

Agenda item 5

For decision – Consultation response to Bus Back Better

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Summary

This report sets out a recommended response to Somerset County Council's Bus Back Better consultation. It highlights some issues to be addressed and some recommended actions to be taken to improve bus services in Frome and the surrounding area.

Relevant elements of this year's Work Programme

- Promote public transport

Background

In March, the Government announced that it was launching a new National Bus Strategy – 'Bus Back Better', a £3 billion pot of funding to improve bus services across the country. Somerset County Council (SCC) is able to bid for a share of this funding with bus operators.

As part of the process, SCC has agreed to commit to forming an 'Enhanced Partnership' with all local bus operators in the county to help access funding and improve services. The first stage involves drawing up an ambitious Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP).

To help with the preparation of this Plan, SCC has launched a survey which is designed to gather the views of residents on existing services and where the gaps in provision are. Details of the survey are [available on the Somerset County Council website here](#). We have put this information out to the local community to encourage responses.

SCC are also encouraging town and parish councils to submit their views. The following represents a recommended response.

Key issues to be addressed

The backdrop to Bus Back Better is that over the last 35 years, bus usage has declined. Factors contributing to this decline include big increases in car ownership, declining bus reliability and frequency, real term fare increases, decline in concessionary demand and cuts in Government funding.

Somerset has fared particularly badly. There has been a 43% decline in per head bus journeys over the last 10 years. This compares with only a 15% fall in Wiltshire and Devon. More recently, COVID has impacted greatly on bus usage.

What would make a difference?

The following would create a bigger incentive to travel by bus:

- More convenience
 - the availability of more frequent services that connect people with the places they want to get to e.g. , people are more likely to use the bus in their leisure time if there is better frequency at weekends and in the evenings and buses connect with the venues they wish to use
 - better connections with workplaces e.g. , Commerce Park, which is the largest business park in the area and where significant growth is planned but lacks a bus service
 - cross ticketing that would allow passengers to travel with multiple bus operators and across local authority boundaries
- Lower fares – there is a growing expectation that fares will be low and flat in urban locations such as Frome
- Better and more accessible information on bus services
- Disincentives to travel by car (something that can probably only be successfully tackled at a national level)

Frome Town Bus Enhancements

Several projects that would improve services in Frome are already being explored with the help of representatives of the Frome and Villages Bus Users Group (FAVBUG) and Somerset Bus Partnership. We would encourage SCC to back them. These are as follows:

D2 Frome to Bath – proposed express service:

First Bus is known to be considering the introduction of a D2X service (probably a double decker to provide extra capacity needed during peak times) in response to growing demand for more express services. This would run along the A36 into Bath and should result in time savings.

X34 Frome to Chippenham:

It is understood that Wiltshire Council is exploring the possibility of an evening service between Trowbridge and Chippenham. To extend this to Frome and the villages (which would improve evening bus services between Frome and Trowbridge) would require funding from the SCC BSIP.

Intra-Frome bus service:

Better connections between residential areas and the hospital, railway station, ASDA/Edmund Park and Commerce Park could be achieved through a better intra-Frome bus service.

Frome to Westbury:

Currently the Westbury-Frome route only operates 5 times a day. In contrast the services from Warminster and Trowbridge to Frome operate hourly. Buses come from the Frome depot and then serve Westbury town routes. The proposal which is being led by Westbury Town Council is to bid for 4 electric buses, 3 to be in use at any given time. The Westbury town routes would continue to run hourly but be rerouted to include the Westbury train station. The service from Westbury to Frome would run hourly.

The cost is estimated to be £1.5m for 4 electric buses and charging infrastructure for which special funding would be sought from the Department for Transport (DfT). The running cost is estimated at £200k p.a. and expected revenue from running the service £120k p.a. The rest would need to come from £80k subsidy from Wiltshire/Somerset. The pre-COVID subsidy for this route was £92k. The lower cost of operating electric buses means there would be a saving.

The project is innovative, would help reduce carbon emissions and would involve cross-boundary cooperation between Frome and Westbury and Somerset and Wiltshire Councils. It also has the potential to improve connectivity with Westbury railway station and Commerce Park. It would hopefully provide a model for expansion quickly which is exciting in the context of our collective climate and ecological emergency strategies.

184 Frome to Midsomer Norton:

The 184 service between Frome and Midsomer Norton is currently operated by Libra Travel. There has already been consultation with villages along the route of the 184 arranged by the Somerset Bus Partnership. There is interest in at least an hourly service including Saturdays with the 184 linking up with Frome rail station and ASDA.

Real time bus information:

The specification of the new bus shelters in the Market Place funded by Frome |Town Council (FTC) and SCC allows for the addition of real time bus information displays. What is needed now is an investment in the equipment and administration that would enable Frome's hub for bus services to be served with real time information. SCC's support with this investment is requested.

<p>Recommendation</p>

<p>That above is approved as FTC's consultation response on Bus Back Better</p>
