

Case Study:

Taunton Interchange

Introduction

Taunton is the county town for Somerset and a regional growth centre. It is a gateway to Exmoor National Park and the attractive Somerset coast, including the busy Butlins camp at Minehead.

Taunton station benefits from high-speed intercity rail connections to London, the Midlands and South West and a range of local services. The Taunton Interchange project focused on the strategic role of the station in helping the town to grow and to serve its wider region.

The problems

The local and regional authorities are aware that some of the local communities suffer from social deprivation and exclusion, not helped by transport and accessibility problems. There are particular concentrations of deprivation within parts of Taunton and Minehead and within rural communities such as Watchet, Williton and Dunster. Until the end of 2006 West Somerset was designated a European Objective 2 area. This entitled the area to regional development funding aimed at raising levels of economic activity closer to the European average. Regional planning guidance emphasised the role of poor access to jobs and services in rural West Somerset as a factor in relatively poor economic performance.

Regional and local planning and transport plans specifically recognised that upgrading integrated transport facilities was important for accommodating Taunton's strategic growth. Current facilities were a barrier to growth opportunities.

There were several specific issues at the station that this project was trying to address:

- Bus services at Taunton station were frequent and well used, but facilities for people wanting to use the bus were poor and hard to get to
- The stop for Taunton town centre, served by 13 buses per hour, was under a dark and damp railway bridge – not a secure or attractive location, and difficult for passengers with luggage
- People travelling further afield by regular buses to Minehead and elsewhere suffered from limited facilities and awkward access – for passengers and buses – within the south side car park
- Cycle parking facilities at the station were dated and insecure, and surrounding roads were not cycle friendly
- Increasingly, Taunton station car park was becoming full – sufficient for current travel patterns, but the local authorities and train operators were concerned that growth of rail use from Taunton would be stifled

The solution

FirstGroup coordinated a diverse partnership which included Network Rail, Somerset County Council, FirstBus and local developers. The company also took the lead in commissioning plans for an upgraded interchange. With assistance from First's funding consultants, Transport

Regeneration, the project partners agreed on the scope of the project. They then developed a funding package of over £300,000, which included the partners' own resources and a grant from the Strategic Rail Authority through its Rail Passenger Partnership scheme.

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The project resulted in several improvements. At the main station entrance, a new contraflow bus and cycle route, new bus stop and shelter and new drop-off/pick-up point for cars and taxis were created, as were segregated pedestrian access across the forecourt and additional cycle parking. At the former main station entrance, a new passenger waiting room with direct access to platforms and buses was built, a new circulation system meant buses don't need to reverse within the car park, and 70 additional parking spaces, with CCTV, were created. The station was improved throughout by better local and interchange information and signage and upgraded lighting.

The scheme will facilitate growth at the station and open up direct bus links to a range of destinations in Somerset, including Taunton town, Butlins in Minehead, the West Somerset Railway (a steam railway) at Watchet and Minehead stations, Wells, Glastonbury, Exmoor National Park and the Somerset coast.

Following on the success of the station scheme, a number of complementary initiatives have been gathering steam. They include:

- **Project Taunton**, an extensive regeneration scheme set to make Taunton 'the centre for sustainable and prosperous living in the South West'. Major regeneration proposals include retail development in the town centre

and residential and commercial redevelopment in the station area. Financial support for Project Taunton has come from the Environment Agency, the South West Regional Development Agency and local authorities, as well as developers

- **A rail industry scheme** to boost capacity and accommodate a higher level of rail service from the station, achieved through reusing a former island platform
- **'Steamlink'**, the local bus connection between Taunton station, the West Somerset Railway and Minehead which began in 2007. This service is sponsored by Somerset County Council and run in partnership with the West Somerset Railway and Cooks Coaches
- **'Adopt A Station'**, First Greater Western's community programme designed to make stations a vibrant part of the community, which was piloted at the station. A local primary school was invited to adopt the station and to contribute to station flower baskets and planters, with the children first visiting the Borough Council nurseries where the flowers were grown. In 2006 the Taunton station won a Royal Horticultural Society special award for its outstanding contribution to Taunton in Bloom.

Lessons learnt

The Taunton scheme is an excellent example of establishing a virtuous circle of continuous improvements. The interchange project is enabling increased rail use and growth of the town in its regional role, in addition to a host of successor projects in which the station plays a major role.

Making connections between local conditions and regional and national policies were key to establishing the project. The scheme also demonstrates the opportunities available through linking with indirect benefits such as economic regeneration and social inclusion.

Developer contributions facilitated the scheme's funding package. Council hierarchies and structures do not always make good communication easy. Even if inter-departmental communications are good, council planning officers need to know what the weaknesses of the local

integrated transport system are and require assurance that if funding were made available, these weaknesses could be addressed.

There are examples elsewhere in the UK of developer funds being allocated for integrated transport purposes but unspent for years and then returned to developers. Good communication and coordination is the remedy, both within and between stakeholder organisations. Rail industry input at an early stage to development frameworks and planning briefs is instrumental in achieving viable schemes. Often this input will be required some years before any investment is made available.

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