal could be shared with Councillors.
- An example was given of wage earners travelling into and outside of Williton, which showed that it was not as simple as rural travelling into urban for work.
- Ideas were shared of using CIL monies to finance a bus, offer new homeowners a free bus pass for one year only.
- The low social mobility contribution of poor transport were stated.

4. Next Steps/Work Plan

- Councillor Mansell emphasised the focus should be on public transport and mentioned college transport and community transport as areas of interest.
- The provision of cycling and whether to include in this review was discussed.
- It was suggested to pull in evidence from Cornwall and Devon and invite officers from those Councillors to attend if needed.
- Councillor Weston suggested that the Group should consult with the bus users and consider our powers as a Council to address under-use and dissatisfaction.

5. Date of Next Meeting

The meeting closed at 7pm.