

South Downs Local Access Forum

Hampshire County Council Future Services Consultation: proposals relating to Passenger Transport

The attention of the South Downs Local Access Forum (SDLAF) has been drawn to the County Council's "Future Services Consultation" exercise.

This letter constitutes formal advice from the South Downs Local Access Forum.

As a body listed under Section 94(4), Hampshire County Council is required, in accordance with Section 94(5) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, to have regard to advice from this forum in carrying out its functions.

It will also be important for the County Council to take account of the strengthened duty on all local authorities (and others) included in the recent Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 (S.245):

In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in any National Park in England, a relevant authority must seek to further National Park purposes and if it appears that there is a conflict between those purposes, must attach greater weight to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area comprised in the National Park.

The County Council's proposals relating to passenger transport appear to be alarming, far-reaching and pay no regard to National Park purposes, to mitigating climate change, to improving health and wellbeing or to supporting the local economy.

As part of an exercise to address an overall anticipated budget deficit of £132 million from April 2025 the County Council appears to be proposing to withdraw all the public transport funding that it is not legally required to provide: including all subsidies for bus routes that are not commercially viable and for all community transport services.

Having studied the appendix in the consultation papers which lists all the services that are due to be affected, the SDLAF believes that the proposals will hit the South Downs National Park area very hard: not just for resident communities but also for visitors, including those trying to use any of the 'Long Distance Trails' in the area including the South Downs Way, Meon Valley Trail, Hangers Way, Shipwrights Way, Staunton Way, Wayfarers Walk, Writers Way etc. None of the bus routes which connect with these popular long distance routes appear likely to survive.

The bus cuts would also threaten the National Park's ambitions of 'A National Park for All' and its aims of working to make sure the landscape, scenery and tranquillity of the South Downs is available to everyone, inclusive and enjoyed by all. Public transport (and, in particular, bus services) can be crucial to this effort. But it appears that in the future people will need a car to access almost any of the National Park in Hampshire.

Although there will still be rail services to Winchester, Petersfield, Liphook, Liss and Rowlands Castle, it does not appear that there will be any bus services from any of these stations to take anyone out into the National Park.

Transport is already one, if not the biggest, barrier to accessing the countryside for many people. The Government's Review of National Parks (the Glover Review) concluded that "traffic spoils tranquillity and poor access keeps people who should be able to visit away." The County Council should, therefore, be including proposals to retain bus services to, from, within and around the South Downs National Park – along with new ideas to publicise and promote these services to residents and visitors. These ideas would assist with the decarbonisation agenda by providing a sustainable alternative to driving for leisure visits to the South Downs National Park – contributing to the County Council's Climate Emergency actions.

A package of proposals to robustly market, promote and publicise bus services that connect to the South Downs National Park could help to attract new users and encourage a modal shift which, together with the promotion of other sustainable alternatives such as cycling, would help reduce the impact of car congestion and pollution. Other County Councils appear to have recognised a number of these opportunities and there is still hopefully time for Hampshire County Council to do so.

The South Downs Local Access Forum believes that it would be terrible for Hampshire to get a reputation as a council that has created a National Park that has little / no public transport and that could only be visited by those with a car.

Furthermore, it appears that the following villages in the National Park are likely to lose the last remnants of their remaining bus services (including any Dial-a-Ride, Taxishare and Call & Go opportunities):

Abbots Worthy
Bramdean
Brockbridge*
Buriton
Chawton
Cheriton
Corhampton*
Droxford*
East Meon
East Tisted
Exton*
Froxfield
Grayshot
Greatham
Hawkley
Hinton Ampner
Itchen Abbas
Itchen Stoke
Langrish
Liss
Lower Farringdon

Martyr Worthy
Meonstoke*
Newton Valence
Owslebury
Selborne
Sheet
Soberton*
Stroud
Twyford
Upper Farringdon
Warnford*
West Meon*
West Tisted

**Assistance for the Meon Valley Community Bus is due to be withdrawn*

Bus services in rural areas assist with inclusion and fairness by providing access to employment, education and training.

It is not clear from the consultation exercise how the County Council's decision to withdraw funding for public transport services will take account of potential social consequences of isolation and loneliness which can cost the County Council more money in its Social Services budgets.

Studies show that loneliness, a sense of isolation and a loss of independence lead to ill health and mental decline. Were the County Council to remove subsidies for bus services in the National Park it would run the risk of simply making savings in one Department (Transport & Environment) whilst increasing expenditure (and pressures) on another part of the public purse (Social Care) – as well as adversely affecting people's lives.

With increasing numbers of elderly people, living to older ages, this would not be a sustainable position for the County Council to adopt: far better to enable elderly people to live independent lives by providing public transport services. At some point in their lives, elderly people lose their confidence to drive but are, otherwise, still independent. Bus services can be their lifeline to get out, to look after themselves and to enjoy meeting other people.

Hampshire has an extensive Public Rights of Way (PRoW) network and having access to the natural environment supports people's health and wellbeing. The SDLAF believes that enabling sustainable access to the PRoW network by public transport is particularly important.

Hampshire welcomes tourists from across the UK and from abroad and a wide range of tourist destinations require connectivity in order to thrive. Public transport services can support visitor numbers, improve the visitor experience, extend stays and encourage repeat visits to the benefit of the local economy.

Many visitors to the National Park use local buses to access walks in the countryside and to visit local attractions, pubs etc. Reductions in bus services could adversely affect the trading positions of such attractions at a time when many village pubs are closing. Without subsidised public transport more visitors will travel by car, increasing traffic along sensitive country lanes which are often used by

walkers, cyclists and horse-riders to supplement the local Rights of Way network. It would not be appropriate for the County Council to simply ignore or overlook these aspects of public transport services.

The proposed cuts appear to run contrary to the County Council's claims that it is aiming to move journeys from transport modes with greater carbon emissions (such as cars) towards walking, cycling and public transport by promoting public transport and active travel.

There seems to be no consideration of any of the commercial services in this consultation exercise and the SDLAF suspects that the County Council may therefore be missing opportunities of liaising with the operators of profitable bus routes to explore some beneficial route-change diversions.

Drawing on all the above points, the SDLAF believes that cuts in bus services can have wide ramifications about which the County Council should think very carefully before considering whether or not to continue with such far-reaching and alarming proposals.

Yours sincerely

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On behalf of South Downs Local Access Forum.

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