

People and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Briefing Note on Community Transport

26th June 2017

What is Community Transport?

Community transport is a service provided by the local community in response to specific local transport needs. The schemes run on a not-for-profit basis, or as a social enterprise, often involving volunteers to manage and deliver the service. Community transport is regarded as an effective, flexible, small scale solution for meeting the travel and mobility needs of specific individuals and local groups.

Community transport solutions connect:

- Socially isolated people to essential services and facilities.
- Older people or those with a disability to essential medical services.
- Local people with schools, libraries, shops, friends, clubs and community events
- Community and youth groups with social, recreation and entertainment centres.

Community transport can offer the following benefits for a local community:

- Give individuals greater independence and improve their well-being and quality of life.
- Often the ideal response to a local travel/transport problem.
- The use of volunteers can reduce the overall cost of travel.
- May provide employment and/or access to employment in the local area.
- Strengthens rural communities across a district.
- Work with local transport action groups and parish councils to help solve transport issues.
- Flexibility over time, route and destination.

Public and School Transport Review

The consultation for Dorset County Council's [Public and School Transport Review](#) ran for 8 weeks between 27 May and 22 July 2016 and sought people's views on their proposals for the future of subsidised bus services in Dorset.

The transport review was needed because the existing subsidy driven approach was not working and central government is reducing funding for Dorset County Council which means the Council has to make big savings to balance the budget. As a result, the public transport subsidy needs to be reduced by £1.5m plus the cost of school transport services must be reduced by £850,000. These savings must be in place by 2017/18. It will not be possible to retain the current public bus network within the revised budgets so many existing services will change.

The core transport network was redesigned and 7 routes were identified needing continued support. The county council has now awarded new contracts for supported public and schools transport services. The new contracts, which replace those due to expire in July, cover 7 core public transport routes and 13 secondary/upper schools (plus 5 middle schools). These have been

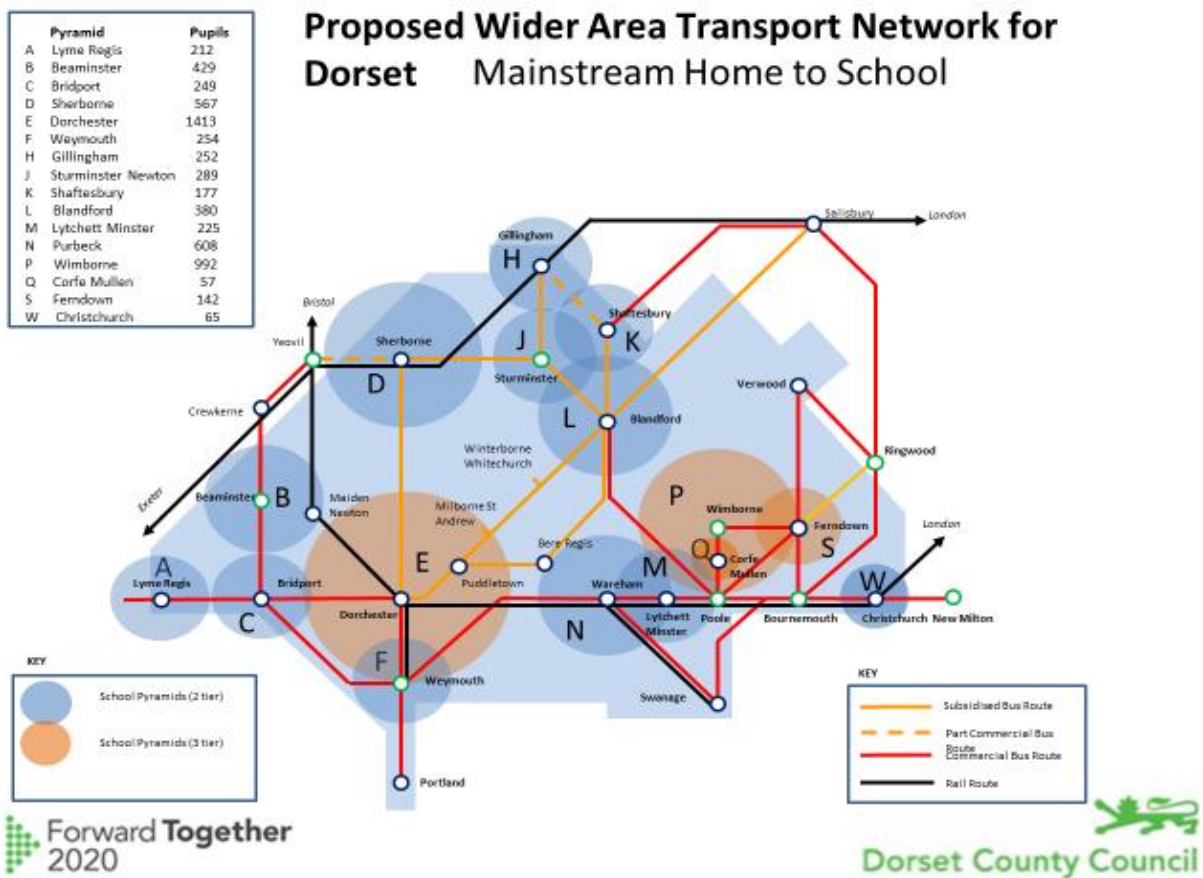
awarded to 4 local bus companies: Go South Coast (Damory), First Hampshire and Dorset, South West Coaches and Vale Coaches.

The new contracts cover two elements of travel support provided by the council, which represent a significant step towards realising the council’s Passenger Transport Strategy:

- a core network of public bus routes between Dorset’s market towns that help support Dorset’s economy by helping people travel to school, college, training or work; and
- school contracts allocated on a ‘one school, one operator’ basis where most appropriate. This provides a more simple approach for pupils, parents and schools, allowing schools to develop working relationships with a single bus company.

The 7 public transport routes between Dorset’s market towns will start operating on 24 July 2017. The new school transport contracts will start in September. The council has been working closely with bus operators and schools to make any changes to services as smooth as possible.

As a result of this Review, where commercial transport operation is not viable, some areas of Dorset will no longer have access to a public transport service and will therefore have unmet transport needs. Community transport brings both innovation and flexibility to fill these gaps in an inclusive way.



The role of community transport in Dorset

There are 64 schemes in Dorset that provide an invaluable service to thousands of local residents who have difficulty accessing public transport. These community transport schemes play an important role for helping people to access services in rural areas.

91% of Dorset (by area) has access to a community transport scheme (mainly Dial-a-Bus or volunteer car schemes) with more than 720 volunteer drivers. Currently there are 64 established schemes plus 20 trial schemes that have been introduced since April 2016.

The majority of new schemes are the weekly 'PlusBus' services operated by Dorset Community Transport (DCT). DCT operate a number of Mainstream School/Special Educational Needs (SEN) contracts across Dorset and are keeping their driver and vehicle in those rural areas to provide a community transport service between the morning and afternoon school runs. This keeps costs lower as the driver and vehicle are available and already in the area. This is a model that Dorset County Council would encourage other school transport operators to follow.

Dorset County Council, NORDCAT and SEDCAT are the other operators that have also introduced trial community transport services since April 2016.

Dorset Travel - Aims and Objectives

One of the aims of the Dorset County Council's Dorset Travel Team is to help residents in Dorset have access to a community transport service in areas where public transport is unavailable to help meet the needs of both current and potential passengers. The strategy encompasses key stakeholders such as local residents, community transport operators, Transport Action Groups, community groups, voluntary sector, POPP, District, Borough, Town and Parish Councils and their councillors.

The overall aim will be achieved via the following objectives:

- Targeting areas most affected by the Public and School Transport Review.
- To engage with key stakeholders in an on-going and constructive dialogue about how best we can maintain and improve our community transport services.
- To empower key stakeholders to set up new community transport schemes or to expand existing schemes in their area, particularly those areas with little or no public transport service.
- Funding initiatives, such as a Community Transport Grant, to support the establishment of new community transport services or to expand existing schemes to meet the need of local communities.
- Recruitment of volunteer drivers and co-ordinators to cope with additional demand for community transport schemes.

Engaging with Key Stakeholders

By engaging and working closely with communities and key stakeholders, a range of travel and transport options can be explored that could offer a more flexible community transport network.

Since January 2016, Dorset Travel have attended in excess of 45 community engagement meetings across the County involving councillors, parish councils, transport operators, members of the community and other interested stakeholders. These meetings have given the opportunity to discuss the outcome of the Transport Reviews, inform of existing Community Transport schemes and explain possible options for setting up new Community Transport schemes.

Community engagement meetings will continue throughout 2017. These meetings will focus on the areas shown on the map of Dorset's proposed wider area transport network that will not be served by a public transport service. All key stakeholders can be involved such as members of the community, District, Borough, Town and Parish Councils, councillors, parish transport representatives, transport operators and other interested parties such as housing associations or local businesses that may be able to assist, sponsor or contribute towards a community transport scheme.

Meetings have also been set up to bring together Chairs of all the Transport Action Groups (TAGs) to ensure that they are kept up-to-date with progress on the Transport Reviews, Community Transport Toolkit, etc so that this information can be disseminated back to their TAG members. TAGs have the necessary local knowledge and are an invaluable link to support their local communities that may be considering various transport solutions in their area. The TAG Leaders Meetings continue to be held on a 6-monthly basis.

A Community Transport Directory has been produced and is available on the community transport webpage on dorsetforyou. The Directory contains details of the established voluntary car schemes, dial-a-rides and other community transport initiatives across Dorset. A page is dedicated to each scheme and provides information such as areas served, eligibility, cost, days of operation and contact details for making enquiries and booking transport.

Condensed versions of the Community Transport Directory containing information only relevant to a particular zone have been produced for distribution at community engagement meetings. There is ongoing communication with the existing community transport schemes to ensure that this information is kept up-to-date.

In conjunction with the 2016 Bus Review, the Community Transport pages on dorsetforyou were updated and an interactive map illustrating where Community Transport schemes are located across Dorset was developed. Community transport schemes also appear on the "My Local" facility available on dorsetforyou.

Dorset Travel will engage with all transport operators, not just community transport operators. Therefore, community transport was discussed at a pre-procurement Market Engagement Event held for passenger transport operators in October 2016. It was suggested and encouraged that operators who are successful in the 2017 contract tendering process for Mainstream/SEN contracts could consider providing a community transport service during the time slot between morning and afternoon school runs, as DCT is already doing (see earlier).

Working with Others

In 2016, Dorset County Council produced a Community Transport Toolkit that provides useful help and advice to local volunteers and community organisations about setting up a new community transport scheme. The toolkit can be downloaded at www.dorsetforyou.gov.uk/community-

[transport](#). Reference copies were sent out to all Town and Parish Councils, libraries, Transport Action Groups and made available at community engagement meetings.

Dorset County Council has committed to supporting community transport and it has produced the Toolkit to help communities develop different travel/transport solutions tailored to the needs of residents. The document can inspire groups to set up new ways for local people to get out and about more easily.

The guide includes everything from gathering evidence and creating a business case, meeting the legislation and finding funding, to marketing, publicising and launching a new scheme. By guiding through the process step-by-step, the Toolkit will help communities decide which option best suits their needs and understand how schemes can be started and become successful.

In September 2016, Dorset County Council also introduced the initiative of Friends of the Bus Stop or Friends of Bus Service as an approach of allowing the community to take some ownership and pride in their local bus stops or bus service. For example, members of the Western Area Transport Action Group (WATAG) have become Friends of the Bus Stop which involves them reporting any issues relating to bus stops in their area and ensuring that bus timetables are kept up-to-date. All Transport Action Groups have been encouraged to become Friends of the Bus Stop and have been provided with the tools necessary to access timetable cases. There is also interest from Tarrant Hinton Parish Council to become Friends of Service 20 (the Blandford-Salisbury service).

To encourage and empower existing NeighbourCar schemes to consider expanding their operating criteria, an article was included in their first quarterly newsletter 'Rear View Mirror' of 2017. The article informed schemes that they will be entitled to additional funding from the Partnership for Older People Programme (POPP) if they wish to expand their criteria whether by providing transport for all age groups (not just the elderly or disabled), increasing their geographical coverage and/or by catering for all journey purposes rather than only medical appointments.

Dorset County Council has also offered assistance to community transport schemes to recruit new volunteers to help manage any increase in demand on their services. This support has included setting up Facebook ads, press releases and an article in the next Your Dorset newspaper.

Funding

Dorset County Council introduced a Community Transport Grant in October 2016. This Grant has been made available to support the establishment of new community transport services or to expand existing schemes to meet the need of local communities.

Groups can apply for a grant of up to £5,000 and all applications will need 50% matched funding of the total cost of the project. Projects should be non-profit making and applicants must be either registered charities, Parish or Town Councils or Parish meetings, voluntary organisations or a community group looking to establish a new community transport scheme.

The Community Transport Grant funds costs associated with starting up and operating a scheme. These include vehicle purchase costs, IT software that supports effective operation, marketing of schemes and training of staff or volunteers.

Up to £5,000 is available for capital expenditure ie. vehicle purchase and £2,000 is available for revenue costs such as IT systems, training and marketing, etc.

As at June 2017, 4 Community Transport Grants have been awarded to:

- Bridport Town Council to fund a feasibility and scoping study for a Bridport Community Bus
- Thorncombe Parish Council to help support community buses serving Thorncombe and surrounding areas
- SPARK (community group in Southill, Weymouth) to establish a community bus service.
- Christchurch Dial-a-Bus to help purchase an accessible vehicle to meet existing demand and to provide a feeder service to scheduled public bus services for those areas that do not have direct access to public transport.

Seed funding of up to £2,000 is also available from the Partnership for Older People Programme (POPP) to set up a community car scheme. The community of Dewlish are in the process of setting up their own scheme.

Recruitment of Volunteers

Meetings have taken place between Dorset County Council and Volunteer Centre Dorset (VCD) to increase awareness of voluntary community transport schemes and to attract new volunteers. The Volunteer Centre is receiving a Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Strategic Grant from Dorset County Council's Chief Executive's Department to undertake some work to help support and add value to community transport schemes. VCD have undertaken to:

- Consult with groups about scope for expansion and increased usage.
- Look at sharing resources/volunteers.
- Look at how community/local buses can be used more extensively – especially for young people and those out of work.
- Target volunteer recruitment for community transport schemes.
- Provide specific links and information on the VCD website.

Regular updates are also provided on VCD's website and they included a full page article on community transport in their 2016 autumn/winter newsletter (3000 distribution). VCD also undertake to promote community transport through social media, develop posters and raise awareness through town and parish councils, village halls, etc.

Dorset Travel also offers assistance to community transport schemes to recruit new volunteers to help manage any increase in demand on their services. This support includes setting up Facebook ads plus any other PR and communications that may be required.

Communications Strategy

Community Transport has featured in a number of Dorset County Council's press articles, including the Community Transport Grant and the Toolkit. Articles on community transport have also been included in the last 6 publications of Dorset County Council's countywide quarterly newspaper – Your Dorset. This included a full 2-page feature on Community Transport in the July 2016 edition.

The feature included information on the Toolkit and case studies on Dorset's community transport schemes.

Dorset Travel has worked with Communications colleagues to ensure that there continues to be a steady flow of information provided on community transport during 2017. This includes press releases, Facebook ads, case studies, You Tube videos, articles in Your Dorset and updates on the dorsetforyou webpages.

Scrutiny Review

A meeting was held in March 2017 with Councillor David Walsh to discuss the community transport work carried out by Dorset Travel. Councillor Walsh suggested that a meeting of key stakeholders be set up after the new transport contracts had been awarded to discuss how to get the best out of community transport.