

Evidence submitted to the second consultation on Dorset Council/BCP Council LTP4 by the West Dorset Western Area Transport Action Group (WATAG)

Local, regional and sub-national bodies have declared climate emergencies and set ambitious transport carbon reduction targets. The level of ambition they thought was in scope when setting their targets has gone. Where next? Two options stand out:

1. The national position is accepted, local targets are re-interpreted as 'aspirations' and the real carbon ambition is pushed back by a few years.
2. Local authorities, businesses and citizens insist on a different approach from national government. Significant transport demand reduction is put back on the agenda which enables the delivery of a fairer and faster transition.

Marsden, G. 2023. Reverse gear: The reality and implications of national transport emission reduction policies. Centre for Research into Energy Demand Solutions. Oxford, UK. ISBN: 978-1-913299-17-0

Summary

- WATAG welcomes LTP4's ambition. The Plan's aspirations reflect what needs to be done to make personal travel and goods transport in Dorset (and BCP) 'sustainable' in the strong sense of ensuring the environmental, social and economic needs of the present can be met without damaging the capacity of future generations to meet their needs.
- LTP4 is not sufficiently integrated with the draft Local Plan, particularly, but not only, with regard to proposals for so-called 'sustainable' economic growth.
- Key performance indicators with regard to greenhouse gas emissions must be tightened. This applies both to transport operations, and to infrastructure construction and maintenance.
- The first Implementation Plan (2026-31) for Western and WATAG's part of Central Dorset has very few specific commitments. Those for future Implementation Plans (IP2, IP3) are even less forthcoming.
- Dorset Council faces tight financial restrictions. However WATAG expect these to encourage a higher degree of engagement with lower-tier local authorities and third-sector organizations than is evidenced by the Implementation Plan(s).
- WATAG is keen to be involved in developing plans for a Bridport Region Integrated Links network of public-transport and active-travel corridors, and similar schemes for the other Tier 2 settlements in our area, Lyme Regis and Beaminster.

1. Introduction

1.1 The West Dorset Western Area Transport Action Group (WATAG) campaigns for active travellers and public-transport users in all of Western and some of Central Dorset as defined by LTP4. We are a long-standing voluntary group, funded partly by small grants from Dorset Council (DC) and lower-tier councils. Our quarterly public meetings provide a forum for users/travellers, bus and rail operators, local and occasionally national politicians, council officers, voluntary groups and anyone else with an interest in active travel and public transport. An advisory group of about a dozen WATAG members meets monthly, to set priorities as well as maintaining contact with DC and operators over day-to-day issues.

2. LTP4: the draft strategy

2.1 WATAG mostly – and often strongly – agrees with the principles and vision set out in the LTP4 draft strategy. In particular we welcome the commitment to: a pathway to 2050 net-zero greenhouse-gas emissions from transport within the LTP area; the rebalancing of transport priorities so communities become more ‘inclusive’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘resilient’; and the reversal of the bio-diversity losses attributable to transport. We agree that the safety and security of travellers and everyone else affected by transport within Dorset is essential to LTP4.

2.2 Nevertheless certain ambiguities threaten to undermine LTP4’s laudable aspirations. In particular, ‘sustainable economic development’ is not defined (unlike ‘sustainable transport’). However, the draft Local Plan (DLP) defines it as ‘long-term economic growth while ensuring environmental protection, social equity, and the responsible use of resources – so that future generations can also meet their needs’ (DLP, p.90). We do not understand how some of the economic activities LTP4 supposedly supports can meet this definition. For example, expanding Bournemouth airport would result in a substantial increase in GHG emissions, both from aircraft (for which, despite government and industry rhetoric, there is no short- or medium-term substitute for carbon-intensive kerosene) and land transport. Labelling economic activity as ‘sustainable’ does not make it so.

2.3 We also note that the proposed performance indicator (PI) for carbon emissions (ID1) is inadequate (p.59). First, ‘carbon emissions’ must also explicitly include other greenhouse gas emissions if LTP4’s environmental aspirations are to be met. Secondly, measuring ‘the reduction in aggregate LTP area CO₂ emissions *per capita*’ [our emphasis] is insufficient: it is consistent with an overall rise in transport-related GHG emissions.

While it is useful to know if, on average, an individual's carbon footprint for mobility has fallen, the climate emergency requires an absolute reduction in emissions.

2.4 Thirdly, while we welcome the commitment to 'reduce' 'carbon' emissions from infrastructure construction and move to lifecycle maintenance regimes (p.46), the choice of an 'appraisal toolkit' reflecting current best knowledge and practice will be critical. Recent academic studies decarbon8.org.uk/embodiedemissions/ suggest that much road and rail infrastructure can lead to lifecycle increases in GHG emissions:

- All new transport infrastructure generates carbon emissions in its construction, maintenance and operation.
- Even with generous assumptions about the potential for technical innovations to decarbonise the construction process over time, there remains a core of emissions which is hard to decarbonise.
- In the case of roads, the emissions from construction are unlikely to be paid back by operational improvements. In some cases, increased use of the road will also worsen the emissions burden.
- In the case of public transport infrastructure, one of the aims is to enable lower car use and therefore many schemes will be more than able to 'pay off' the emissions they generate in construction. However, here too, the 'pay back' period needs to be understood.
- The emissions from maintenance of the existing network are at least as significant as new build emissions and these must also be tackled.

3. The draft Local Plan and LTP4's implementation

3.1 While we generally applaud LTP's ambition and aspirations, we have very severe reservations about the draft specific proposals for Western and our part of Central Dorset. Based on the lack of firm commitments, it is highly likely that even by 2041 LTP4's 'aspirations' will have come to very little. It is not even clear whether the draft for the implementation plan is primarily focused on IP1 (2026-31), as given on the title page and footers, or IP1-3 (2026-41), as repeatedly referenced throughout the text!

3.2 We applaud the fact that – nearly 60 years after the first 'Land Use and Transportation [sic] Study' (1967) for SE Dorset and then-SW Hampshire recognized the principle – LTP4 aspires to treat transport and land-use planning holistically. Dorset certainly needs a commitment to a 'vision-led approach' which 'will integrate transport and strategic land-use planning to achieve well-designed, sustainable and popular places', providing 'transport solutions to deliver those outcomes' (p.36; also pp.37, 38). But there is little evidence of this aspiration in the short-, medium- or even long-term priorities for WATAG's area.

3.3 The DLP aspires to ensure that by 2043 '[e]xcellent employment opportunities will exist in all 'the towns across the whole of Dorset with sustainable travel opportunities provided to them from surrounding villages' (pp.12-13). In Western Dorset, Bridport, Lyme Regis and Beaminster are classified as Tier 2 settlements (p.18), meaning they will be 'the main centres for service provision' (p.24) and, presumably, employment for both their growing populations and that of their rural hinterlands (i.e. the Tier 3 villages of Burton Bradstock, Broadwindsor, Charmouth, Mosterton and Salway Ash, and smaller villages and hamlets (pp.18-19)). The DLP recognizes that Western Dorset suffers from 'relatively poor connectivity', and proposes that 'growth' will focus on 'improving digital infrastructure and rural mobility' (p.24). In general we agree with these aspirations and proposed remedies. Unfortunately LTP4's draft Implementation Plan(s) (DIP) fall woefully short of what is minimally required to meet the Council's goals with regard to 'sustainable transport' in our area.

3.4 LTP4 defines 'sustainable transport' as 'high quality networks that encourage active travel as primary form of transport for short urban journeys and expanding public transport services to benefit everyone' (draft strategy, p.22). Among other indicators, successful implementation will mean: 'more journeys... undertaken using active travel modes or public transport using high quality transport networks' (p.25). Streets 'will prioritise active travel, provide an attractive and safe environment for making healthy travel choices' (p.25), and 'favour moving people rather than motorised vehicles, with space prioritised for walking, cycling and public transport modes' (p.26). Local bus services 'will operate at higher frequencies, with extended hours, becoming a more viable option for getting around without the need to drive', bringing 'more people' on to public transport for work, school and other 'key services', reducing 'social deprivation'. All transport services 'will be fully integrated so people can make seamless connections between public transport, active travel and sustainable [sic] car use'; 'mobility hubs will consolidate services including deliveries, travel information, charging facilities and social spaces to transform our transport interchanges into places that benefit the whole community' (p.26).

3.5 WATAG wholeheartedly agrees with these definitions and indicators. We applaud the clear commitment to the hierarchy of sustainable transport users underpinning them (p.38). We also agree that persuading people to travel differently (achieving modal shift) requires demonstrating how they will personal benefit (p.33, 56). Repurposing streets, building active-travel corridors, and enhancing public-transport and micro-mobility services is not enough. Nevertheless we agree that such measures are essential in existing settlements, and must be integral to all 'significant proposals' for 'new developments' (pp.33-4), such as those proposed in the DLP for Western Dorset.

3.6 We are aware that funding constraints and the practicalities of project planning require hard choices. Nevertheless the DIP's proposals for Western and our part of Central Dorset are disappointing. They lack ambition, in terms of meeting both the scale of existing challenges and those anticipated by the DLP's proposals for developments in and around the Tier 2 settlements. Proposals often lack specificity, relying on generic policies which might have potential but would be more convincing if they acknowledged the often considerable work completed by town and parish councils and third-sector bodies. It is also clear that, despite the feedback from the first round of consultation, Western Dorset is very likely to get considerably less resource than other parts of the county.

3.7 We fully agree with the 15-year DIP's goal to 'enhance rural mobility and improve connectivity, both within the area and to neighbouring economic centres' (p.37) – although we note that these 'neighbouring... centres' are often also important cultural, social, educational and medical places. But while quantity is *not* a measure of quality, it is striking that the delivery plan for our area fills just over three columns of text, compared to seven for SE Dorset, and nearly six for Central Dorset! While Northern Dorset, geo-demographically similar to our area, gets about the same level of (in)attention, we are disappointed with the low number of firm proposals, let alone detailed commitments, for Western Dorset.

3.8 Annex N lists just seven projects for development and/or delivery in Western Dorset during IP1 (2026-31), compared to 14 for SE Dorset, 16 for Central Dorset, and 10 for North Dorset (28 for BCP). We accept that some neighbouring schemes might also benefit Western Dorset (such as Central Dorset F12, F13 (bus service enhancements), F15, F16 (rail enhancements); North Dorset F9 (bus service enhancements)) – although we are surprised that if this is the case, no explicit mention is made in Annex N.

3.9 Treated holistically, the projects listed in Annex N, barring the first (freight refuelling), plus some of those in Annex O (such as the review of car-parking, and rural mobility hubs), have real potential to deliver the kind of paradigm shift required to fulfil LTP4's aspirations. But we do not have much faith that this will happen, because the large amount of developmental work already undertaken by town and parish councils in our area, as well as third-sector bodies, are either not recognized or appear only in the list of documents consulted. For example, Bridport and Lyme Regis town councils have worked with Dorset Council on detailed studies of the kind of changes needed in their town centres to effect modal shift to active travel and public transport. Why does IP1 not commit Dorset Council to developing and, where affordable, delivering these specific proposals?

3.10 Even allowing for the possibility of 'spill over' to our area from the Central Dorset proposals, we are unconvinced that objective F6 (bus service enhancements) are anything like ambitious enough to provide a genuine alternative to the private car, even along the 'strategic inter-urban routes' currently served. Dorset Council has allowed the network in our area to deteriorate to the point where buses are only used by those who have no alternative or who have plenty of spare time. The Council's Enhanced Partnership with bus operators has had little impact within our area. The recent debacle over the winter timetable for the X51/ X53 Weymouth–Axminster services does not give us confidence that the Council has the expertise to plan or negotiate the comprehensive overhaul of 'strategic' services that is needed.

3.11 Even restoring the frequency and operating hours to those of around a decade ago will not attract people out of their cars, unless severe – and probably currently politically unacceptable – restrictions are placed on motorists' access to, particularly, town centres. For example, a bus journey from Bridport bus station to Dorchester South railway station was timetabled to take 59 minutes in summer 2025 (partly because all services divert via Martinstown). Several journey planners suggest the equivalent trip by car takes 23-27 minutes. Congestion can, of course, play havoc with these times – but buses are as badly affected as cars. Similarly, an all-public-transport journey on a weekday from Bridport to central Exeter is currently timetabled to take anywhere between 2½ and nearly *five* hours! It can be driven in around an hour (with Devon County Council's park-and-ride offering a cheaper alternative to city-centre driving and car-parking). These differences mean that even if drivers become fully aware of the true monetary costs of motoring, few will choose to take buses: LTP4's aspiration to 'nudge' people towards new travel behaviour(s) will fail.

3.12 We believe it is possible to bring about significant modal shift to public-transport. But this will require not only a holistic approach to developing and delivering Annex N's objectives but also sustained engagement with those organizations (councils, third-sector bodies such as WATAG) and individuals who have the local knowledge and expertise to suggest what is needed.

3.13 Each of the Tier 2 settlements in our area have particular travel requirements. But as an example, we suggest that the Bridport area, centred on the largest town and the one with the greatest population increase planned over the next 15-plus years, urgently needs a fresh approach to thinking about public-transport, both in terms of 'strategic' links to places providing services and facilities not available in Bridport, and those connecting the town with its extensive rural hinterland. Many of the elements of such thinking are already familiar: they need to be brought together.

4. BRIL – Bridport Region Integrated Links

4.1 BRIL will be a network of high-quality public-transport services complemented by a comprehensive system of active-travel corridors.

4.2 Inter-urban buses will provide direct, limited-stop services at least hourly from the town to Dorchester and Axminster. These buses will not divert from the A35, and will be given priority in town centres through a combination of measures already proposed for other areas covered by LTP4 – such as restrictions on private-vehicle access and traffic-light controls. These measures will make travel times more competitive with the car; all the more so if town-centre streets are remodelled to encourage active travel and car-parking is restricted to the edge of Bridport and other towns. The aspiration is to provide an express bus service of comparable quality to a rail link; indeed good connections with trains at Dorchester South (and possibly West) and Axminster are a key. Nothing quite like this has ever been provided on this corridor: nothing less will have any hope of tempting people out of their cars. Such a service could help to achieve LTP4's ambition to provide long-distance links across Dorset and BCP between places which have never been directly rail-served.

4.3 Existing inter-urban bus routes to Lyme Regis, Charmouth, Beaminster and Weymouth will continue with enhanced service frequencies (at least hourly) and operating hours, although the lightly loaded and time-consuming Martinstown leg will be served instead by an extension of Dorchester's suburban services.

4.4 Proving 'sustainable travel opportunities' between Bridport and the surrounding rural settlements arguably requires even more imagination. The financial challenge of maintaining adequate rural bus services has been apparent for well over 60 years. While there might be some scope for reinstating some of the deep-rural timetabled bus routes axed over the last decade – for instance, using funding from Western Gateway's Rural Transport Strategy – it is possible that on-demand services will be more convenient and financially viable. The key is an 'Every Village, Every Hour' service which connects with the express and other inter-urban buses at a Bridport mobility hub (BridHub), developed at the present bus station.

4.5 The mobility hub will also be a focus for an expanded and improved network of active-travel corridors either separated from roads carrying motor traffic or on highways which prioritise active travelling. Much of the preparatory planning for this network has been done by Bridport Town Council, including its Access and Movement Study, and third-sector bodies.

4.6 Making town-centre streets welcoming to active travellers while enhancing the social, cultural and economic vibrancy of the town will mean most private motorists will need access from car-parking on the edge of the built-up zone. This requires high-quality, accessible services from any car-park too far away for 'park and stride'. In the long-term BRIL might incorporate a high-quality fixed link, perhaps drawing on the experimental battery-powered Coventry Very Light Rail (CVLR) project, between park-and-ride facilities at West Bay, Broomhills (for the A35) and BridHub. An equivalent facility could be provided to/from Gore Cross, for travellers from Beaminster and the north. A third-sector body, Bridport Community Railway, has demonstrated the technical and engineering feasibility of the southern part of this scheme, including passing under the A35.

4.7 While we largely agree with the analysis of the present transport networks and services (p.36), we note that Maiden Newton is not listed as a railway station indirectly serving Western Dorset. Although only realistically reachable by driving, this station, situated some 17-20km by road (depending on the route) from Bridport town centre, is closer than both stations in Dorchester (24-25km), Axminster (21km), and roughly the same as Crewkerne (19-20km). It is 16km from Beaminster (although Crewkerne is closer, 10km). While the present Heart of Wessex railway timetable offers limited travel opportunities, we note that LTP4 aspires to increase these to hourly (p.23, 31). The station's longer-term potential as a rural mobility hub should not be ignored, particularly given LTP4's aspiration to complete the Bridport-Maiden Newton railway (pp.37, 64). In the much longer term, a true paradigm shift might see all or part of the former branch railway re-open as the spine of a rural-renewal corridor linked to Bridport.

5 Conclusions

5.1 WATAG welcomes the ambition of LTP4. We agree that broadly speaking the Plan's aspirations reflect what needs to be done to make personal travel and goods transport in Dorset (and BCP) 'sustainable' in the strong sense of ensuring the environmental, social and economic needs of current generations can be met without damaging the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

5.2 However we are not convinced that LTP4 is sufficiently integrated with the draft Local Plan, particularly with regard to the latter's proposals for so-called 'sustainable' economic growth.

5.3 Key performance indicators with regard to greenhouse gas emissions need to be tightened. This applies both to transport operations, and to infrastructure construction and maintenance.

5.4 We are very disappointed at the lack of specific commitments in IP1 for Western and our part of Central Dorset. We acknowledge the tight financial restrictions facing Dorset Council. However we should expect these to have encouraged a higher degree of engagement with lower-tier local authorities and third-sector organizations than is evidenced by the Implementation Plan(s).

5.5 In particular WATAG is keen to be involved in developing plans for the Bridport Region Integrated Links network and similar schemes for the other Tier 2 settlements in our area, Lyme Regis and Beaminster.

WATAG
8 October 2025