
ACCESSIBILITY PLANNING CONSULTATION

Introduction

This paper has been prepared to inform and involve the Communities of Cheshire Partnership in the County Council's accessibility planning consultation process.

The purpose of the consultation is to seek the views of stakeholders, partner organisations, service users and the wider community on the County Council's approach to accessibility. It is our hope that this will help identify priority areas, groups and issues on which future resources and action should be targeted.

A twelve week consultation period is underway closing on Friday 19th September 2008. Following the consultation, a revised Accessibility Strategy will be produced. This will be supplemented by a number of more detailed local area action plans, setting out how to improve accessibility in Cheshire.

The revised strategy will inform and identify accessibility priorities that will need to be taken forward by the new Unitary Councils of Cheshire West & Chester and Cheshire East. The evidence from the consultation and revised strategy will also provide valuable baseline data for setting out priorities in the new Community Strategies and Local Area Agreements.

Background

Accessibility is the ease with which people can reach jobs and essential services, such as healthcare, education, food shops and other destinations that are important to local residents. If people cannot access the key services they need at reasonable cost, in reasonable time and with reasonable ease, their quality of life suffers.

Even in a county with higher than average car ownership, there are still many people in the community who may suffer from poor access. These include people living in rural areas, low income families, older people, people with disabilities, ethnic minority groups and young people. A range of factors impact upon accessibility, including travel time, cost of travel, location of facilities / services, method and timing of service delivery, perceptions of safety and security, and travel knowledge and horizons.

Cheshire's Local Transport Plan (LTP) sets out the County Council's objectives, strategy and delivery programme for taking forward our transport priorities between 2006 and 2011. An important part of the LTP process is to map out and consider how to improve accessibility to key services. Proposals are set out in an Accessibility Strategy which aims to identify the most important accessibility issues in a local authority area and identify an action plan for how these are to be addressed over the lifetime of the LTP.

The County Council is currently involved in numerous projects and initiatives which support the accessibility agenda. However, following an independent review of the strategy, a number of areas for improvement have been identified. This includes the need to improve prioritisation, so that it is clear from the evidence base how and why a specific approach has been chosen. Another area for improvement is how we can enhance partnership working with delivery agencies to help meet the needs of local communities.

The timing of this review coincides with the need for Cheshire to produce a mid-term progress report on the delivery of the current LTP. It is our intention to use this opportunity to prepare a new revised Accessibility Strategy and submit this to the Government at the same time.

Our Proposals

The aim of the revised strategy is to improve accessibility to those destinations which have the greatest impact on people's life chances. There is a specific focus on tackling accessibility problems experienced by those in disadvantaged groups and areas.

A countywide accessibility assessment was carried out in autumn 2005 to provide a clearer picture of the accessibility issues in Cheshire. A review of the existing evidence has identified a number of proposed priority areas for further focus and consultation.

These are:-

- Access to key services from rural areas, particularly for older people;
- Access to health services, particularly in relation to Primary Care Trust (PCT) modernisation plans; and
- Access to employment, particularly from areas of deprivation.

The consultation period is a vital part of the process. It enables partners from all sectors to add their own knowledge, experience and expertise to the accessibility planning process. It is important that the revised strategy reflects the experience of service users and Cheshire residents and the priorities reflect those people most in need and those who have the most difficulty in accessing essential services.

In addition, an Equality Impact Assessment is being undertaken to critically examine our approach to accessibility in order to comply with legislative requirements and equality standards. Underpinning our approach to accessibility planning, and a key objective of the LTP, is to promote social

inclusion and accessibility to everyday services for all, irrespective of race, disability, gender, age, sexual orientation or religion.

Partnership Working

The basis of accessibility planning is that policy development and service delivery can be improved to better meet the needs of local communities by being more evidence-led and through improved cross-sectoral working.

The County Council is committed to working in partnership with service providers, so that accessibility considerations are reflected in decisions affecting the provision, location, design and delivery of services.

The County Council will be working with the new shadow authorities of Cheshire West & Chester and Cheshire East to ensure that partnerships continue to be developed and sustained beyond April 2009.

What Happens Next?

- June 30 – September 19: Consultation period
- September – October: Preparation of revised Accessibility Strategy
- November: Finalisation and approval of new strategy
- November – December: Submission to Government and feedback on assessment
- December onwards: Refining action plans and delivery
- January onwards: Dialogue with shadow authorities for taking accessibility planning forwards in Cheshire West & Chester and Cheshire East beyond April 2009

Conclusion

The revised Accessibility Strategy will be developed in the context of the wider vision for the area, as set out in the interim Cheshire Sustainable Community Strategy. The consultation provides the opportunity to utilise the mechanisms of the existing strategic and local level partnerships to identify accessibility issues and involve partners in setting priorities and targets.

Recommendations:

Members of the Communities of Cheshire Partnership are invited to:

- (i) Comment on the proposals;
- (ii) Explore opportunities for securing shared goals and priorities; and
- (iii) Advise on partnership working arrangements to deliver the strategy.

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