

## **Somerset County Council's Proposed Reductions in Public Transport Subsidy**

Somerset County Council needs to reduce the amount of money spent on supporting bus services in Somerset due to the reduction in the amount of funding the Government provides the Council to run local services.

### **What transport services does the Council currently provide?**

The County Council currently provides subsidised public transport on 108 routes across the County which are not fully commercially viable, to ensure there is an alternative to the use of private cars, and to ensure isolated communities have access to jobs and services. Many of the bus routes have a mixture of commercial and subsidised sections. The subsidies are provided where the Council is required to ensure a statutory need is met, or where on a discretionary basis we feel it is appropriate to ensure a service is provided.

The Council provides transport in a number of forms; from bus services to volunteer drivers; enabling children and adults to access services including school, health appointments and day care provision. We also work closely with Community Transport providers. In addition to this Somerset currently has a very high coverage of 'demand responsive' services such as the Slinky Bus which do not operate on fixed routes due to the rural nature of the County.

The Council provides transport for around 2,800 further education students attending educational establishments in Somerset. This is provided to meet government standards regarding equal opportunity and access to education and training.

### **What transport services are the Council legally obliged to provide?**

The Council is not legally obliged to provide any public or community transport services, but does have a duty to secure public transport services which would not otherwise be provided, where we feel this is appropriate. The Council must also have regard to the transport needs of members of the public who are elderly or disabled.

We are obliged to provide school transport to eligible pupils. The provision of transport to adult social care is discretionary, but if the service user is unable to make their way to the care provision, transport is provided to ensure statutory care provision is met.

Further education transport is statutory for disabled students who are over 16, and the remainder of our further education transport is currently provided to meet emerging government standards regarding equal opportunity and access to education and training.

### **What are the options for changes to the supported bus network?**

Due to the current economic situation we must reduce the discretionary or supported services that we provide. The Council has agreed to reduce bus subsidies by approximately £1.5m as part of our financial planning process to ensure we stay within our spending limits. This means that difficult choices will need to be made about where we provide support in the future, but does still leave the Council with approximately £1.6m to provide subsidised public transport services where there would otherwise be no provision.

We have considered a number of options in making these savings:

**Option 1.** Reducing the supported rural bus network and focusing the Council's available funding on ensuring the services within and between the larger towns, which carry the greatest number of passengers, are maintained. This would mean that every pound spent by the Council would benefit a larger number of people, however many people in our rural communities who do not have access to a car would find it increasingly difficult to access services.

**Option 2.** Using the Council's available funding to ensure rural communities continue to have a supported bus network and reducing support for the services operating within and between the larger towns. As these 'inter-urban' services carry more passengers they stand a greater chance of operating commercially without subsidy from the Council, however there is no guarantee that commercial operators will be able to keep these services running.

**Option 3.** Reviewing all services which are supported by the Council and considering the value of each route on a case by case basis. This includes considering:

- the value of each route to the community as a socially necessary service;
- how much each route is used;
- how much it costs to support;
- how close to commercial operation it is;
- Whether any adjustments can be made to the route or contractual arrangements with operators to reduce costs.

Under all options we propose to retain the following vital services:

- School transport network to meet our statutory duty to provide transport for eligible children.
- Further education transport network which ensures young people have access to College courses.
- Park and Ride services which minimise the growth of traffic congestion in Taunton and enables the economic regeneration of the Town Centre.

In addition:

- Social care and non-emergency health transport will continue to be provided by the Council;
- We will continue to work with community and voluntary transport providers to expand the availability of their services;
- We will work with representatives of local communities such as Parish Councils as well as the business community to identify opportunities for additional investment in bus services;
- We will seek contributions towards bus services from new housing and commercial developments;
- We will continue to achieve financial savings through increasing the efficiency of our operations; and
- Many bus services will continue to be provided by commercial operators.

### **What is the Council's preferred option?**

Having considered the available options the Council's preferred option is Option 3 and as part of the earlier stages of our consultation process we have carried out a review of supported services in discussion with the bus operators and public transport interest groups.

Proposals for service reductions have been developed using the following approach:

- Demand responsive services are retained to provide access for rural communities with particular regard to the needs of our elderly population and people with disabilities who may not have access to a car;
- Investment in many jointly funded cross-boundary services is retained as these are very good value for money;
- Frequency of service is reduced in many cases in order to retain some level of access to services for our communities rather than cutting services altogether where possible;
- Services that appear close to commercial operation will no longer be supported;
- Support is being reduced where discussions with operators indicate that they feel there may be opportunities for commercial services to be created.

### **What are your views on these proposals?**

We would be grateful for your views on these proposed changes before a decision is taken by the Council in February 2012. If you would like to complete our on-line survey please go to the following website for full details.

[www.somerset.gov.uk/bussurvey](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/bussurvey)

Alternatively please contact Transporting Somerset on 0845 345 9155 for a paper copy of the survey.