

ACCESSIBILITY PLANNING CONSULTATION – SUMMARY REPORT

OCTOBER 2008

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report summarises the feedback and responses from the County Council's accessibility planning consultation. The outcomes will inform and identify the priorities that will need to be taken forward by the new local authorities of Cheshire West & Chester and Cheshire East following Local Government Reorganisation in April 2009.
- 1.2 The accessibility planning process aims to promote social inclusion and access to everyday services for all. However, there is a need to focus resources on "those most in need" and those who have the most difficulty in accessing essential services.
- 1.3 The County Council were proposing to focus on the following priority areas:
 - 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.
- 1.4 A twelve week consultation period ran from 30th June until 19th September 2008. The purpose of the consultation was to seek the views of stakeholders, partner organisations, service users and the wider community on the County Council's approach to accessibility.
- 1.5 A series of meetings and events were held throughout the consultation period, utilising existing strategic and local level partnerships wherever possible. The organisations who were invited to contribute to the consultation are listed as an Annex to this document.
- 1.6 In addition, an online survey was developed to enable service users and Cheshire residents to add their own knowledge and experience to the process. There were 320 respondents to the survey, which has collected data on perceptions of ease when accessing key services.
- 1.7 The views of older people have been well represented throughout the consultation. However, it has been difficult to engage young people and seek their views on the proposed priorities. This will be considered when evaluating the overall results and feedback.
- 1.8 The following sections of this report summarise the qualitative and quantitative responses for each proposed priority and also highlight other issues which were raised throughout the consultation.

2 PROPOSED PRIORITY: “ACCESS TO KEY SERVICES FROM RURAL AREAS, PARTICULARLY FOR OLDER PEOPLE”

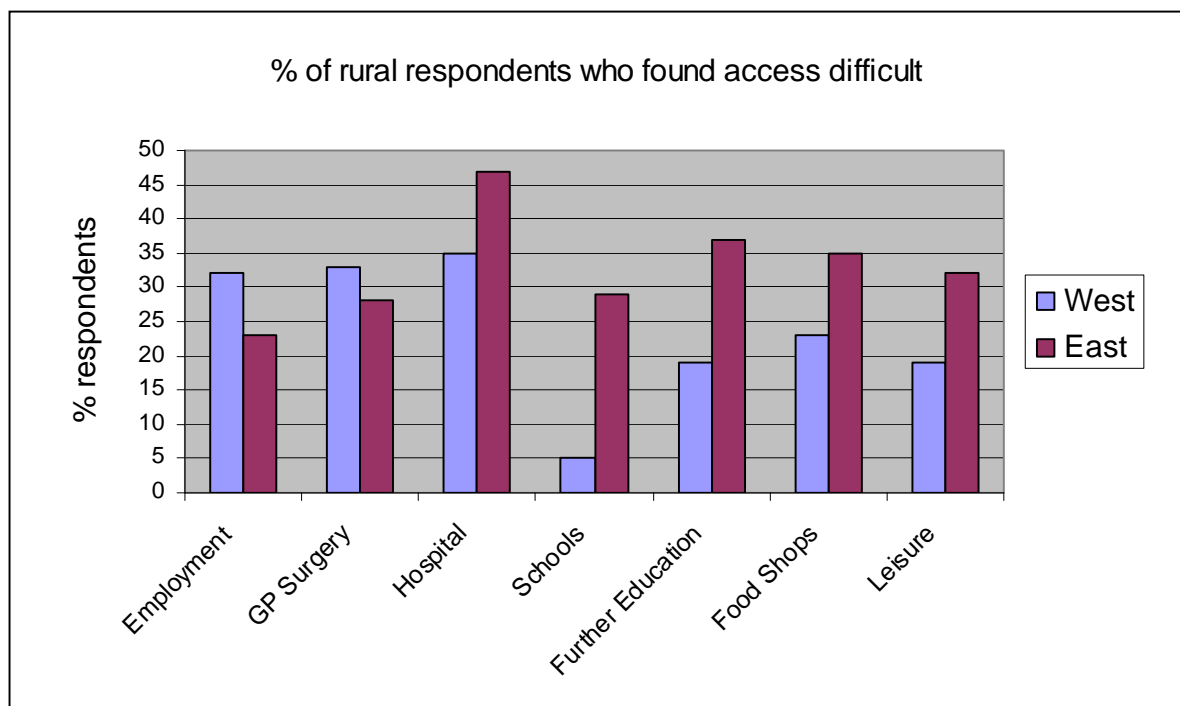
Introduction

2.1.1 40% of Cheshire’s population live in rural areas. The evidence gathered during the accessibility assessment identified the rural areas with limited access to public transport. It is recognised that rural communities can face particular accessibility problems and have to travel greater distances to reach key services.

2.1.2 Cheshire has an increasing ageing population and will see one of the most extreme shifts in age structure of any county in the country. There is also a larger proportion of older people in rural areas, so the proposal was to focus on the access requirements of older people.

Consultation Responses

2.2.1 Respondents to the survey were asked to state the ease or difficulty with which they can access key services. The chart below focuses on those who live in rural areas and those who found access difficult. The results have been split between Cheshire West & Chester and Cheshire East.



2.2.2 Across 5 of the 7 key services, a larger proportion of respondents from the rural areas of Cheshire East found access difficult. The service with the greatest variation in response was schools, where 29% of respondents from rural east found access difficult, in comparison to 5% from rural west. In addition, 37% of respondents from rural east found access to further education difficult, in comparison to 19% from rural west. However, a greater proportion of respondents from the rural areas of Cheshire West & Chester found access to employment and GP surgeries more difficult.

Rural Transport

- 2.3.1 Throughout the consultation, rural transport was felt to be a priority for isolated rural communities. Many people would like to see more bus services operating in rural areas. It was felt that increasing the frequency, extending the operating hours (i.e. evenings & weekends) and improving the quality and reliability of services would improve access to services. It was also felt that bus operators should improve the training for drivers, so they are familiar with the route and adopt a more customer friendly approach.
- 2.3.2 Concern was also raised about the planned reduction in local rail services on the Crewe to Manchester line. It was felt that the railway line is a “lifeline” to rural communities (i.e. Holmes Chapel) and is used by schoolchildren and commuters to Manchester, Crewe and Stockport. It was felt that the bus services in the area do not provide a viable alternative and the planned reduction will affect the ease with which rural communities can access key services.
- 2.3.3 It was felt that transport in rural areas needs to be flexible and responsive to local needs. Community transport initiatives, such as dial-a-ride and community car schemes, are becoming increasingly more important and are perceived by many to be an integral part of the public transport network. The Chester District Community Car Scheme is currently run by Cheshire Community Action and is now over-subscribed, providing journeys for elderly and disabled passengers to shops and GP surgeries.
- 2.3.4 The physical accessibility of public transport was also raised as an issue of concern. Getting on and off buses and trains can be problematic for people with disabilities or mobility problems and people with prams/pushchairs. Helsby railway station platform was highlighted as a particular issue of concern, due to the distance between the train and the platform. It was felt that low floor buses should be used consistently on routes, so that people can be confident that they can travel on the services they wait for and make the return journey with ease.
- 2.3.5 Personal safety is an issue of concern on rural roads, where lack of footways can prevent people choosing walking as a mode of transport. Where footways exist, they can be poor quality and lack consistent dropped kerb provision. This can affect access to rural service outlets, as well as bus stop waiting areas. There was also felt to be an issue with bus stop locations in some rural areas, as many seem to be in the wrong place for the user, particularly for the hail and ride services.
- 2.3.6 Lack of information can be a major barrier to the awareness and uptake of both public transport services and community transport initiatives. If people are unaware that services exist they cannot use them. It was felt that timetable information can often be difficult to understand and the style and size of print may not be accessible to all. It was felt that Traveline could be further promoted to raise the profile of the service.
- 2.3.7 Some rural residents felt they have no option but to travel by car, which is unsustainable and becoming increasingly expensive. It was recognised that as people get older they may not be able to continue driving to access services and households with no private transport, or one car households, are particularly at risk.

Service Provision / Delivery

- 2.4.1 In addition to transport, the consultation with rural communities identified village halls and community centres, local shops, GP surgeries and Post Offices as the services that people need most in rural areas. Where services have already been lost, it was felt that this has had an effect on the sense of community. It was felt that without local services, people can become increasingly isolated and excluded in their community.
- 2.4.2 It is recognised that village halls and community centres often provide the only focal point and hub for the village. They can also host numerous other services, such as leisure, cultural and educational activities. There is also an opportunity for multi-use premises to be developed in village halls (e.g. shop). In addition, the 'Extended Schools' programme provides the opportunity to utilise existing school buildings.
- 2.4.3 The poor financial viability of village shops and Post Offices has led to a number of closures of retail outlets across the county. However, it was felt that the social benefit of these service outlets is often overlooked. Many people use village shops and Post Offices as social meeting places, which was felt to be invaluable to rural communities.
- 2.4.4 There is thought to be a lack of young people in rural areas, due to a severe lack of affordable housing. With a diminishing working population in rural areas, unable to afford to live in Cheshire villages, it is becoming increasingly difficult for communities to sustain services. It was also felt that the potential for community run shops must not be overlooked (e.g. Antrobus Community Shop Association).
- 2.4.5 An increasing number of services are available online and it is important for rural areas to have access to good broadband infrastructure. However, the majority of older people do not have internet access and do not know how to use, or do not want to use, online services (e.g. banking, shopping). It was thought that some older people may appreciate an opportunity for computer/internet training. Telephone facilities were seen as a useful service, particularly for those who cannot use online services.
- 2.4.6 Home delivery of groceries was felt to be a good service and it was suggested that community groups could work with supermarkets to arrange bulk orders. Throughout the consultation there was general support for mobile services or combined multi-use services (e.g. shop in the pub).

Summary

- 2.5.1 There was a general consensus and agreement throughout the consultation that "access to key services from rural areas" is a priority issue for action. The proposed priority included a particular focus on the access requirements of older people in rural areas. This approach received widespread support throughout the consultation.
- 2.5.2 The survey found "access to key services from rural areas" was a top priority for older respondents (aged 55+) in both the east and west of the county. In addition, Cheshire Community Action, a number of Parish Councils and the Older People's Network welcomed the focus on the ageing rural population. However, access to employment and activities for young people was also raised as an issue for consideration, as well as the access needs of parents with young children (aged 0-5) in rural areas.

3 PROPOSED PRIORITY: “ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES, PARTICULARLY IN RELATION TO PRIMARY CARE TRUST (PCT) MODERNISATION PLANS”

Introduction

- 3.1.1 The Government have set out plans to modernise Primary Care Trusts and restructure the way in which health care services are delivered. The aim is to provide a greater range of health care services at a local level, to support the shift of care closer to patients in the community. The County Council proposed to focus on the accessibility implications of these proposals, particularly where GP surgeries are being co-located into new purpose built premises.
- 3.1.2 In addition, access to hospitals has been identified as an issue of concern. The accessibility assessment found that 33% of households have to travel more than 30 minutes by public transport to reach a hospital.

Consultation Responses

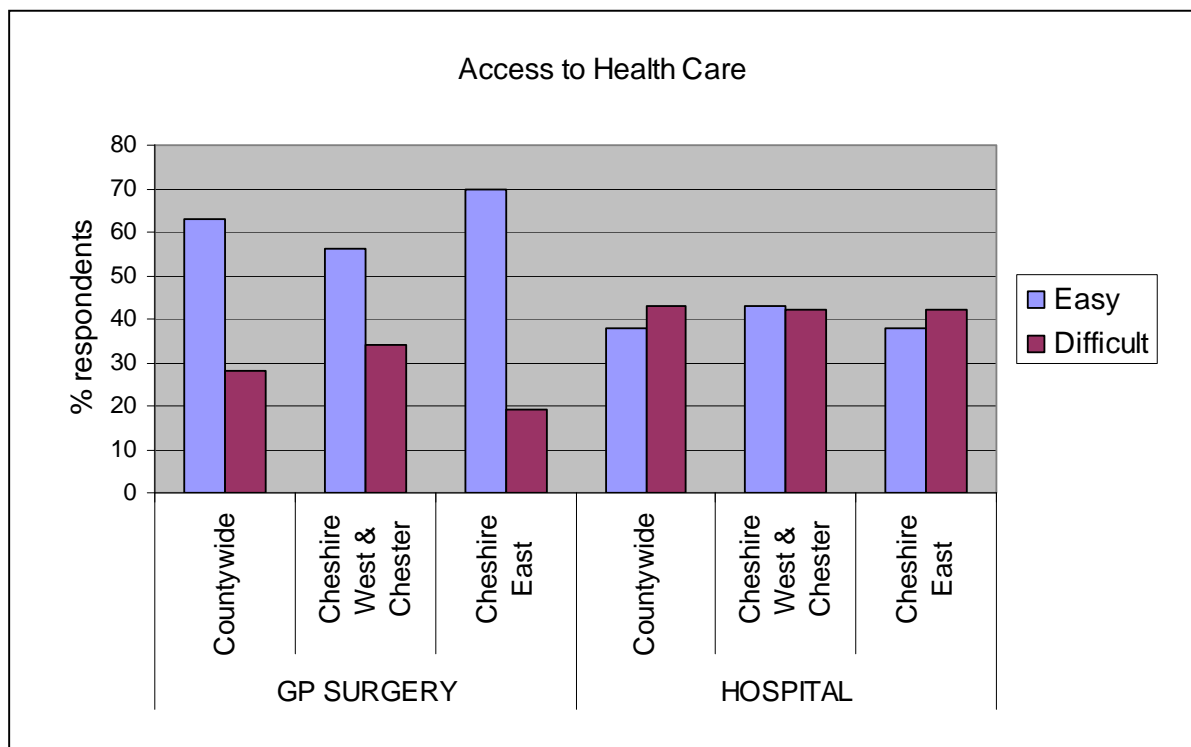
GP Surgeries

- 3.2.1 The survey found that 1 in 4 (26%) respondents walked to their GP surgery and 62% used their car. Overall (countywide) 63% of respondents found it either very easy or quite easy to access their GP surgery and 28% of respondents found it either very difficult or quite difficult (see chart below).
- 3.2.2 A larger proportion of respondents in Cheshire West & Chester found access difficult (34%), in comparison to Cheshire East (19%). The reasons why access was felt to be difficult include inflexible opening times, living in a rural area, infrequent public transport, lack of parking, lack of dropped kerbs and difficult to book an appointment with their own doctor.
- 3.2.3 The Primary Care Trust (PCT) modernisation plans stimulated much debate throughout the consultation period. There are two PCT's in Cheshire and each are at a different stage in developing their modernisation plans. Central & Eastern Cheshire PCT are at an advanced stage and many new health centres have opened across the area. West Cheshire PCT is at an early stage in developing their proposals and GP surgeries have yet to be relocated.
- 3.2.4 There was general support for the decentralisation of health care and more services being available at GP surgeries and health centres, rather than hospitals. However, there was also concern that patients may have to travel greater distances to reach the new premises. It was felt that when new services are planned or changed, accessibility issues need to be considered at a very early stage, including liaison with public transport operators. Any measures to improve access need to be well managed, monitored and evaluated (i.e. Travel Plans).
- 3.2.5 Patients who have visited the new Eagle Bridge Health & Wellbeing Centre in Crewe and Rope Green Medical Centre in Shavington were concerned about the lack of direct bus services to the centres. Although GP surgeries have been relocated, it was felt the bus stops and routes in the area have not changed to support the relocation. This

highlights the importance of integrating accessibility assessments into the development control process and ensuring that proposed sites are in accessible locations.

3.2.6 It was felt that there should be a choice between booking a GP appointment in advance and booking on the day. Flexibility in opening hours would also ease the pressure on the appointment systems (i.e. evenings & weekends). When appointment cards are issued, it was suggested that travel options could be included.

3.2.7 The Health Coach scheme was felt to be a particularly useful as people can ring up and discuss medical problems with trained professionals. This reassures people and reduces the need to travel to a health centre. The NHS Direct helpline had a mixed response - some people felt the service was excellent and others thought it was poor. It was also suggested that mobile or part-time GP surgeries would be beneficial, particularly in rural areas.



Hospitals

3.3.1 The survey found that 80% of respondents travel by car to a hospital and 10% use public/passenger transport. Respondents found hospitals the most difficult service to access. Overall (countywide) 43% found it very difficult or quite difficult and 38% found it very easy or quite easy.

3.3.2 The chart above illustrates the difference between ease of access to hospitals and GP surgeries. The proportion who found access to hospitals difficult is equal across the Unitary Council areas (42%). The reasons why access was felt to be difficult include not having access to a car, poor, inaccessible and infrequent public transport, living in

a rural area, inadequate number of disabled parking spaces and car parking problems. It was felt that car parking charges at hospitals are too expensive.

- 3.3.3 Hospitals were felt to be particularly difficult to access for older people. Patient transport services appear to operate different criteria in different areas and people would like to see a best practice scheme rolled out across the county. Introducing Park & Ride services to hospitals was suggested as a measure to improve access.

Prevention & Wellbeing

- 3.4.1 The links between higher levels of deprivation and poor health outcomes are well established. It was felt that access to health should also include access to a healthy diet and physical activity. Within the health sector, poor diet and nutrition are recognised as a major contributory factor towards ill health and premature death.
- 3.4.2 It was felt that improving access to fresh food (i.e. fruit and vegetables) should be considered as part of the accessibility planning process. The survey found that currently 61% of respondents found access to food shops very easy or quite easy and 27% found access very difficult or quite difficult.
- 3.4.3 It was felt that access to the countryside, including parks and open spaces in urban areas, should be included as a key consideration within the access to health priority. The benefits of countryside recreation to both mental and physical health are well documented nationally and are a cornerstone of the Cheshire Rights of Way Improvement Plan (2006–2011). Improving access to walking and cycling opportunities for leisure and purposeful journeys should also be a key consideration.

Summary

- 3.5.1 There was a general consensus and agreement throughout the consultation that “access to health care” is a priority issue for action. The survey found that hospitals were the most difficult of the 7 key services to access. In addition, the need to assess the accessibility implications of the PCT modernisation plans received widespread support throughout the consultation. The survey found that “access to health care” was selected as the top priority for respondents aged under 55 in Cheshire East.
- 3.5.2 It was recognised that a range of services are important to people’s physical, mental and social wellbeing. Access to fresh food, physical activity and leisure opportunities also contribute to preventing ill health and it was felt that they should be considered as part of the accessibility planning process.
- 3.5.3 The proposed priority included a particular focus on the PCT modernisation plans. However, the feedback and results from the consultation suggest a need to review this priority in order to acknowledge the particular difficulty which has been identified regarding access to hospitals.
- 3.5.4 Access to GP surgeries and hospitals should be considered together, with partners across the health sector. The modernisation plans will result in a greater range of health care services being delivered locally through GP surgeries, rather than hospitals, reducing the need for patients to access hospitals in future.

4 PROPOSED PRIORITY: “ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT, PARTICULARLY FROM AREAS OF DEPRIVATION”

Introduction

- 4.1.1 From a national and regional perspective, Cheshire is a relatively prosperous area. However, there are also pockets of serious deprivation. Around 8.4% of the population (57,400 people) live in areas which rank in England’s top 20% most deprived and unemployment rates are higher in these areas.
- 4.1.2 Given the links between deprivation and worklessness, the County Council proposed to focus on access to employment, particularly from areas of deprivation. The aim is to improve the life chances of residents and narrow the gap between the least and most affluent, as well as ensuring the local economy is developing in all areas of the county.

Consultation Responses

Employment

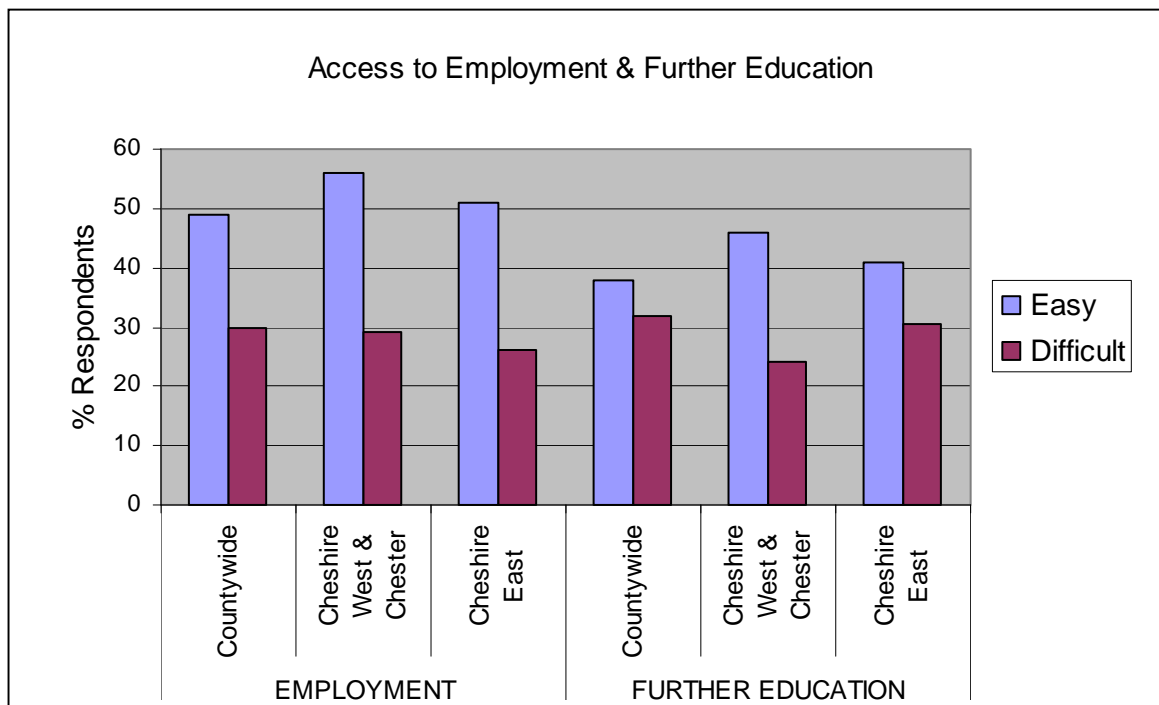
- 4.2.1 The survey found that 78% of respondents in employment travel to work by car and over 12% use public/passenger transport. Nearly half (47%) of overall (countywide) respondents found access to employment either very easy or quite easy. The reasons why access was felt to be easy include short travelling time, ability to work from home, travel to work by car with parking available, and good public transport.
- 4.2.2 30% of respondents in employment found access either very difficult or quite difficult. The reasons why access was felt to be difficult include lack of public transport or infrequent bus services (particularly in rural areas), cost of public transport, no local jobs, no access to a car, congestion and safety for cyclists.
- 4.2.3 The chart below illustrates the difference in response between the new Unitary Council areas, as well as the overall countywide response. The results are similar across the east and west areas of the county. However, a slightly larger proportion of respondents in the west found access to employment easy (+5%) and difficult (+3%). In Cheshire East, a larger proportion of respondents found access “neither easy nor difficult” (+8%).
- 4.2.4 It was acknowledged that there needs to be a link between the areas of labour availability and employment opportunities. It was recognised that assisting people to take up job opportunities has a positive effect on the individual (i.e. increase in confidence), the community (i.e. reduction in crime) and the economy.
- 4.2.5 It was also noted that the areas of deprivation were concentrated in urban centres and some people felt that they already benefit from good bus services – but do they link to major employment sites? It was felt that transport services should be co-ordinated with hours of work (i.e. shifts, flexible hours) at employment sites.
- 4.2.6 It was felt that there should be easier access to major employment bases, particularly Greater Manchester from Cheshire East and Liverpool from Cheshire West & Chester. Access to employment from rural areas was felt to be particularly difficult, due to a lack of local job opportunities and limited transport services.

- 4.2.7 Personal safety on and around public transport was raised as an issue of concern, particularly for women when travelling home from work in the evening, as well as young people and older people. It was felt that women can experience difficulties in returning to work following maternity leave, where childcare is an extra cost. It was suggested a mentoring system for all working age people, who may have problems accessing or staying in employment, would be useful.
- 4.2.8 It was also suggested that employers should take a more proactive role in promoting and encouraging the use of sustainable travel options, through implementing effective workplace Travel Plans. Existing transport services should be better publicised and promoted to raise awareness of the services which already exist.
- 4.2.9 In terms of the visitor economy, it was felt that there should be improved connectivity with key regional gateways, in particular Liverpool John Lennon Airport and Manchester Airport, as well as the main intercity gateways. There was also felt to be a need to strengthen relationships with cross-boundary operators such as Arriva, Mersey Rail, Northern Rail, Virgin Rail and the airports.
- 4.2.10 The Mersey Dee Alliance (MDA) Workwise project was highlighted as a successful scheme in the west Cheshire area, which aimed to remove transport as a barrier to residents in taking up employment, education or training opportunities. This scheme was a cross boundary initiative operating across the MDA sub-region but a number of initiatives have finished due to lack of funding.
- 4.2.11 There are a number of Wheels to Work schemes operating across Cheshire which were well received throughout the consultation. The scheme provides the short term loan of a scooter to people who have no suitable public or private transport to access a work, training or educational placement. However, the schemes are currently under threat due to lack of funding.

Further Education & Training

- 4.3.1 When considering access to employment, there is a need to consider skills matching and employability, as well as the location of job opportunities. The mix of “entry level” and skilled job opportunities may not match the mix of people with few or no qualifications and those with qualifications may not fit with the requirement of employers.
- 4.3.2 A higher proportion of the economically inactive lack a Level 2 qualification (e.g. GCSE’s grades A*-C) compared to the economically active, identifying a correlation between lack of skills and unemployment outcomes. It was felt to be necessary to consider access to employment, further education and training together.
- 4.3.3 The chart below illustrates that 36% of countywide respondents who access further education found it very easy or quite easy to access. A larger proportion of respondents in the west found access easy (46%). The reasons why access was felt to be easy include IT-based learning courses, access to a car, short travelling distance, and reasonable parking available.

4.3.4 Nearly a third (31%) of countywide respondents who access further education found it very difficult or quite difficult to access. A larger proportion of respondents in the east found access difficult. 37% of respondents from rural east found access difficult, in comparison to 25% of urban east. The reasons why access was felt to be difficult include inflexible rural transport, no local further education provision, unreliable buses, lack of pavements and cycle lanes, and no access to a car.



Summary

4.4.1 There was a general consensus and agreement throughout the consultation that “access to employment” is a priority issue for action. However, feedback suggests that it is necessary to extend this priority to include further education and training.

4.4.2 The proposed priority included a particular focus on areas of deprivation. The Cheshire & Warrington Economic Alliance, Job Centre Plus and the Mersey Dee Alliance Transport & Accessibility Group welcomed the focus on areas of deprivation. However, some participants felt that young people in rural areas face particular difficulties in accessing employment and training opportunities.

4.4.3 Within the Cheshire West & Chester area (i.e. Chester & Ellesmere Port) there is an established commitment to tackle worklessness in areas of deprivation. In addition, the survey found that respondents aged under 55 from the west Cheshire area, selected “access to employment” as the top priority.

4.4.4 However, in Cheshire East there may be a need for a more local focus. For example, in the Crewe urban area it may be appropriate to focus on areas of deprivation, whereas in the rural areas it may be appropriate to focus on the access needs of young people.

5 OTHER SERVICES & ISSUES RAISED

Visitor Attractions

- 5.1.1 It was felt that good public transport provision is also important for visitors and the environmental sustainability of tourism. Feedback from Visit Chester & Cheshire highlighted that many attractions in Cheshire rely too heavily on the car and this makes them inaccessible for visitors arriving by public transport or for residents with no car ownership.
- 5.1.2 While there is a recognition that a large part of the market consists of people from outside the area, or those visiting friends and relatives in Cheshire, a high proportion of visits are made by Cheshire residents as day visits. Visitor attractions provide occasions for leisure outings, events and festivals, as well as evenings out and are an important economic benefit to Cheshire. Marketing and promotion of public transport services to Cheshire residents should therefore also take account of visitors' needs and where possible opportunities should be taken to adapt provision.

Leisure Facilities / Opportunities

- 5.2.1 The survey found that nearly half (49%) of respondents found access to leisure facilities very easy or quite easy. The reasons why access was felt to be easy include living close to facilities, access to a car, adequate parking and good opening times.
- 5.2.2 30% of respondents found access to leisure facilities very difficult or quite difficult. The reasons why access was felt to be difficult include living in a rural area, no access to a car, limited and infrequent public transport, high cost of transport and lack of co-ordination & information regarding what is available.
- 5.2.3 It was felt that access to leisure facilities could tie-in with the 2012 Olympics promotion (i.e. cycling, swimming). Exercise classes in local community buildings would help to improve health and social wellbeing. It was suggested that access to leisure opportunities in Manchester should improve (i.e. theatre, cinema, shopping).

Schools

- 5.3.1 The County Council's 'Transforming Learning Communities' programme (review of education provision) raised some concern during the consultation. However, the survey respondents found schools the easiest key service to access, with 64% who access schools finding it easy to access. The reasons why access was felt to be easy include the close location to home, short walking distance, or regular public/school bus service.
- 5.3.2 15% of respondents who access schools found them either very difficult or quite difficult to access. A larger proportion of respondents the east found access difficult (19%), in comparison to the west (5%). When focusing on respondents from the east, 29% of respondents from rural areas found access difficult, in comparison to 6% of respondents from urban areas. The reasons why access was felt to be difficult include infrequent public transport, living in a rural area, long journey time and no access to a car.

5.3.3 Cheshire's 'Extended Schools' programme will result in a wider range services being offered outside school hours. The extra services are generally outside the curriculum and are offered for the benefit of pupils, other children and young people, parents/carers, families and the wider community.

6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 There was a general consensus and agreement throughout the consultation, that access to key services from rural areas, access to health and access to employment, further education & training should be priority issues for action. Access to key services from rural areas appears to be a particular issue of concern in Cheshire East and access to employment appears to be a greater priority in Cheshire West & Chester.
- 6.2 The consultation results suggest that both the three original priorities and the other additional issues referred to in this report are all relevant to progressing and implementing an Accessibility Strategy within both of the new Unitary Council areas.
- 6.3 The review of Cheshire's Accessibility Strategy and consultation process has provided a valuable strategic overview of the accessibility concerns for Cheshire West & Chester and Cheshire East. The next stage in taking forward the accessibility planning process is to develop more detailed local area assessments, consider a range of potential solutions through option appraisal and develop local area action plans.
- 6.4 The consultation has confirmed the need for public, private, community and voluntary sectors to work in partnership, to share ownership of accessibility problems and identify solutions based on the needs of local communities. The development of effective partnerships will help to focus on priority outcomes with finite resources. It will empower local citizens to have greater influence on how services are delivered and outcomes achieved.
- 6.5 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. As the partnership frameworks for the new Unitary Councils develop, it provides an opportunity to mainstream accessibility planning and work more closely with partners to incorporate accessibility principles into wider strategies, policies and procedures.

Jenny Lees
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For further information, please contact:

Transport Strategy Unit
Backford Hall
Cheshire County Council
Chester
CH1 6EA
Tel: 01244 973918
jenny.lees@cheshire.gov.uk