

Planning Committee

Title:	Community Bus Working Group Update
Date:	10 December 2024
Contact Officer:	Becky Reid, Environmental Project Officer

Purpose of Report

1. To inform the committee about action taken by the Community Bus Working Group (CBWG) since the last meeting.

End to Hopper Bus project

2. Since the last meeting of the Planning Committee the CBWG has met and confirmed that it does not believe that progressing with a new bus service at this time is the best use of time or resources for Thame Town Council.
3. The primary reasons for this are:
 1. OCC were not keen for an additional route unless the need was more clearly identified. The 121 service has met a lot of the needs already identified and there is not a strong enough base of evidence that an additional bus route would have enough demand to be sustainable in the long term.
 2. The additional 'need' that we do have evidence for is around increased connections from Thame to Towersey. However, OCC have confirmed that finance available must primarily support **Thame residents** and cannot be used for meeting the needs of locations outside of Thame unless it is a by-product of a service. It cannot be the core reason for the service.
 3. The 121 is still not being used as much as it could be and therefore time and resource being put into supporting its success would be more beneficial.
4. The CBWG are keen to continue working with OCC to support the 121 route, ensuring that the route continues to be the best one for Thame, proposing changes where relevant and promoting the service to ensure the best chance of its success.

Next Steps

5. The CBWG believes that Thame Town Council should still progress with developing a CIC so that it is ready to tender for the 121 service in 2026 when the service comes up for renewal. However, they believe that there is an opportunity for the remit of this CIC to become broader than just a bus, and rather could become a vehicle through which travel and connectivity as a whole in Thame is better supported. To determine if this is the case there are a number of actions that need to be taken, including:
 - 5.1. Identifying the relevant stakeholders involved in travel and connectivity in Thame, and how they need to be involved.
 - 5.2. Mapping the travel options that already exist more thoroughly. This includes all forms of travel and transport – not just public buses. There is a need to spend time understanding what they are, what difficulties or limits they have and, in some cases, what their succession plans are –

e.g. in situations where vehicles are coming to the end of their life, or services depend on a small group of committed volunteers. The CBWG believe there is opportunity to coordinate these to meet the needs of a number of individuals and organisations in a way that is more cost effective and sustainable for all.

5.3. Identifying the gaps that exist, where travel needs are not met by any service at all.

5.4. Planning for expected/possible future changes in this area, including but not limited to:

- Additional developments expected in Thame, and the consequential growing pressure on town centre car parks.
- The implication of relevant changes in central government, such as the 'Active Travel' focus moving up their agenda.
- The implication of local policy changes or developments – such as the outcome of Thame's LCWIP in 2025.
- Other research findings such as the recent report from Living Streets about the value of the Pedestrian Pound <https://www.livingstreets.org.uk/press-media/pedestrians-spend-more-new-report-reveals/> This is leading to more vocal calls for Market Towns in Oxfordshire to reinstate permanent Market Squares. Work needs to be done to review the relevance and potential impact of these findings on the town centre Thame may want to have in the future and what that means for transport and connectivity.

6. The CBWG is keen to see the above action taken, however this would require a change to the groups Terms of Reference. This work is actually more in line with the focus of the previous Travel Plan Working Group.

7. The CBWG therefore would like to take time to engage with relevant Cllrs and external stakeholders and return to a future Planning meeting with a proposal for the establishment of a new group, the proposed members and new terms of reference. This group would replace the current CBWG.

Action Required

- i) To agree that the CBWG can return to the Planning Committee with a proposal for the Terms of Reference for a new Working Group which will be responsible for moving forward the work proposed above.***