

Cabinet

29 January 2026

Transforming Public and Community Transport For Decision

Cabinet Member:

Cllr N Ireland, Leader of the Council, Climate, Performance and Safeguarding
Cllr J Andrews, Place Services

Local Councillor(s): All

Senior Leadership Team:

J Britton, Executive Director for Place Services

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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Dorset Council is entering a new programme of community-focused public service delivery, and the transformation of public and community transport is a central part of this shift. This report sets out the strategic direction for creating a modern, inclusive, and resilient transport system that better reflects Dorset's rural nature, strengthens local partnerships, and supports communities to shape and influence the services they rely on.
- 1.2 Dorset faces significant public transport challenges including rural isolation, limited evening and weekend services, fragile community transport schemes, and a significant funding gap compared with neighbouring rural authorities. These pressures demonstrate the need for a bold, long-term solution to create a stronger, more connected, and more inclusive county.
- 1.3 This report identifies a range of potential approaches, from maintaining current provision through to a more ambitious transformation creating a flexible, community-aligned, integrated transport network. These options will be explored in detail through a Full Business Case.

- 1.4 The strategic direction outlined seeks to reshape transport so that more residents, particularly those currently dependent on specialist or supported provision, can access mainstream public and community services. This approach supports independence, reduces isolation, and strengthens community resilience while aligning transport investment with Dorset's broader outcomes around social inclusion, economic vitality, climate action, and collaborative working with town and parish councils.
- 1.5 Cabinet is requested to endorse the strategic direction that will enable the development of a Full Business Case for improving public and community transport. This staged approach is essential to meet key deadlines for the 2027/28 budget cycle, procurement lead-in times of around 12 months, and academic-year constraints for any future changes in education transport. Early endorsement now enables a balanced approach to consultation later in 2026, combining improvements to public and community transport with examination of efficiencies in existing budgets.
- 1.6 This strategic endorsement enables the council to take forward the next steps in developing a transport system that is more reliable, inclusive and community-aligned, demonstrating a commitment to becoming a better partner for local people and places.

2. **Recommendation(s)**

- 2.1 That Cabinet:
 - a) Endorses the strategic direction for transforming public and community transport as set out in this report.
 - b) Approves the development of a Full Business Case exploring the range of options for delivering a modern, integrated and community-focused transport system, including financial, procurement, and consultation plans to enable implementation from April 2027.

3. **Reason for the recommendation(s)**

- 3.1 To secure Cabinet endorsement for the strategic direction and authorise preparation of a Full Business Case for improving public and community transport, ensuring alignment with the council's community-focused agenda, and enabling timely planning for investment, procurement, and consultation ahead of implementation in 2027.

4. **A Future Model for Public and Community Transport**

- 4.1 Dorset's bus network faces significant pressures. Large parts of rural Dorset have no viable alternative to the car, leaving many residents isolated.

Weekend and evening services are minimal, and concessionary travel dominates usage, limiting fare revenue. Community transport schemes provide vital lifeline services but are fragile and face financial insecurity.

- 4.2 A central challenge is the longstanding structural funding gap faced by Dorset compared with similar rural areas. Lower levels of national bus grant funding place the county at a disadvantage when seeking to maintain, modernise or extend services, particularly across dispersed rural communities where provision is inherently more resource-intensive. This constraint reinforces the need for a strategic approach that focuses on long-term sustainability, partnership with communities, and innovation in how services are designed and delivered. The Full Business Case will therefore examine a range of funding and investment options to understand how Dorset can deliver a more inclusive and resilient transport system despite these financial pressures.
- 4.3 This Cabinet report sets out the strategic need to reshape Dorset's public and community transport system so that it better meets the needs of a modern rural county. It highlights the opportunity to rethink how mobility is designed and delivered in partnership with local communities to create a modern, inclusive network that supports economic growth, social inclusion, and climate goals.
- 4.4 Our vision is to create a modern, inclusive, and community-led transport system that reflects the realities of a rural county. It will bring together public, community and flexible services into a coherent network that helps people live independent, connected lives. By working with towns, parishes, local operators, and voluntary groups, we will build a resilient system shaped by local priorities, one that gives our residents fair access to work, services, education, and community life.
- 4.5 This programme represents not just an enhancement of services but a re-design of how mobility is delivered across Dorset, positioning the council as a leader in rural transport innovation and demonstrating a new model for resilient, community-centred public services. This includes looking at how traditional public transport, community-led initiatives and more flexible or demand responsive services can work together as part of a coherent network.
- 4.6 A key element of this future model is supporting more residents, including those who currently rely on specialist or supported transport, to access mainstream public and community services wherever appropriate. This shift has the potential to promote independence, reduce isolation, and strengthen community resilience, while ensuring that resources are used in a way that delivers better outcomes for residents.

- 4.7 This future model is built on the council's commitment to work differently with communities. It emphasises co-design, partnership, and shared responsibility as essential elements of delivering a sustainable system.
- 4.8 The Full Business Case will explore potential approaches for improving public and community transport, ranging from maintaining current provision to more ambitious enhancements. These represent options rather than proposals, and their feasibility, affordability and impact will be fully examined through the Business Case. This will allow a balanced assessment of how best to improve connectivity, support economic and social participation, and align transport provision with the council's work with town and parish councils and local partners.
- 4.9 Investing in buses and community transport delivers against all four of the council's strategic priorities:
- a) Affordable housing – Improves transport links to new developments and rural housing, reducing car dependency and supporting sustainable growth.
 - b) Growing the economy – Better access to jobs, retail, and tourism. A recent survey from Spring 2025 showed that users of Dorset's core routes spend £30–£40 per trip locally, boosting rural businesses and town centres. The Confederation of Passenger Transport estimates that for every £1 of public funding spent on investing in buses, it generates at least £4.55 in economic benefits¹.
 - c) Communities for all – Transforming buses and community transport will reduce rural social isolation, provide affordable travel for young people and lifeline access for older and disabled residents. The report reflects the council's new way of working with town and parish councils, to reshape services to become a 21st-century council and a better partner for communities.
 - d) Respond to Climate and nature crisis – Encourages modal shift from car to bus, cuts emissions, and supports zero-emission fleet transition in line with Dorset's climate emergency goals.
- 4.10 The programme will be staged as follows:
- Jan 2026: Cabinet approval of direction of travel
 - July 2026: Full Business Case presented

¹ *The Economic Impact of Local Bus Services*, page 26

- Late 2026: Consultation and procurement
 - April 2027: Start of implementation
- 4.11 A Cabinet decision is needed now to proceed to a Full Business Case for improving public and community transport and set out detailed financial, procurement, and consultation plans for implementation from April 2027. Early endorsement is essential to align with:
- a) Budget setting for 2027/28.
 - b) Procurement lead times (~12 months for major service changes).
 - c) Academic year constraints for education transport changes.
 - d) Public consultation on a balanced package of improvements and changes.
5. **Alternative options considered**
- 5.1 In shaping the proposed strategic direction, several broad options will be considered, each reflecting a different approach to the future of public and community transport in Dorset. These options represent high-level pathways rather than detailed proposals, and all will be examined in full through the development of the Business Case.
- 5.2 The first option to be considered is to continue with the current approach and level of provision. While this will maintain stability in the short term, it will not address well-recognised issues around rural isolation, service fragility, and funding, and would limit the council's ability to work differently with communities. Public dissatisfaction will grow, eroding confidence in the council's ability to deliver inclusive mobility.
- 5.3 A second option is a more incremental approach, focusing on small-scale service improvements. Although this could provide some benefits, it lacks the coherence and strategic clarity needed to make long-term decisions, align with community priorities, or create an integrated model that supports wider council objectives. Without an overarching framework, incremental steps risk reinforcing existing inequalities in access and failing to address the pressures on community and specialist transport.
- 5.4 The third option, and recommended to Cabinet, is to explore a full suite of strategic possibilities, including different network models, levels of investment, and approaches to integrating public, community, and flexible transport. This will also consider how working more closely with communities, operators and

voluntary organisations can unlock new ways of co-designing and co-delivering transport that are better aligned with local needs.

- 5.5 Shifting more residents, including those currently on specialist or supported transport, onto mainstream public and community transport has the potential to significantly strengthen Dorset's communities. A more integrated and inclusive transport network enables people to travel independently, access work, education, healthcare, and local services, and participate fully in community life. This reduces isolation, builds personal confidence, and supports the Council's wider ambition to work differently with towns, parishes, and local partners to develop a more connected, community-focused Dorset.
- 5.6 Enabling a greater proportion of residents to use public transport also delivers improved social inclusion. Reliable, accessible, and community-aligned services reduce barriers faced by older people, young people, disabled residents, those on low incomes, and rural households. Ensuring that individuals who currently rely on specialist or segregated provision can access mainstream services, promotes equality, reduces dependency, and creates a more resilient and cohesive transport network across the county.
- 5.7 Progressing to a Full Business Case provides a structured process to evaluate these strategic options, assess their financial and operational implications, and determine the most effective and sustainable approach for Dorset.

6. **Legal considerations**

- 6.1 Dorset Council, as the Local Transport Authority (LTA), exercises its powers under the Transport Act 2000, as amended by the Local Transport Act 2008, and the Bus Services Act 2017. These Acts provide the council with the authority to prepare and implement Local Transport Plans, enter into Enhanced Partnerships with bus operators, and provide financial support for socially necessary bus services.
- 6.2 Provision of local bus services is not a statutory duty, it is a discretionary function exercised to meet local needs. Statutory obligations include preparing a Local Transport Plan and administering concessionary travel schemes for eligible groups. Community transport support, service subsidies, and fare discount schemes are all discretionary.

7. **Financial implications**

- 7.1 Dorset's ability to deliver a modern, inclusive, and reliable transport network is significantly constrained by two structural factors: the county's deeply rural geography and the comparatively low level of government bus grant funding it receives. Much of Dorset consists of dispersed rural settlements with limited

commercial viability for frequent bus services, meaning that public and community transport provision requires a higher level of ongoing support than in more densely populated or better-funded areas. At the same time, Dorset's bus grant allocation is considerably lower than that of neighbouring rural authorities—£3.42 million in 2025/26 compared with £10 million for Devon, £6.4 million for Somerset and £5.9 million for Wiltshire, with further multi-year allocations continuing this disparity through to 2029/30. This places Dorset at a structural disadvantage when seeking to maintain or enhance services.

- 7.2 These combined pressures make it clear that maintaining current approaches is neither sustainable nor sufficient to meet the needs of residents. The financial case for rethinking how transport services are designed, delivered, and funded is therefore compelling. The strategic direction set out in this report responds to these constraints by reshaping the network around a more integrated, community-focused model, reducing dependencies on costly specialist provision where appropriate, and investing in a transport system capable of supporting wider social, economic and climate goals. The rebalancing of specialist or supported transport budgets is intended as a way of enabling better outcomes and strengthening community resilience by allowing more people to use mainstream public transport services.
- 7.3 The Full Business Case for improving public and community transport will set out detailed financial modelling for a sustainable long-term solution. This will include costed service improvements, procurement requirements, consultation timelines, options for rebalancing existing transport budgets, and a phased plan aligned to the 2027/28 budget. Critically, the Business Case will demonstrate how Dorset can deliver transformational change, despite national funding disparities, by integrating public, community, and on-demand services into a coherent, efficient, and community-driven network. This provides a robust and realistic pathway for delivering improvements from April 2027 onwards, ensuring the council can act proactively rather than continuing to maintain services within existing financial constraints.
- 7.4 This report seeks Cabinet endorsement of the strategic direction, not immediate budget approval. The actual funding decision will be taken as part of the 2027/28 budget-setting process. Early approval is essential to allow procurement and consultation to commence later in 2026.
- 7.5 Funding will be sourced through:
 - a) Rebalancing existing transport specialist or supported transport budgets where possible (subject to Full Business Case analysis).
 - b) Government Bus Grant allocations for 2026/7–2029/30.

- c) Potential developer contributions, external funding streams, and opportunities for local contributions from town and parish councils to support community-aligned transport solutions.

- 7.6 Any examination of specialist or supported transport budgets within the Full Business Case will be driven primarily by the need to achieve better outcomes for Dorset's residents. Rebalancing these budgets is about enabling the shift towards a more modern, flexible, and inclusive public and community transport system that promotes independence, strengthens communities, and reduces long-term demand for specialist transport. Redirecting resources will help unlock investment in 2027/28, allowing the Council to deliver more frequent, dependable, and integrated services that benefit the whole county.
- 7.7 This balanced approach ensures that public consultation later in 2026 can be framed around a package of improvements and efficiencies demonstrating a clear link between strategic investment and enhanced community outcomes.
- 7.8 Additional staff resource will be required for procurement, delivery, and contract management. How this resource will be funded will be identified within the Full Business Case.
- 7.9 The financial implications are significant but manageable within the Council's medium-term financial strategy, provided early planning and phased implementation are approved. The Full Business Case will set out detailed costings, funding sources, and risk mitigations.

8. **Natural environment, climate & ecology implications**

- 8.1 The climate decision wheel is presented in appendix 1.
- 8.2 The proposals will have significant implications for Dorset's climate commitments and ecological objective. Investment in public and community transport will encourage modal shift from private cars to buses, reducing carbon emissions and improving air quality.
- 8.3 Enhanced transport networks improve community resilience by ensuring access to essential services and reducing isolation in rural areas.
- 8.4 The proposals align strongly with Dorset Council's climate and nature priorities, delivering co-benefits for carbon reduction, social inclusion, and sustainable rural mobility.

9. **Well-being and health implications**

- 9.1 The proposal is in keeping with the council's age friendly commitment which will deliver positive wellbeing outcomes by reducing isolation, improving

access to essential services, and supporting healthier, more connected communities, particularly for older people, disabled residents, and young people in rural areas.

10. **Other implications**

- 10.1 The proposals have strong connections with Dorset's voluntary and community sector. Community transport schemes, which provide essential services for older and disabled residents, are largely operated by voluntary organisations and depend on volunteers.
- 10.2 Delivery of the proposed changes will require collaboration and co-production with:
- a) Town and Parish Councils – to co-design local transport solutions and support community resilience.
 - b) Local bus operators – through the Dorset Bus Enhanced Partnership
 - c) Voluntary Sector Partners – including Dorset Community Transport, SEDCAT, and NeighbourCar groups.
 - d) Health and Social Care Providers – to explore pooling transport resources for efficiency and improved access.
- 10.3 The approach aligns with the council's commitment to work more closely with communities, ensuring that consultation and co-design are central to the Full Business Case development.

1. **Risk implications**

- 10.4 **HAVING CONSIDERED:** the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Low

- 10.5 Failure to approve the strategic direction now will compress the timetable for procurement, consultation, and implementation, risking service disruption and inability to deliver improvements from April 2027.
- 10.6 Increasing budget pressures or external funding shortfalls, create a risk of scaling back proposed interventions.
- 10.7 Procurement delays or market capacity issues could prevent timely delivery of enhanced services.

10.8 Mitigations include:

- a) Early Cabinet endorsement to secure mandate and enable timely planning.
- b) Development of a Full Business Case with detailed financial modelling and phased implementation options.
- c) Clear communication strategy framing consultation as a balanced improvement plan.
- d) Early engagement with operators and suppliers to manage procurement risks and secure capacity.
- e) Integration of risk monitoring into project governance with escalation routes to senior leadership.

11. **Equalities**

11.1 The proposals deliver strong positive impacts for several protected groups and communities:

- a) Older people – Improved access and reduced isolation through more frequent services and community transport.
- b) Young people (16–25) – Discounted fares and better connectivity support access to education, training, and employment.
- c) Disabled residents – Accessible vehicles in Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and community transport improve mobility for those unable to drive.
- d) Pregnant women and parents with caring responsibilities – Enhanced access to healthcare, childcare, and essential services.
- e) Rural communities and socio-economically deprived groups – Hourly core routes, Saturday services, and affordable fares reduce isolation and improve opportunities.

11.2 Most other protected characteristics (race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, armed forces communities) show no differential impact.

11.3 The Full Business Case will include an Equality Impact Assessment and ensure compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010. It will also include plans for consultation and engagement with affected groups, including schools, parents, disability forums, and voluntary organisations.

1. **Appendices**

11.4 Appendix 1 - Climate decision Wheel

12. **Background papers**

12.1 NA

13. **Report sign-off**

13.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)

Appendix 1 - Climate Decision Wheel

