

Bus service cutbacks 'exclude thousands of people from society'

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COMMUNITIES across South Devon have been hit by the axing of bus services caused by a 'perfect storm' of cash cutbacks and rising costs, ministers were to be told today.

MPs at Westminster were due to hear 70 bus routes had been affected in the county, including those serving Kingsbridge, Dittisham, Blackawton and Marldon.

It meant those relying on public transport could no longer access employment, medical appointments or school and so were effectively 'excluded' from society.

Tory MP for Totnes Dr Sarah Wollaston was to tell a parliamentary debate she had secured into rural bus services that 14 per cent of households in country areas of Devon did not have a car, amounting to 55,000 people.

Dr Wollaston was due to say: "Without transport these people are unable to access hospitals, employment, education or even benefits."

It comes after Devon County Council, as a result of reduced government funding, had cut its public transport support budget by £1.35 million out of a total of £7.75 million.

At the same time there was the cutting of bus subsidy grants by a fifth, reducing the amount bus operators are reim-

bursed for taking concessionary passengers and continuing transport inflation.

These difficulties have previously been highlighted by the county council with the Commons Transport Select Committee.

The authority estimates the cost of running the concessionary travel scheme will amount to £12.35 million in 2012/13.

This is set against spending of £7.5 million to support bus services in the current year.

The council said this made 'little sense' and cast doubt on the future viability of free bus travel.

Dr Wollaston was to tell Parliament: "Many of my constituents wonder whether the ability of some people to travel free is more important than the ability to travel at all for many people of all ages."

One of the services lost was the 'lifeline' 111 running from Dartmouth via Totnes Station to Torbay.

The impact of it being cut had been 'devastating' said Dr Wollaston.

For one elderly constituent from Dartmouth travelling to visit her 91-year-old



■ STORM: Dr Sarah Wollaston

sister in hospital, it meant numerous bus changes and a long walk on a round trip taking 10 hours, having spent only one hour with her sister.

Dr Wollaston was telling the House: "Doing nothing leaves the 14 per cent of rural transport poor at the roadside and is not an option. As public consultation exercises have shown, they are not prioritised by those who have cars."