

Somerset Bus Partnership-led proposal for a full route 25/25A review between Taunton and Wiveliscombe/Dulverton

In April 2025, the 25 corridor was at its lowest ebb. First Bus had given up the service, and Wiveliscombe LCN put forward a proposal that sought to make the best possible overall service offer from what was thought likely to be a reduction in vehicle numbers down to just one vehicle on the 25 service, due to rising costs and the near certainty - as indeed turned out to be the case - of First being the only bidders for the newly tendered replacement 25 contract.

What the LCN came up with was a concept for a combined brand new Wellington-Wiveliscombe-Dulverton Monday to Friday service that would during the daytime utilise the Somerset Council minibus that operated the X26 Dulverton-Taunton college service in each direction at the beginning and end of the day. The one remaining Service 25 vehicle would then provide a reduced six journeys per day on Monday to Friday in each direction between Taunton and Milverton/Wiveliscombe, with just one of these in each direction extending beyond Wiveliscombe as far as Bampton. Saturdays would have seen a variation of this service pattern.

Thankfully, a solution was found that ended up being rather better than that. Two vehicles were retained on the 25 service, offering 10 journeys per day on Monday to Saturday in each direction between Taunton and Cotford St Luke, 6 of which run through to Milverton/Wiveliscombe offering a standard pattern every 2 hour frequency, with one of these in each direction extending beyond Wiveliscombe through to Dulverton. The 4 short journeys to Cotford St Luke are numbered 25A, also offering a standard pattern every 2 hour frequency, combining with the 25 to offer a bus in every hour in each direction during the daytime between Taunton and Cotford St Luke.

A Service 26 Somerset Council minibus provides onward connections during Monday to Saturday daytime to Dulverton at Wiveliscombe in both directions from Service 25, at a similar service frequency level as the LCN envisaged in their proposal. Last but not least, a trial Somerset Council minibus Service 27 is provided between Wellington and Milverton/Wiveliscombe, initially 2 days a week, but now on 3 days a week (Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday). Again, this is at a similar service frequency level as the LCN envisaged in their proposal.

As well as this, the Taunton and Wellington Digital Slinky DDRT zone is now in full operation. This includes the eastern half of the 25/25A route from Preston Bowyer and Hillcommon through to Taunton, but not the western half through to Milverton/Wiveliscombe or Dulverton.

The picture on these services in terms of passenger numbers is mixed. The trial Service 27 between Wellington and Milverton/Wiveliscombe is proving very popular indeed, hence the move from 2 to 3 day a week operation. The 25 (and 25A short journeys) from Taunton as far as Cotford St Luke are also posting solid passenger numbers throughout the day.

However, of the 6 Service 25 journeys in each direction that run through to Milverton/Wiveliscombe, only the school/college traffic focused 0634 from Dulverton to Taunton, and the 1650 Taunton to Langley Corner (ex Richard Huish College) journeys carry a decent level of patronage, with the other Service 25 journeys

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through to Milverton/Wiveliscombe during the daytime reporting consistently very low passenger numbers beyond Cotford St Luke. This has been said by Welly Wivey BUG to be due to potential Taunton to Milverton/Wiveliscombe passengers being put off by the long-winded 25 route via Cotford St Luke.

The passenger numbers on the connecting Service 26 between Wiveliscombe and Dulverton are also consistently low, and this is said to be because the bus doesn't take Dulverton passengers directly to either Taunton or Wellington where they would really want to go to.

However, the 25/25A contract is due to end and need tendering again in September 2026. Once again this is against the backdrop of rising costs and the likelihood of First being the only bidder. Unfortunately, with the contract now ranking among SC's most expensive, the prospect of avoiding a reduction in vehicle numbers down to just one vehicle on the 25 service is now seen as very unlikely.

This is why we should all get on the front foot and put forward a jointly agreed proposal that stands the highest chance of delivering the best possible service for all of us along the corridor in the prevailing circumstances. We have such a proposal in mind, and we will outline this below:

- We know that SC are assessing the feasibility of a 6 days a week Wellington-Wiveliscombe-Dulverton service, and our proposal would fully support this being introduced on the same basis as the original LCN combined timetable with the X26 envisaged.
- This would enable the tendered service to be worked by just one bus rather than two, so saving a considerable amount of funding.

The regular bus would start its day running dead to Bampton to operate an inbound 25 in the existing path but continuing to Richard Huish College. This would avoid duplicating the X26 departure from Dulverton and enable a 40 minute later departure from Hamilton Road depot. This part of the proposal would be very similar to the original LCN proposal for the 25.

The driver could take a break in Taunton before running dead direct to Bishops Lydeard (BL) to operate a 25A from there, departing BL at 09:30 and picking up the existing first 25A inbound path from Cotford St Luke. This would benefit BL concession pass holders and provide guaranteed morning peak-time seats from there to Taunton, particularly on Butlins changeover days.

The 25A would extend its route to terminate at Bishops Lydeard and repeat this return journey pattern until peak afternoon time. A 75-minute return journey pattern results, with 25A departures from Castle Way at 10:30, 11:45, 13:00, 14:15 & 15:30.

The vehicle would then operate the existing 1642 from Taunton Richard Huish to Langley Corner and return 1807 Langley Corner to Taunton Service 25 journeys before finishing for the day.

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Although the current 1750 Taunton to Dulverton journey has low passenger numbers, these include a number of socially necessary passenger flows that must be catered for. However, we propose that the Somerset Council minibus that operates Taunton Town Service 3 operates the 1750 journey at the end of its operating day, as a better fit to patronage than the existing double decker bus.

- This would mean that there would no longer be any direct off peak daytime Service 25 journeys beyond Cotford to Milverton/Wiveliscombe on Monday to Saturday.

However, SC have budgeted significant funding to extend Slinky DDRT throughout Somerset in the coming years, and have already recently introduced 4 brand new Slinky minibuses for the Taunton/Wellington Slinky DDRT Zone.

Therefore, our proposal includes extending the Taunton DDRT Zone westward from Preston Bowyer to include Milverton. This would create connectivity to an expanded route 27, thereby facilitating onward off-peak journeys to Wellington, Wiveliscombe and beyond for people living in the Taunton Slinky zone.

Four stops between Cotford St Luke and Milverton would lose their off-peak 25 service completely: Preston Bowyer, two at Hillcommon and Heathfield turn. These are all sparsely used off-peak but are all within the existing Taunton Slinky DDRT area.

This approach is modelled on that successfully introduced in Wiltshire on the 24 Warminster-Frome and 58 Mere-Gillingham corridors by renowned award winning DDRT expert Paul Sanders, and has significantly increased passenger numbers and markedly reduced costs since being deployed there.

SBP 18.05.2026 (first draft)

Recommendations from our subsequent meeting with Welly-Wivey Bus User Group:

There was encouraging but rightly guarded support for all the elements of these proposals, subject to the following provisos:

- the drawing up and subsequent scrutiny of a draft detailed timetable showing how an enhanced, combined routes 26/27 6-day a week timetable might look, including a crucial earlier southbound 27 journey and increased frequency between Wivey to Welly
- SC being expected to conduct a formal route review with proper consultation and adequate time to conduct a fully considered passenger impact assessment
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- a probable 6-month extension to the existing expiring tender arrangement to allow time for the above to be conducted