

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 12 December 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Autun Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Adam Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), Jim Brown, Bret Facey, Conor McGrath, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater and Graham Snell.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.40pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received by Baroness Taylor of Stevenage and Councillor Andy McGuinness

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 1 NOVEMBER 2023**

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 1 November 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 **PRE-SCRUTINY OF THE STEVENAGE CYCLE HIRE SCHEME**

The Chair introduced Officers present, as well as Jill Borchers and Tina Walker from Cycling UK, to present and speak on the item.

The Principal Planning Officer gave a presentation detailing the proposed cycle-hire scheme for Stevenage. There was a long history of cycling within Stevenage although recent data showed that only 3% of Stevenage residents cycle to work compared to around 68% driving.

The Principal Planning Officer highlighted the cycle hire scheme in Watford that was implemented in 2020. Watford had seen a 30% modal shift from car to cycling as a mode of transport to work and had over 33,000 users.

The cycle hire scheme would allow people to hire a bike for short durations. There were three types of schemes: docked, virtual, and hybrid. The proposed plans for Stevenage would be a docked scheme as it would reduce the possibility of the bikes being abandoned. The aim was to provide a public low-cost scheme that was inclusive to all and would complement the existing public transport. There would be 220 cycles with at least 45 docked stations accessible 24/7, 365 days a year. They

were also looking at a scheme that offered the option to hire bikes with or without a smartphone. She added that they were looking at additional protections, such as extra locks or two step authentication, as some degree of vandalism was likely to occur as reported with most cycle hire schemes. However, Officers took lessons learned from other Local Authorities, including close partnership with the police and further advances in technology and expected vandalism to be kept to a minimum.

The Principal Planning Officer gave Members a brief overview of the timeline which included:

- In 2019 Stevenage Borough Council commissioned a feasibility study with Transport Initiatives to explore things like the feasibility and where the docking stations could go.
- SBC requested an update to this in 2023 after COVID and took into account the new developments and explored the current market.
- In August 2023 Planning Policy Officers published a soft marketing brochure with the aim of gaining feedback. It was important that the potential suppliers aligned with the SBC vision and aims.
- During August and September 2023 there was a consultation on the cycle hire scheme. Officers aimed to make this as user friendly as possible.
- There was also an engagement event during the consultation period for business users and employers. Three suppliers attended and gave presentations of their models. There were also bikes for people to test and maps for people to show where they wanted docking locations.
- There were three surveys – a cycle hire survey, a youth survey, and a map survey which allowed people to highlight various points of interest such as locations for docking, unsafe cycle routes, lack of signage, or lack of cycle storage.
- There was a lot of data on how people travelled to work but not a lot of data on how people travel within Stevenage, therefore this was a focus of the survey.
- Across the surveys, over 50% of people provided positive responses.
- Officers were looking at behaviour change and more engagement. She added the chosen operator would also do more engagement.
- The top destination of cyclists was to leisure, with the second being to work. This aligned with the data collected from Watford. This was important as they wanted to put docking stations in the right places.
- During the feasibility study, a phased approach was identified with western docking stations being implemented first.
- The feasibility study, as well as the consultation map, would be shared with the supplier when the contract was awarded.

A Member asked some questions in relation to the surveys. In response, the Principal Planning Officer advised that there were 899 respondents in total. The survey contained an “other” option which allowed people to provide their own answer. Many of these contained people who owned a bike already so would be less likely to use the cycle hire scheme.

Ms Borchers highlighted the spread of docking stations on the proposed map from the feasibility study as some were very close together whereas others were far away. The Principal Planning Officer advised that the supplier would use the map as well as their own expertise to decide where to place the docking stations. The app would allow people to see which docking stations had bikes and whether there were spaces. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) added that there were a lot of docking stations contained within the town centre as there would be a lot of people using them and there would be different uses. For example, people coming to the town or others going to the train station.

A Member suggested that some people who walk might want to hire a bike. They also suggested that SBC should drive the scheme, not the supplier. The Principal Planning Officer advised that the planning team were doing as much research as possible to help the scheme. The feasibility study and the information from the consultees provided a guide. The supplier would come back to SBC with their proposals to be reviewed.

Some Members raised concerns around the potential vandalism and theft. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the virtual geofenced hire bikes were the ones that could be hacked and stolen. Docked is better in this case and was why SBC were looking at the docked hire bikes rather than the other types. If people didn't return docked bikes, they would be charged for this. The Principal Planning Officer added that operators gather a lot of intelligence and data on the bikes so they could see if anything happened and could make improvements and changes if needed. There was also a lot of communication with the police, as well as additional locks being asked for by SBC, and visible docking stations to reduce potential vandalism.

A Member suggested some docking stations should be placed where bus routes are, as well as a hybrid option so people could move where they wanted. The Principal Planning Officer advised that the supplier would gather information on design lines. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) also advised that the most issues with abandoned bikes came from dockless options which is why SBC was looking at a docked scheme. There was data collected by the supplier which looked at travel, rush hours, and routes and there was a redistribution van which made sure the bikes were in place at the start of the day and if they needed to be moved back.

Another Member asked how many residents could ride a bike and how many had passed a cycling proficiency. They also asked who would be liable if someone had an accident on the bike. The Officers advised that the liability would be with the supplier who had insurance. Ms Walker added that many adults didn't admit they needed additional cycling training, but Cycling UK did offer cycling proficiency for all. She estimated that around 60% of adults could ride a bike but this could be higher.

Some Members raised concerns around the issue with e-scooters and suggested there should be some "no go" areas especially in shopping areas. The Principal Planning Officer advised that SBC were not looking at e-scooters. The bikes could be traced, and the speed could be reduced in certain areas. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) acknowledged the issues with wheeled powered vehicles,

especially in the town centre. He added that they would look closely at the locations of the docking stations around these areas and geofencing would be looked at. The town centre was the only place in Stevenage with a bike ban but this could be looked at in all shopping areas, as well as whether the bikes could be stopped on pavements.

A Member asked whether the docking stations could be moved if they decided they were in the wrong place. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that this would be the case and they would respond to changes. The Principal Planning Officer added that they were learning a lot from Watford and getting any information that would improve the Stevenage scheme.

Some Members asked what the cost to hire was as financial inclusivity was important. The Principal Planning Officer advised that they have rough ideas from the suppliers and consultants, but costs would depend on discussions with the Council in setting the fees. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that some are £1 for 30 minutes but this would be discussed. Ms Borchers added that the scheme in Watford was £12 for the whole day, or £1 to unlock and 5p per minute. These were much cheaper than a bus fare. TfL also run similar schemes and have discounts for people such as NHS workers.

A member highlighted the large cost to the Council and suggested looking at other funding. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that they were trying to get a sponsorship deal. SBC were putting money in at the start and using the Towns Fund. There would be an option for the Council to look at pricing and there could be other ways to make it more affordable to everyone. They were also looking at the Herts County Council Sustainable Transport fund as it was improving the cycle highways.

Ms Borchers asked some questions in relation the scheme and was advised that the scheme would be a minimum age of 16+ and that 40% of people using hire schemes hired for 15 minutes or less.

A Member raised concerns on the weight of e-bikes which was around 44kg and potential accidents.

Members suggested that the scheme could come back to the Committee to be reviewed and that there should be some criteria to assess it against, such as relevance to climate change, transport poverty and modal shift. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that they could gather data over the first 6 months to a year and come back to the Committee with this.

Some Members asked whether planning permission was needed for the docking stations. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that it depended on where they were located. The individual docking locations would come through planning and checked by the Highways Authority. The plan would be taken to the Executive in early February to agree the funding and there would be a potential rollout in the summer subject to approvals.

Ms Borchers highlighted Stevenage having a lot of hills and the issues with certain

infrastructures making it difficult to access some places by bike. She added that the scheme was an opportunity to get more people on bikes and a lot of people commuting to Stevenage could benefit from it. Ms Walker also added that people who were getting the train would benefit, even if they owned a bike, so they wouldn't have to leave their own bike in the station.

A Member asked who would promote the scheme. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that promotions would be led by the operator, but SBC would support this and do some as well.

Another Member asked whether the docking stations needed a power supply, and it was advised that they did, and they also had a phone connection.

The Chair thanked Officers for the presentation, as well as Ms Borchers and Ms Walker for their contribution to the meeting.

4 **DRAFT REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE'S REVIEW INTO BUS SERVICES**

The Chair expressed that the bus review was a helpful exercise and that he felt strongly about the first recommendation and that it was important to look at things like modal shift and behaviour change. He suggested the bus review should come back to the Committee and guests should be invited back annually or the portfolio holder should have regular conversations with bus operators.

Members gave opinions and suggestions on the recommendations which included:

- Real time information at bus stops should be included in recommendation 2.
- There were concerns around the switch to biodiesel and SBC should at least look at electric or other alternatives,
- It was difficult for buses to do more than 20mph in certain roads due to traffic therefore recommendation 8 should look at other options, such as bus gates.
- Regeneration of the town should be looked at as there weren't bus routes in certain areas that there will be new developments, such as St Georges Way.
- There was no mention of a spine service within the recommendations.
- Other forms of public transport should be looked at in the future.
- It was valid to challenge the current funding modal as Arriva were subject to review and weren't doing well.
- The site visit was positive and useful.
- A park and ride was suggested, especially in areas such as the football ground.
- The idea of a shuttle bus was seen as a positive.
- The bus station should offer free Wi-Fi so people could access the timetable or see where buses were.

In response to various queries, the Scrutiny Officer and Assistant Director (Direct Services) advised that in terms of biodiesel, this had been trialled by Aviva but were unsure of the outcomes. A recommendation urging them to look at other options

other than fossil fuels was a positive, but it didn't have to be biodiesel, could be hydrogen or electric for example. The Scrutiny Officer agreed to include an image of a suggested electric shuttle bus to accompany Recommendation 9 (iii).

It was **RESOLVED:** That the draft report and recommendations of the Committee's review into the bus service be noted.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

A Councillor raised an issue of a diesel-powered novelty train that had been used in the town centre Event Island for a fun children's activity arranged by Town Centre Management as it seemingly contradicted to the Councils commitment to the climate emergency.

Other Members agreed and suggested a balanced needed to be struck between events, such as the use of an ice rink in Event Island last year, and the commitment to climate change.

The Scrutiny Officer and Assistant Director (Direct Services) advised that it was reasonable to ask Officers to explore alternative options in terms of the train and consider the climate change implications.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR