

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This evidence is provided by Dorset Council to the House of Common's Transport Select Committee session on rural connectivity.
- 1.2 This short briefing paper provides a summary of the Dorset context, the challenges we face in providing high quality rural transport services and what we would like to see done that would support us to improve rural connectivity and mobility.

2. Dorset in Context

- 2.1 Dorset Council was formed in April 2019 as a single unitary council covering the former districts of East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset and Weymouth & Portland.
- 2.2 The council area covers some 252,000 hectares and is home to 379,791 people. [Click](#) to view area profile for Dorset Council.
- 2.3 The main urban areas include Dorchester (county town), Weymouth and Portland, and the South East Dorset area surrounding Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch (which fall under neighbouring BCP Council).
- 2.4 Dorset is a predominantly rural county with one of the lowest population densities in England - 152 people/km²
- 2.5 A high proportion of our residents live in areas that are significantly deprived when it comes to accessing services (essential services such as a GP Surgery, Post Office, General Store and Primary School). 175,000 residents (46%) live in areas that fall within the top 20% most deprived nationally ([Figure 1](#)) for access to services according to 2019/20 data.
- 2.6 It is estimated that 1 in 5 households are vulnerable to social isolation / loneliness in Dorset (see [2015 report](#)).
- 2.7 84.8% of Dorset households own one or more vehicles, compared to 74.3% in England (2011 Census).
- 2.8 Dorset is a popular tourist destination, with an estimated 15+ million visitor trips per annum contributing an estimated £1Bn per year.
- 2.9 Dorset has one of the highest percentages of older people with 29.4% (111,765) aged 65 and over compared to an England average of 18.6%. The 2021 Census data shows the number of people aged 65 to 74 years rose by around 12,000 (an increase of 26.4%) compared to 2011.

3. Local Bus Network



- 3.1 The network map ([Figure 2](#)) shows the main bus routes in Dorset. These corridors provide important connectivity between our urban areas.
- 3.2 Most urban bus services are run commercially. The three main operators are Go South Coast, First Bus and South West Coaches.
- 3.3 Eleven inter-urban services are supported by the council connecting the larger towns and villages. The majority of these services operate hourly or less frequently throughout the daytime Monday to Friday, with far fewer services operating in the evenings and at weekends. Connectivity would be greatly improved by services operating more frequently on these important corridors, but the council lacks the available funding to achieve this.
- 3.4 The council's annual budget (2022/23) for public bus service provision is £1.4m. The council is seeking to identify sources of funding to enable it to increase the budget from 2023/24 and beyond.
- 3.5 The heat maps ([Figures 3 to 5](#)) demonstrate stark differences in provision between typical midweek peak operations compared with evening and weekend provision. Regular public transport is restricted to urban areas in Weymouth, Dorchester and from south eastern Dorset into the BCP Council area, operating up to every 15 minutes on many routes.
- 3.6 [Figure 6](#) highlights the significant areas of rural Dorset (particularly in the North and West) that have no access by public transport to significant service centres. Across Dorset, just over one in five of our residents (83,500) do not live within thirty minutes by public transport of a town centre (during peak am weekday times, 2022).
- 3.7 During the summer additional routes are registered aimed at capturing the leisure market along the Jurassic Coast from Lyme Regis to Poole. Winter levels of service are far less frequent, particularly on Sundays. These seasonal variations in service levels have an effect on peoples' abilities to access employment opportunities.
- 3.8 During and since the Covid pandemic, the council has done everything in its power to protect the existing bus network. The network has stayed stable but there has been some change in the frequency of individual services. Five commercial routes have reduced in frequency and one commercial service in Weymouth has been cancelled (recently reinstated on a short-term trial basis by a new operator). However, there are several significant challenges that persist and pose a real risk to the bus network, particularly when BRG funding ends on the 31st March.
- 3.9 Public bus services, particularly those supported by the council, play a critical role in the delivery of home to school transport. The council's policy is where possible to place school pupils on public buses rather than provide dedicated school transport. Therefore, any contraction of the public network would cause major issues delivering school transport and have significant budget implications.
- 3.10 During 2022 five contracts to operate supported routes were handed back to the council, and a further contract reached the end of its contract period. The contract costs for these routes have risen by up to 100%. These services have been retendered using a new contract model which will give the council greater control over service levels and fares, with the



council in future retaining the revenues. A further two supported routes will be retendered in 2024 when the contracts come up for renewal.

- 3.11 There are over fifty community car and dial-a-bus services operating within the council area. The number of schemes has reduced since the Covid pandemic, mainly due to a reduction of volunteers available to run them. These schemes play a vital role filling in gaps in the bus network to support some of the most vulnerable residents in our communities, but they do not provide a level of service that allows residents to access employment and health appointments on a regular basis.

4. The challenges for Dorset

- 4.1 Dorset has significant transport challenges that need to be overcome in order to transform local public transport services.
- 4.2 Rural places are financially left behind. The Dorset BSIP was not allocated any government bus transformation programme funding. Since 2017/18 the council has received zero government Revenue Support Grant to support local bus provision. Dorset receives £395,095 per annum in Local Authority Bus Subsidy Ring Fenced (Revenue) Grant, but this allocation has been the same since 2019/20.
- 4.3 The council receives an annual Integrated Transport Block capital allocation of £1.9m for local transport scheme improvements. This is third lowest allocation to a county/shire council in the country. This allocation has not increased since 2015/16 and due to inflation is now worth considerably less. Without access to government grant funding, capital and revenue, bus improvements are restricted to those actions that can be achieved through existing programmes and closer partnership working.
- 4.4 The Covid-19 pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis continues to prove to be a huge challenge for the council and has had a dramatic impact on the council's financial position as income levels have fallen while service demand and expenditure has increased. Dorset Travel is facing cost pressures of circa £2.5m in the current year. There is a national picture where all aspects of travel, but especially SEND transport, are facing significant cost increases - well above the rate of inflation. Significant emphasis is now being placed on transport transformation, with the intention to reduce overall cost. Budget proposals to go to cabinet in January 2023 recognise the wide range of issues facing Dorset Travel and the budget for Public Transport is set to be increased by £360k. These cost pressures come against a general context of increasing costs and financial pressures across the whole authority.
- 4.5 Our bus operators are struggling with rising operating costs, staff shortages, and falling revenues. In August 2022 Yellow Buses, who operated across the south east Dorset area, went into liquidation. Three other bus companies have withdrawn services and no longer operate in the council area. The Bus Recovery Grant funding has been a lifeline for operators but is due to end in March 2023. The small pool of bus operators in the area creates risks in terms of tendering contracts and securing value for money.



- 4.6 Large areas of rural Dorset have no bus service and our communities therefore suffer poor access to daily essentials, increasing social isolation and reducing opportunities, as well as seeing greater impacts from the cost-of-living crisis.
- 4.7 The bus network in Dorset is failing to meet the expectations and needs of many people. The key issues identified are too infrequent bus services, coverage of the network in rural areas, and the cost of fares. Connections between different modes of transport has also been highlighted.
- 4.8 Evidence from Citizens Advice provided in 2019 highlighted issues related to travel (distances, lack of transport options, travel costs), and the lack of services – physical agencies and broadband / mobile signals. Difficulties attending health appointments was also raised as a recurring theme for many of their clients. It was also highlighted that these issues can be exacerbated by isolation, and lack of awareness of how and where to seek information and help.
- 4.9 Transport has been highlighted as a significant issue for young people. [Recent research](#) undertaken by the Dorset AONB team and Dorset Young Researchers identified that many young people living in rural areas are not able to access good quality public transport. A lack of public transport was identified as the top barrier to accessing and enjoying the Dorset countryside. The lack of public transport also impacts on the choices that young people make when making decisions about their post 16 education/employment opportunities.
- 4.10 There are low levels of satisfaction with bus services in Dorset. Only 29% of respondents were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their local bus services in a council 2021 public online survey. The latest (2021) National Highways and Transportation (NHT) annual public satisfaction survey shows 49% are satisfied with bus services in Dorset, compared to the national average of 60%.
- 4.11 An ageing population is creating an over-reliance on concessionary fare income to support services. Dorset sees a higher rate of ENCTS use versus regional and national proportions. In 2019/20 45% of bus journeys were made by concessionary passengers. The council reimburses operators for journeys made by passholders boarding buses within its boundary.
- 4.12 A growing elderly population will put the concessionary fares budget under severe pressure. Many people aged 65 and over are still choosing not to travel on public transport following the covid pandemic and this is impacting the ongoing viability of service provision.
- 4.13 Over the past 10 years Dorset has seen a significant reduction in passenger journeys on local bus services. Covid has also had a dramatic effect on the number of people travelling as these figures show:
- 2018/2019 – 8.2m
2019/2020 – 7.6m
2020/2021 – 2.4m
2021/2022 – 4.8m
- 4.14 Passenger numbers have steadily grown through 2021/22 and 2022/23. However, they remain significantly below pre-covid levels, operator data shows that passenger numbers have only returned to between 70-80%.



- 4.15 Winter timetables do not support residents and encourage them to use these services year-round. In February 2022 this led to a local resident offering to fund (£3k) a Sunday service to keep the service running following an operator decision to withdraw it. The operator backtracked and continues to provide the service commercially.
- 4.16 Additional summer services are run commercially on routes serving campsites and tourist locations along the coastal areas of the Jurassic Coast. Despite this many key road routes become heavily congested through the summer with visitor traffic on the A31, A35, A351, A354 causing lengthy delays. Further growth in tourism is not sustainable without significant improvements to public transport within the county.
- 4.17 Reliable onward travel connections are important to people. However, without more frequent services, implementation of reliable interchange is difficult, particularly where bus services are trying to connect with rail or coach journeys which are also infrequent.
- 4.18 Average adult fares are higher in comparison to national averages. Figures for Dorset show a +£0.27 difference. Until recently each operator set the fare structure for their services whether they were commercial or supported by the council. Under the councils new tendering model for supported routes, the council will now set the fares for those services operated on its behalf. The council intends to introduce a multi operator 'Dorset Travel' ticket that can be used across the network of supported routes and will engage with operators of the commercial networks to expand this across all routes in Dorset. We would also like to standardise a youth fare product for 16-25 year olds.
- 4.19 Bus punctuality is below the target of 95% within the window of tolerance (up to one minute early to five minutes late). Estimates of bus punctuality across Dorset show only 72.9% (2021/22) are on time, below both regional (81.9%) and national (83.0%) levels. Traffic flows in urban areas have a significant effect on local bus service punctuality. However, large scale bus priority is not suitable in much of Dorset, especially in rural areas where traffic congestion and delays on bus routes are not common. Dorset will therefore require a targeted approach to bus priority to address the causes of delay and disruption.

5. What do rural areas need?

- 5.1 The council requires access to long long-term grant funding, capital and revenue, in order to transform public transport as per the vision in the Dorset BSIP and deliver the councils five strategic priorities as set out in the [Dorset Council Plan 2022-24](#).
- 5.2 Table 2 sets out our short-term BSIP delivery programme that the council can deliver within our existing budget over the next three years, and additional improvements that can be delivered if external funding is secured. Full proposals will be in the refreshed Dorset BSIP, to be published in Spring 2023.
- 5.3 Central to our BSIP transformation programme is the development of a new 'hub and spoke' model with more frequent core services between hub locations, and a network of on-demand flexible feeder services enhancing rural mobility for communities across Dorset. The council seeks to make Dorset an exemplar for how flexible on demand services can increase rural accessibility to link up communities and reduce rural isolation. Access to additional government grant funding would enable this aspiration to be delivered.



- 5.4 Bus Recovery Grant funding must be extended to allow passenger numbers to continue to recover and enable time for some of the BSIP improvements to be implemented resulting in further sustainable passenger growth. If it is not, the outcome will be further service cancellations or timetable reductions which are counter to the aims of the National Bus Strategy. It is unlikely that the council would be able to support these services as they will be unaffordable to the local authority. This would result in passenger journeys being lost.
- 5.5 A review of the concessionary travel scheme and changes to the national policy to ensure it gives a fairer deal in rural areas and supports the delivery of better bus services for rural communities. The council is concerned that concessionary fares operator reimbursement in rural areas is inadequate and operators in Dorset are losing out due to exceptionally high demand for concessionary travel. The council needs Government to recognise the significant challenge this poses in Dorset and other rural authorities.
- 5.6 Baroness Vere wrote to Local Transport Authority Directors in July 2022 to signal the government's intent to change the approach to funding local transport schemes. From 2024/25, a proportion of the grant funding will be granted or withheld depending on an authority's performance, with the intention to focus on LTP development, EV charging, bus and active travel infrastructure. As part of this change to funding, we would like government to review the funding formulae used to determine capital grants provided by the DfT to local authorities for local transport schemes. In combination we need future local transport funding allocations to give a fairer deal to Dorset and other rural areas.
- 5.7 Funding for the Sub National Transport Bodies (STB's) to support rural mobility pilots, including those set out in the [South West Rural Mobility Strategy](#). A set of (primarily) mobility service and infrastructure interventions have been formed into bundles specific to different types of rural places (rural towns, villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings). The concept focuses on delivering trials of bundled project in different types of rural place, within either individual or groups of settlements. Led by different sectors, and either within or across rural local authority boundaries.
- 5.8 Extra support to enable rural authorities to address the challenge of net zero living in rural areas.
- 5.9 We ask that the Transport Select Committee undertakes a full enquiry to examine rural connectivity issues in detail including provision of public transport services, networks and funding.



Table 2 – Short term Dorset BSIP delivery programme 2022/23 – 2024/25

	Deliverable outputs with no external funding	Additional deliverable outputs with external funding
Better network coverage and scale	Focus on maintaining the current bus network and growing patronage. Introduce the council's new tender model. Work closely with operators to identify where service improvements could be introduced on a commercial basis and from contributions secured through planning.	Improve the core network frequency and coverage on commercial and supported routes. Introduce flexible on-demand transport services feeding into the core network. Maintain summer service levels throughout the year on core routes. Eventual aim to have 100% transport coverage across Dorset with the voluntary and commercial sectors working with Dorset Council and our bus operators.
Better integration between modes	Provide better integration between all modes - bus, walking, cycling, community and voluntary transport and rail. Co-ordinate timetables between different modes to enable connectivity.	Identify, introduce and monitor mobility hubs that include safe cycle storage, waiting facilities and travel information. Increase levels of connectivity between all transport modes, especially where there is known demand.
Better and clearer information	Develop a strategy that provides a consistent approach to information provision across the area to include printed, online and 'at stop' material. Create a Dorset travel portal to host this information. Produce a network map for all routes.	Continually develop the Dorset Travel portal until it is a 'one stop' platform for travel information, ticket purchase and, in the future the possibility to work with the Tourism industry to provide 'all in' ticketing for public transport users.
Better journey time reliability	Develop a targeted approach to bus priority using a range of measures including bus lanes, bus gates, advanced signal priority, traffic management, road space re-balancing and placemaking interventions.	Provide bus priority at known pinch points and along high frequency, high use corridors, and include them in the planning stage of any future Highways schemes.
Better value and integrated fares	Initiate a multi-operator Dorset ticket, initially across the tendered services but with the aim to roll out to include all operators and services. Promote Plus Bus tickets in relevant areas.	Introduce daily fare capping. Provide discounted tickets across the area. Introduce a Dorset wide ticket for ages 16-25.
Better vehicle standards and lower emissions	Work within the Enhanced Partnership to increase the standard of the fleet in Dorset across all operators.	Introduction of first zero emission buses as initial step towards a fully decarbonised fleet by 2035.



6. Maps

Figure 1 – Access to Service Deprivation 2019/20 (Lower Super Output Areas)

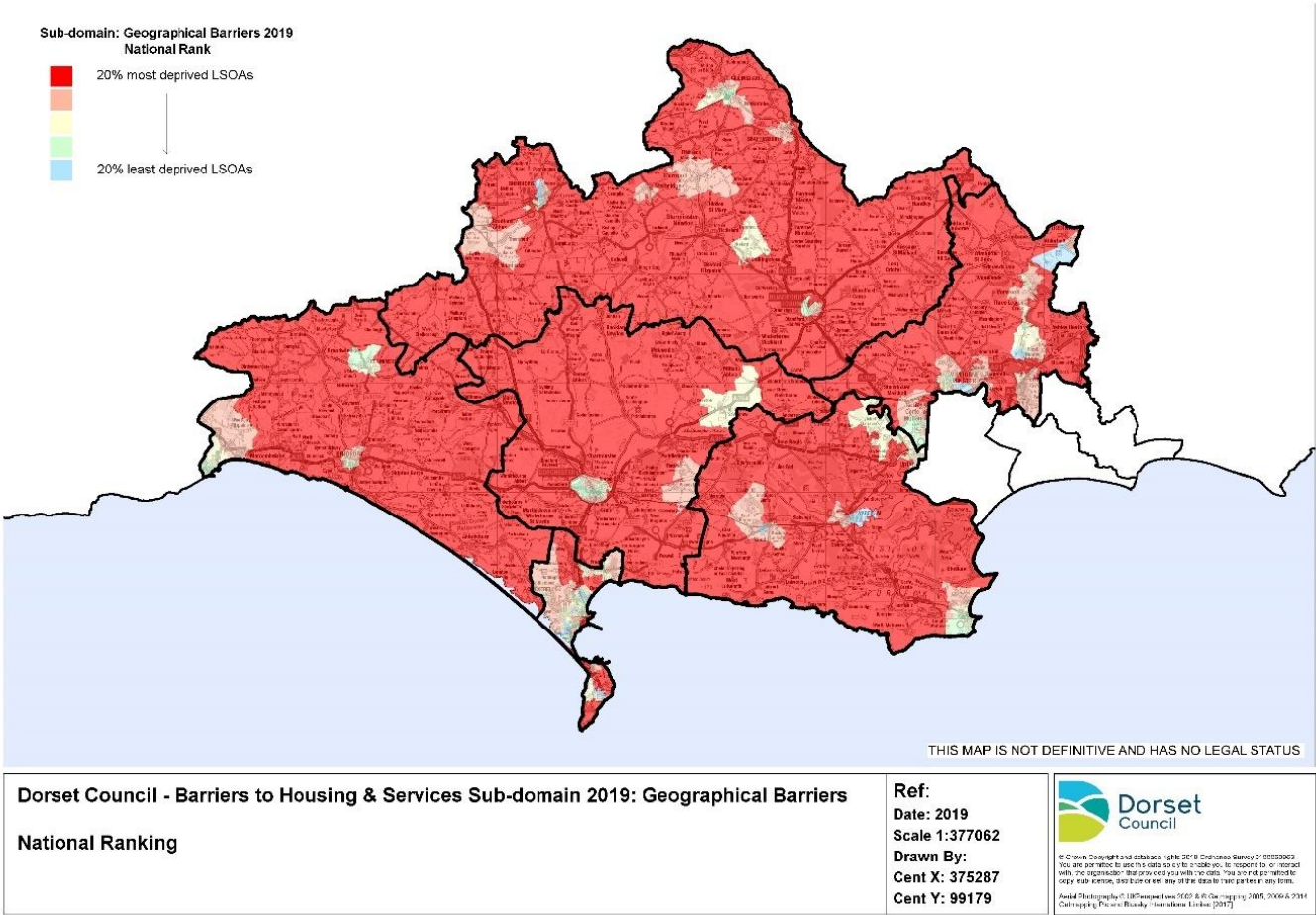


Figure 2 – Dorset Core Bus Network Map (November 2022)

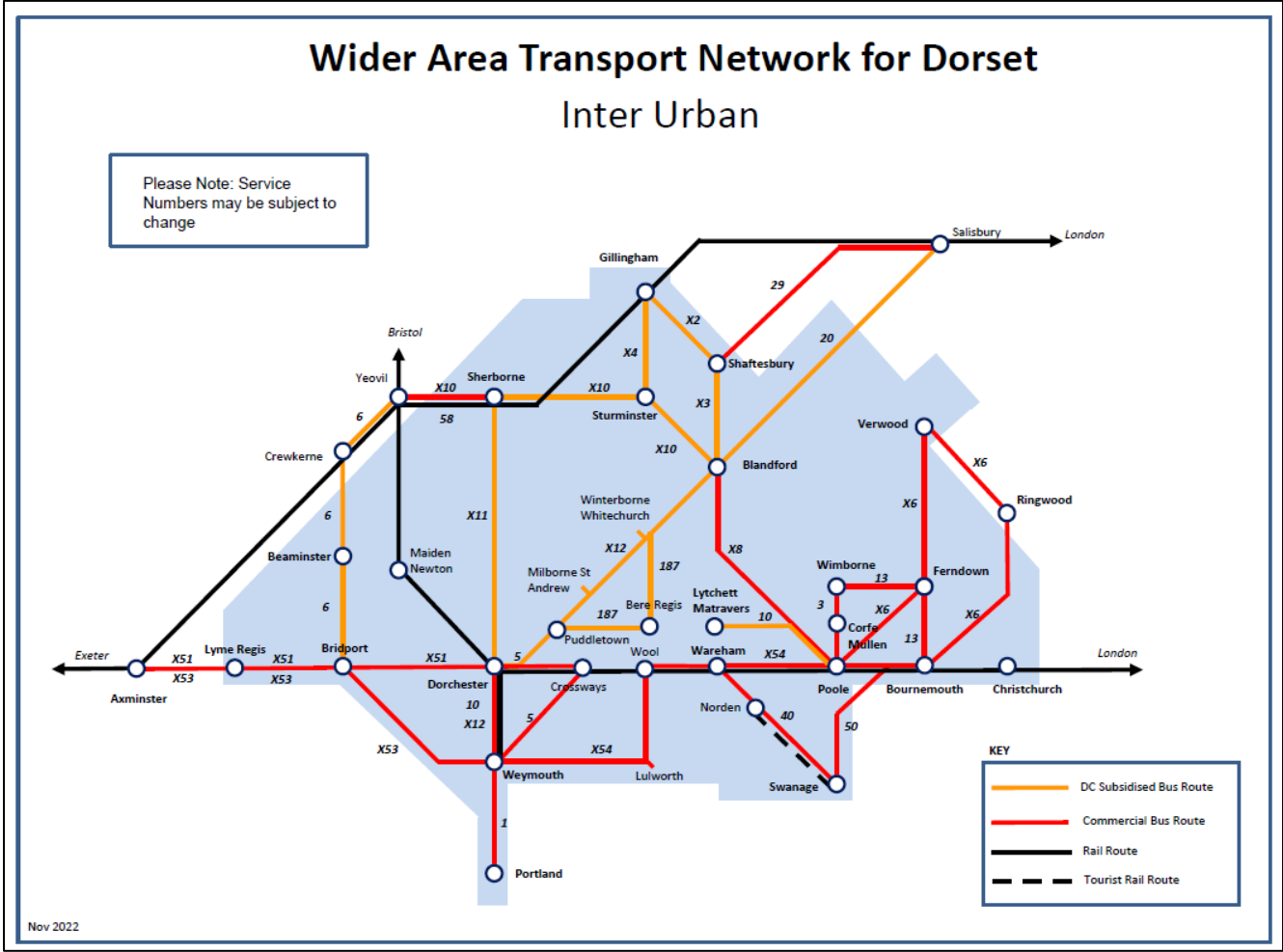


Figure 3 – Bus Service Frequency Heat Map Wednesday AM Peak (0700-0900)

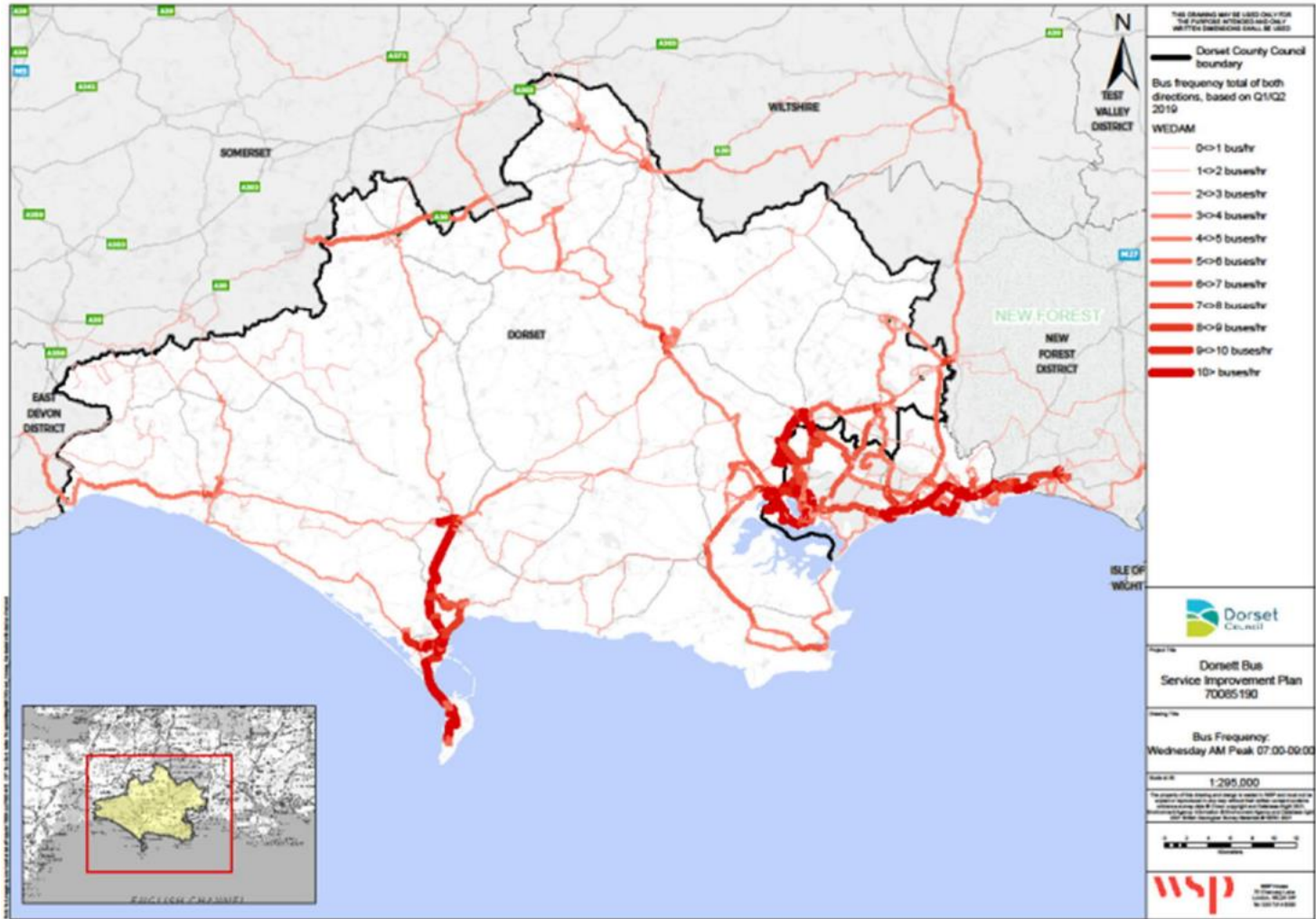
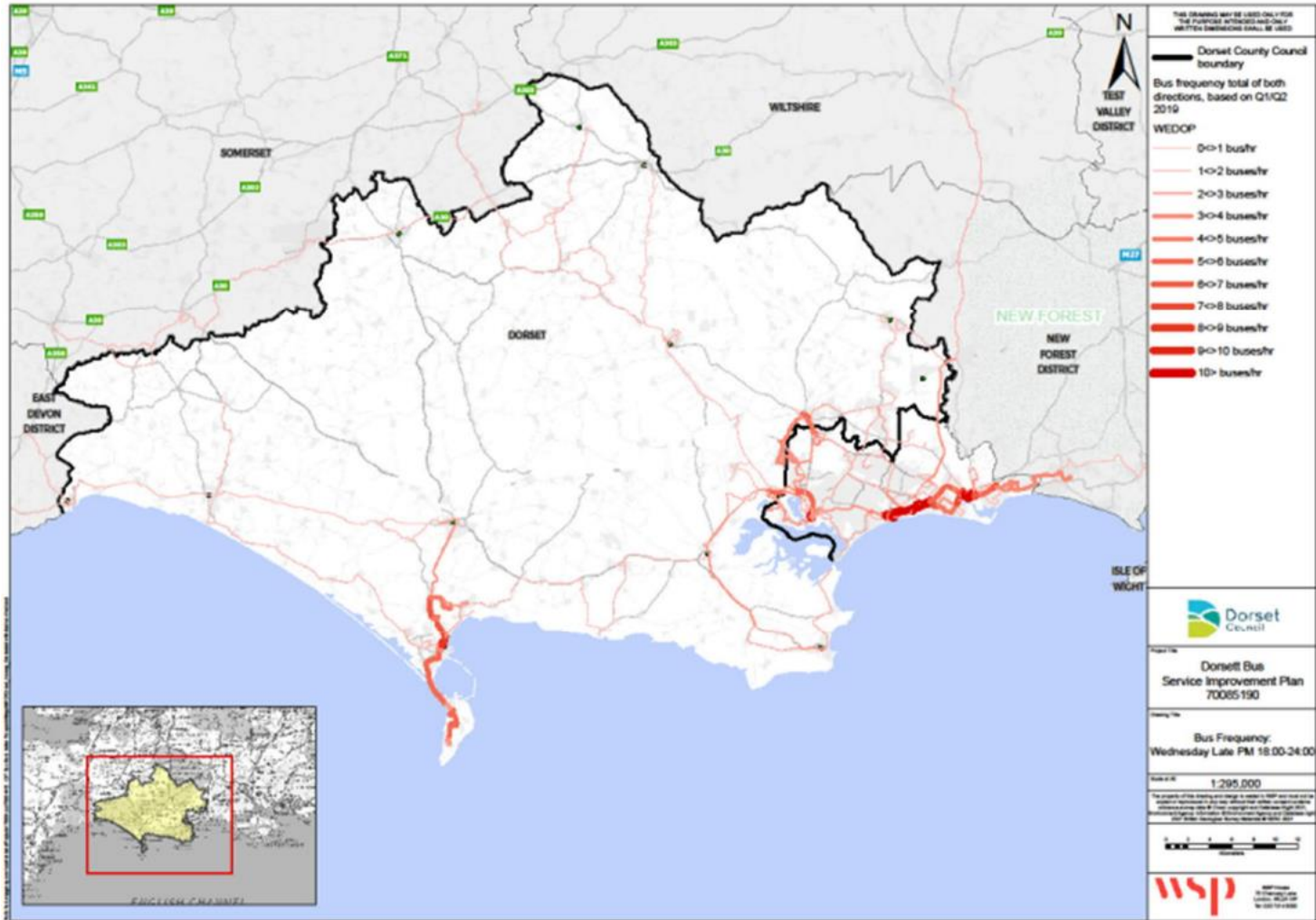


Figure 4 - Bus Service Frequency Heat Map Wednesday Late PM (1800-0000)



This document is a map of Dorset, England, illustrating bus frequency by road segment for the period Q1/Q2 2019. The map is titled "Dorset Bus Service Improvement Plan 70085190" and is part of a series of maps showing bus frequency for different times of day (Morning, Afternoon, Evening, Night). The map is produced by WSP (Worshipful Society of Professional Planners) for Dorset Council.

The map displays the Dorset County Council boundary, which is outlined in black. The map shows the following surrounding areas:

- SOMERSET (to the west)
- WILTSHIRE (to the north)
- NEW FOREST DISTRICT (to the east)
- EAST DEVON DISTRICT (to the southwest)
- ISLE OF WIGHT (to the southeast)

The map shows the following bus frequency ranges by road segment (based on Q1/Q2 2019 data):

- 0-1 bus/hr
- 1-2 bus/hr
- 2-3 bus/hr
- 3-4 bus/hr
- 4-5 bus/hr
- 5-6 bus/hr
- 6-7 bus/hr
- 7-8 bus/hr
- 8-9 bus/hr
- 9-10 bus/hr
- 10+ bus/hr

The map also includes an inset map showing the location of Dorset within the South of England, and a scale bar indicating a distance of 1:295,000. The map is dated 15/05/2019 and is part of a series of maps showing bus frequency for different times of day (Morning, Afternoon, Evening, Night).

Figure 6 - Midweek accessibility to tier one settlements at peak am and pm periods

