

Response to Somerset County Council's consultation on the proposed removal of subsidy and discretionary funding for buses.

Summary of main points of the response:

- Bus travel accounts for nearly two thirds of public transport journeys but does not receive a proportionate public sector investment¹
- Bus Services are essential to enable people to access education, employment and vital services
- Home to school transport costs could be cut by the provision of appropriate bus services
- Avoidance of social exclusion reduces the burden on local health and social services and buses are key to this
- Disabled people will be particularly badly affected by the proposals, even more than other vulnerable groups in the county
- Removal of the discretionary element of the Concessionary Bus Pass would have severe unintended consequences
- Removal of Saturday services will exacerbate the isolation in areas where Sunday services have already been stopped in previous rounds of cuts.
- Community Transport and the Slinky Bus will not be able to bridge the gaps which would be caused
- The effect on the local economy, congestion and integrated transport options should not be underestimated

Bus Users has carried out a series of public consultation events across Somerset in recent months and would be happy to share this research with SCC officers and offer some advice on how best to mitigate the effects of any cuts that do go ahead.

Who we are

Bus Users UK champions the interests of bus and coach passengers throughout Britain and is the official body to oversee bus users' complaints in England (outside London) Wales and Scotland under the EU Passenger Rights Regulations.

Passengers understand that Somerset County Council, like every local authority, is required to make substantial savings in the current climate. However, it should be noted that bus travel accounts for nearly two thirds of public transport journeys but does not receive a proportionate public sector investment².

Prioritising savings is always going to be a difficult job. But when deciding those priorities it needs to be considered that bus services are not simply a dispensable luxury. Bus services are essential to enable people, including those on low incomes and with disabilities, to:

- Access employment
- Access education
- Access health services

¹ Transport Statistics Great Britain

² Transport Statistics Great Britain

- Get to shops
- Avoid isolation and social exclusion
- Enjoy a greater degree of well-being

The first three of those requirements are always at the top of local authority spending priorities, and removing bus services risks people losing access to those essential services.

Bus services can access shopping centres in an environmentally-friendly and more effective way than the private car, and bus users contribute to the high street economy in a way which is often underestimated. Removing access to bus services and thereby denying access to local retail centres to people without private transport is likely to stifle economic growth.

Avoidance of social exclusion and encouragement of well-being can often reduce the burden on local health and social services and enable more active citizenship.

Even for those able to afford to run a car, bus services can provide an alternative which is sustainable and can provide better access to town centres, alleviating congestion at peak times.

Impact of proposals on access to Education & Employment

Feedback from our events shows a large reliance on taxis for home to school transport in communities which could benefit from a bus service. Home to school transport is one of the biggest parts of a local authority's transport budget and many of these costs could be avoided by providing an adequate bus service. Getting children and young people onto a local bus service increases their self-reliance and independence, gets them used to travelling by bus, increases activity levels (which decreases childhood obesity), reduces congestion and encourages young people to think about the bus as a sustainable future source of transport. Bus Users UK would urge the council to consider the requirements of Section 63 of the 1985 Transport Act to provide 'socially necessary' buses and reallocate the majority of this budget to subsidising bus services to meet this need.

In 2014, research showed that the average education cost per pupil in the UK was £807. This does not include children with Special Educational Needs for whom the cost was £4366 per pupil.³

As many schools and colleges become specialised academies, students need to be able to travel to different sites in order to study their field of interest. By removing bus services, this forces students to accept whatever course is available at their local educational establishment rather than allowing them to develop their specific interests and skills into possible career paths.

Access to opportunities for work experience also decreases and puts young people based in suburban and rural areas at a distinct disadvantage to their peers living in urban areas.

Likewise, entry level jobs tend to require unsocial hours working and certainly weekend travel so anything which would impact on people's ability to access employment needs careful consideration if it not to have a deleterious impact on the ability of employers to find and retain local staff.

Impact of proposals on access to Health and Social Care services

Decreasing access to buses will increase the burden on other parts of the council's budgets such as social services who will have to deal with more cases of depression and anxiety, adding to the workload of the NHS. Access to community groups provides help and support upon which the NHS and social services

³ 2014 ATCO Benchmarking Survey

currently rely and the removal of that access would cause additional burdens on child and adult social care budgets.

Patients are currently waiting for three months to get appointments at Musgrove. Many patients will not be able to attend morning or late afternoon appointments due to restrictive bus services. This will impact on consultants' appointments potentially affecting surgery and theatre availability and putting more stress on the doctors' and ancillary staff's shift patterns.

The additional erosion of rural communities if public transport is decreased should also be noted in the wake of closures of libraries, post offices, GP surgeries and in some cases, local schools as a result of centralisation. If transport links are cut, there will be an inevitable movement of people towards urban centres. Given the lack of social housing in urban environments in the county, this shift will add to the workload of the housing departments in local authorities and increase the burden on housing associations.

Impact of proposals on disabled residents

As of January 1st 2016, all single decker buses must be DDA compliant, and this means that passengers with a disability can have confidence that, for the most part, their end-to-end journey will be accessible. This should mean that their opportunities have significantly increased, but if there is no bus service where they live, the accessibility changes are meaningless.

The DWP has set up centres around the county which specialise in disability work exemption assessments. Many of these centres rely on their clients being able to access their services by public transport as many of these people, by nature of their disability, will not be able to drive

The proposed removal of the Companion passes would save very little money but will, in nearly every case, severely compromise the independence of the disabled person involved. This would have a great impact on the requirement for adult social care to be increased if the disabled person was not able to get about by public transport.

If, in addition, the proposal to reduce by half the discount on Community Transport options, disabled people in Somerset will bear a disproportionate percentage of the impact of these cuts, as we assume the disability impact assessment which the council is required to carry out in such case will undoubtedly show.

In addition, Bus Users UK would urge the local authorities to require DDA compliant vehicles in any tender documents, rather than allowing operators to use minibuses or coaches which mean that many elderly or disabled passengers are not easily able to use those services, thereby increasing the burden on demand-responsive transport

It may also be worth noting that independent research by Scope suggests that 2 out of 3 wheelchair users have been overcharged by taxis because of having a wheelchair.

Impact of the removal of Concessionary pass discretionary enhancement

One of the proposals in this consultation is that the 09:00 – 09:30 concessionary pass enhancement be removed. The alleviation of social isolation was the rationale underpinning the introduction of the concessionary fare scheme. There are a number of situations in which the removal of this enhancement may have unintended consequences and cause significant difficulties

For example, service 25 leaves Dulverton at 09:20am and the next service is not until 11:20am. There are a number of similar service gaps and this means that residents cannot easily access medical appointments, day centres, social clubs and leisure facilities as waiting for the following service will mean that many passengers miss the morning community groups.

Likewise, if concessionary passholders wish to make a train connection, there are areas where this is going to be made much more difficult by the removal, of the 9.00-9.30am discretionary bus travel element. For example, the first train from Yeovil to London which can be used with a senior railcard leaves at 09:29 but necessitates an earlier than 09:30 bus to reach the train station in time. If this discretionary funding is to be withdrawn, a detailed programme of exemptions will need to be put in place .

Removal of Saturday services will mean that some villages will have no access to a bus for two days and, in the cases of Bank Holiday weekends, those who live there will be isolated for even longer. This means they would be dependent on taxis, favours from neighbours or the availability of friends and family members with cars. This is a cause for concern for many older people, especially those who live alone and currently manage to lead an active and independent life.

Impact of proposals on local economy

In many parts of the county, market days are only on a Saturday. To reduce the number of customers available to these market traders will have a far-reaching effect on the economies of those communities but also the livelihood of the traders. Removing Saturday services will also prevent people from attending cultural social events which are usually staged at weekends to increase patronage as people work in the week. The impact on theatres and cinemas in smaller communities will be far reaching.

Many of the smaller villages and communities have attractions such as pubs and associated walks which rely on their rural nature. Many of these smaller businesses will suffer adversely should patronage be reduced.

High street shops already struggle to compete and removing the shopping option from a significant proportion of the county's residents will inevitably have a damaging effect on the local economy.

Reliance on Community Transport

Solutions involving community transport, or using taxis, demand-responsive transport and so on to reduce the cost of individual journeys to more remote locations, can be non-inclusive. Many of the community transport schemes already in use across the country operate under Section 19 permits which limits their use just to members of the scheme. Use of Section 22 permits enables community transport to benefit the whole community and to enable people to make journeys spontaneously. This may well reduce the cost savings somewhat but will give greater benefit. Greater value could also be attached to bus services in some parts of the county by effective marketing; many of the routes affected are scenic and could be attractive for leisure travel if properly marketed.

However, **the proposal to cut the discount on the community transport options** will have the effect of pushing away those who could most benefit from their use.

Reliance on Slinky Bus

Our research suggests that more people would like to see more money provided to local bus routes rather than encouraging reliance on the Slinky Bus service which is perceived as far less convenient and does not go where people necessarily want to be. The Slinky Bus service removes the 'impulse purchase' element of bus service and implies that everyone is able to plan their lives 24 hours ahead. This particularly impacts on those living with or caring for someone with progressive illnesses or mental health issues whose ability to go out cannot be taken for granted from one day to the next. There are concerns that, should more bus services be removed, the Slinky Bus service would not be able to deal with the demands. The Slinky Bus' own website states: "Customers will be asked to be flexible as we may not always be able to provide the journey you require." Not everywhere in Somerset has access to the service and we do not believe that a clear link has been made between the proposed cuts and the availability of other options.

Impact of proposals on integrated travel

The consequences of the proposed cessation of the subsidised section of service 29 and the withdrawal of services 667 and 669 are severe. These actions represent a very real loss of public transport availability and connectivity. In particular, the loss of service 667 (Street to Wincanton) on Saturdays means that rail connections at Castle Cary would be lost. A clear alternative would be that the 667 could be re-scheduled to integrate with the trains and marketed in conjunction with the train operators to offer days out on Saturdays.

Impact of proposals on the future sustainable growth of public transport

Bus use is highest amongst those aged 17-20 and 60+ and bus use in the South West has actually increased.⁴

Bus Users UK would like to see young people wanting to continue to use the bus longer term rather than automatically considering a driving licence as soon as they can. Furthermore, Bus Users UK would like to encourage local authorities to implement schemes to encourage young people to use the bus, such as the Welsh Government's young person's discount and discounts for those in full time education.

Comments from the Your Bus Matters events

(held across Somerset December 2015 and January 2016)

- I use the bus regularly to get to college. Without this service it would be impossible for me to get to college to complete my education.
- My world would get smaller.
- I would become housebound.
- I'm disabled and a non-driver so I rely on these services to get out of the house.
- Removing Saturday services will leave people isolated for two days and more when there are Bank Holidays.
- It would make my life smaller, less healthy both physically and mentally.
- It would be impossible for me to get to college to complete my education.
- It's going to cause capacity issues on buses which are already overloaded.
- We won't be able to get into town to contribute to the local economy and may have to shop out of county. It will be the demise of smaller communities.

PLEASE NOTE: Bus Users has carried out a series of public consultation events across Somerset in recent months and would be happy to share this research with SCC officers and offer some advice on how best to mitigate the effects of any cuts that do go ahead.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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⁴ DfT Local Bus Statistics 2014/15

