



Community

CLEAR ROAD AHEAD FOR MEON VALLEY COMMUNITY BUS

A new minibus paid for by the Department of Transport's Community Mini-bus Fund has put community transport in the Meon Valley on the road to a secure future. The new Ford diesel minibus – built to latest Euro VI emissions standards – was officially unveiled at the AGM of the Meon Valley Community Bus Association (MVCBA) on July 21st and is now in service on regular routes from Soberton and Newtown to Fareham, Winchester, Waterlooville and Petersfield and is also available for charter by community groups. Run entirely by volunteers, the association covers its costs mainly

through the Hampshire County Council travel scheme which reimburses it when bus passes are used. Its remaining income comes from fare-paying passengers and charter fees.

Last year the bus carried nearly 1200 passengers on its scheduled trips – most are intent on shopping, but others meet up with friends and family in town or do their banking and visit council offices or libraries. Certain passengers simply enjoy meeting up on the bus for some company and a good chat.

Summing up the importance of the bus to the local community, Association Chairman Professor David Williams

said: "The real value of this service is that people can continue living in our remote villages who might not otherwise be able to manage, due to lack of public transport. We are grateful to the Department of Transport for this grant which secures the future of the community bus service for years to come."

Every effort is made to ensure the service is fine-tuned to passengers' needs – a new timetable introduced in January added a monthly trip to Petersfield and an extra Winchester run, by popular request. Also, free "park and ride" facilities at Soberton Village Hall and Rookesbury Hall are making it easier for people not on the bus route to take advantage of the service – and the MVCBA hopes to add to these in future.

Frailer passengers get special help, too, as drivers are usually more than happy to include request stops or drop passengers at their front door. The scheduled service makes a huge difference to local residents.

Paying tribute to the volunteers behind the MVCBA at the AGM, Meon Valley MP George Hollingbery said: "It's a real credit to your organisation that you have secured this fantastic investment in your community. At a time when many services are disappearing to have a scheduled bus for this area is very important."

To enquire about chartering the Community Bus ring Richard Blackburn on 01489 877391. The Meon Valley Community Bus Timetable can be found via the "our villages" section on www.soberton.org