



ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Date: Tuesday, 12 December 2023

Time: 6.00pm,

Location: Autun Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Contact: Abbie Hamilton

committees@stevenage.gov.uk

Members: Councillors: R Broom (Chair), A Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), J Brown, B Facey, C McGrath, A McGuinness, S Mead, C Parris, E Plater, G Snell and Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, OBE

AGENDA

PART 1

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**
2. **MINUTES - 1 NOVEMBER 2023**
3. **PRE-SCRUTINY OF THE STEVENAGE CYCLE HIRE SCHEME**

As a pre-scrutiny policy development item Members are invited to receive a presentation from Officers on a proposed cycle hire scheme for Stevenage, including locations and potential phases of the scheme.

Copy of the presentation slides to follow.

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

To receive the draft report and recommendations of the Environment and Economy Select Committee's review in local bus services.

Pages 11 – 18

5. **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

To consider any Part 1 business accepted by the Chair as urgent.

6. **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

To consider the following motions –

1. That under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and

public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs 1 – 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

2. That Members consider the reasons for the following reports being in Part II and determine whether or not maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

7. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

To consider any Part II business accepted by the Chair as urgent.

Agenda Published [04.12.2023](#)

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 1 November 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair) (Chair), Adam Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair) (Vice Chair), Jim Brown, Bret Facey, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Graham Snell and Forhad Chowdhury

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 8.07pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received by Baroness Taylor of Stevenage and Councillor Ellie Plater.

Councillor Forhad Chowdhury substituted for Baroness Taylor.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 10 OCTOBER 2023

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 10 October 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 CLIMATE CHANGE UPDATE

The Chair introduced the Chief Executive Matt Partridge, the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) Zayd Al-Jawad, the Assistant Director (Direct Services) Steve Dupoy, and the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance Councillor Simon Speller.

The Chief Executive informed the Committee he was the Lead Hertfordshire and East of England CEO for climate change. He co-authored the report which led to the launch of the Hertfordshire Climate Change Partnership. He referenced both the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) and the Regional Climate Change Forum (RCCF).

Previously there was very limited joined up working across the districts, boroughs, and county council on climate change. Accordingly, the HCCSP was set up in 2020 to maximise the opportunities across the 11 local authorities and the Herts Local

Enterprise Partnership.

There was a funding agreement set out and the HCCSP was being resourced by two part time officers. An officer group fed into the Members board. There were now over 100 Officers contributing to the broader objectives to achieve climate change targets. They were also ensuring that the partnership was connected to the right groups in Hertfordshire such as the Herts Infrastructure and Planning Partnership and the Herts Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership. The HCCSP was also working with Suffolk and Cambridgeshire Councils as well to further collaboration.

The Chief Executive added that the HCCSP was shortlisted at the LGC awards for a local government award. Unfortunately, they didn't win but the Partnership was recognised as doing good things for the County in terms of climate change and the CE was invited to present at the national Local Government Chronicle conference.

The RCCF represented 50 Councils in the Eastern region and HCCSP represented Hertfordshire at a regional level. A baseline assessment had been undertaken on what was being done in the East of England region and this led to the development of 8 priorities such as developing a regional switchboard to share information more effectively and lobbying in government circles. By collaborating together, Councils could increase resources, have a good strategy, and develop a clear plan. All Councils had agreed to put more money in to get more things done.

The Chief Executive updated the HCCSP on what was being done at a regional level. They had developed 6 action plans which included:

- Carbon reduction such as solar together which was a scheme offering solar panels at a discounted rate.
- Biodiversity such as the green spaces audit.
- Transport such as the clean air day which featured anti-idling activities.
- Water such as sustainable drainage systems.
- Behaviour changes such as focusing on communications and training.

HCCSP were looking at how they engaged with sectors and wanted to move into a coordinating role recognising that there were other organisations who could support some of the delivery. They were briefing leaders and top teams on what they were focusing on and further resourcing communication into the wider public. He noted that there was always more to be done in this area but there was a lot of positive work being done at a local level in Stevenage as well as in the County and regional levels. They were also lobbying into government circles and doing work to get things done.

A Member asked whether government lobbying had brought any projects to Stevenage. The Chief Executive advised that there was a lot to do as there were so many funding pots available. They were campaigning for the government to simplify the funding model. He also advised that match funding was challenging in some areas. For example, SBC had been successful twice on the Housing Decarbonisation Fund, however the Council had to put a lot of money in to get it match funded. Decarbonising the entire SBC housing stock to an EPC rating of C would cost £250m which SBC cannot afford. He added that the LGA had picked up

climate change as one of their key priorities and were working at regional level on how to effectively promote this to political parties and part conferences ahead of the next general election.

Members asked questions in relation to biodiversity net gain and offsetting. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the 2030 target was highly ambitious. If managed correctly, offsetting was highly beneficial especially in terms of housing. Decarbonising new houses was more effective than retrofitting older houses. In terms of biodiversity net gain within planning, it was important to be accountable to where the money from that was spent.

A Member suggested that active transport was only a component of sustainable travel and there were other areas as well. The Chief Executive agreed and advised that the HCCSP Transport plan went into more detail on sustainable travel.

Another Member asked whether the HCCSP had long term ambitions for coordination. The Chief Executive advised that the HCCSP had been delivering a range of projects and would continue to do so. They were trying to work with professionals in certain areas to support broader programme delivery.

A Member suggested that changing behaviour was difficult and asked how this would be tackled. The Chief Executive advised that they were looking at ways and means to encourage people to change. The anti-idling campaign was a good example of practical action to encourage change. He also agreed that this change wouldn't happen overnight, but advertisement and communication needed to be resourced.

Another Member asked whether the partnership was strengthening SBC or whether it was taking independence away from the Council. The Chief Executive advised that there was a lot of work being done at County level that SBC was benefitting from. The partnership was about contributing and furthering what was being done at a local level not replacing or duplicating effort. Cllr Speller added that the HCCSP was a knowledge exchange and that it was reporting on topics that SBC couldn't do by itself. This was shared equally across all the districts and was focused on the research.

A Member asked whether the meetings were public. The Chief Executive advised that they weren't public meetings, but the minutes were publicly accessible as were the action plans.

Another Member asked whether there was more SBC could do to support the changing behaviours in small and local businesses. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that big businesses were trying to help by sharing experiences of what they had done to other businesses in Stevenage. They had also offered 100 spaces for SMEs to get net zero training and advice. 100 businesses had signed up and completed this last year and they were looking at more funding to do this again.

The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) then gave a presentation on the climate change annual update of where the global and national trends were as well

as SBC work programmes. There were three pathways around most of the SBC emissions and they had developed a potential roadmap to net zero on these.

An example of one of these pathways to decarbonise Stevenage was 'fuel and fleet' and looked at the transport sector. This pathway focused on the SBC vehicles and equipment as well as the grey fleet and what were the heaviest users in emissions. It had been proposed to develop a business case to introduce HVO as a fuel type to decarbonise the fuel for the existing fleet as a transitional stage. This would decarbonise up to 80% of the emissions of the existing fleet quickly.

On a street and neighbourhood level they were working with groups with an interest in sustainable travel as well as technical people to work more cohesively and get ideas on what could be done. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) referred to the Dragons Den (Climate Change Community Fund) scheme as an example of community cooperation as local groups took charge of what climate change activities they wanted in their communities with the help of their local Councillors and SBC.

A Member asked whether Members could get clear figures and metrics that could be shared around emissions. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the metrics for the geographical area for Stevenage were nationally set. There was also a challenge on what to measure them against. It was difficult to record and measure how much carbon was being saved by each intervention and a lot of smaller things wouldn't be captured. The baseline that was used were the largest emitters within the Council and they were tracked.

Another Member asked whether it be a slow gradual process to reduce fuel emissions and get a better suited fleet. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that there wasn't currently an economically viable EV heavy duty fleet. There would be an individual assessment when the fleet was ready to replace regarding what would be the best economically. Although, this wasn't attainable for 2030, they were looking at other alternatives to progress this. Funding for the HVO fuel was subject to agreement from the Executive and Council. There would be a 20% difference overall in emissions from vehicles across the fleet (and over 80% saving in carbon for each heavy-duty fleet vehicle that uses the biodiesel fuel) and would possibly be the best option until the technology for alternative fuelled heavy fleet was developed.

A Member suggested that people needed visual aids to help them understand and encourage changes in behaviours. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that they were proposing three pathways which were being presented in a visual way to make them easier to digest. He suggested the online platform was potentially a more user-friendly way at looking at what SBC had been doing. The Chair suggested a future piece of work for the Committee to look at behavioural change.

The Assistant Director (Direct Services) advised that it was important to have clarity around the fleet and heavy goods vehicle type of fleet, such as refuse vehicles, and the smaller fleet, such as vans. The smaller fleet was easier to provide electric vehicles for as costs were coming down and it was becoming more viable. The

larger fleet was more difficult in terms of EV vehicles, and the sector was still developing alternatives that might be more suitable than electric in the longer term. An example was hydrogen vehicles, however these were very costly and the infrastructure wasn't yet in place to support it.

In response to a question regarding recycling, the Assistant Director (Direct Services) advised that the Council was limited in terms of enforcement activity when recyclable materials were not placed in the relevant kerbside containers. In light of the recent Government announcements concerning 'Simpler Recycling', they were reviewing their current arrangements.

A Member asked how the largest emitting buildings, such as the leisure and swimming centres, will be used to form how planning applications were assessed, as well as the towns regeneration. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the second pathway looked at building and assets and would target those with the highest emissions. They were working with the regeneration team for the lowest carbon emissions in the replacement of the leisure facilities and hub, as well as the other regeneration projects. For example, the wet and dry leisure facilities would be on a combined smaller floor plate and would have better usage such as heat power from the swimming pool which would contribute to a significant reduction of emissions overall. The civic hub would also have less floor space and the newer design would reduce overall emissions.

Another Member asked where the proposed trees and lakes/ponds would be located. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that he didn't have a specific number but around 4,000 were planted in Fairlands and 2500 would be planted in the new country park in the North of Stevenage development as well as three lakes. Many local authorities use ponds and lakes as a flooding measure. Cllr Speller added that they were looking at green and climate change friendly schemes such as additional wildflower meadows, but trees were really important, and they should aim to plant even more.

A Member suggested that car charging ports shouldn't be placed near cycleways for safety reasons. They also added that they needed to review cycle and walkways and regen needed to make it easier for people to walk and cycle around the town. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) noted these points.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance, Councillor Simon Speller, the gave a presentation on his portfolio area and some of the local projects taking place which included:

- Strategic partnerships were in a good place, including local businesses.
- Climate change strategy was more specific and clearer, and they were looking at ways to make it simpler and more visual so people can understand.
- They were focusing on 'bottom up' as well as 'top down' strategies as community engagement was important.
- SBC staffing and budgets now show the Councils commitment to climate change and was the only growth in the budget.
- Senior Officers and Members were doing their part.

- He believed the 2023 net zero target was achievable for SBC operations, but not the Borough as a whole.
- There was a long way to go with Ward Members and he encouraged them to use their budgets for the Dragons Den (Climate Change Community Fund) schemes.
- There was also a long way to go with community groups, but they were making headway with local businesses and schools.
- Digital communications were crucial, and these needed to be improved.
- There was only so much that could be done at a local level without government support.
- It was easier for some people to be 'green' than others, so everyone needed to be inclusive and supportive.
- SBC progress was tangible and led in many areas within County and the region.
- His focus was on a 'bottom up' approach and community engagement and all Members were key in this.

A Member raised concerns that there weren't many wards so far that had taken part in the Dragons Den scheme. They also suggested that there should be a blueprint document giving suggestions and inspiration on what could be done to give people ideas. Cllr Speller agreed and advised that community capacity wasn't dwindling, but volunteering took up a lot of space and time people didn't have, especially in the current climate. He hoped that once people saw schemes, it would inspire others to do the same. The focus was on Officer to promote the scheme and make it known, as well as community leaders and Ward Members.

Another Member asked what interventions would contribute to the reductions of CO2 emissions and highlighted the importance of cost effectiveness. Cllr Speller advised that the cost effectiveness of the scheme will happen when it takes off, but it was a scheme of community engagement, so the community was the outcome. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) added that it would become clear what the costs and carbon savings were. The pathways detailed why they were targeting certain areas and looking into them in more detail, including the cost effectiveness.

The Chair thanked Officers for their contribution to the meeting.

He then introduced the Head of Climate Action, Fabian Oyarzun, and the Climate Change Programme Lead, Jennifer Bratchell, to give a demonstration of the new climate change portal.

The Head of Climate Action introduced the Kausal Watch Platform which would plan, track and measure climate actions in a more comprehensive way and was easy to use. This was in collaboration with Officers across SBC and showed who was responsible for certain actions and engaged with stakeholders to keep everyone informed.

They presented what the portal looked like and informed Members that the platform was on the website but wasn't publicly available yet, but they aimed to put it online by the end of the year. There was an indicator linked to every action and a tracker of

carbon reduction.

A Member asked whether they could see figures to assess their progress towards net zero and climate change targets. The Head of Climate Action advised that the baseline was the 2018 data of SBC fuel fleet and properties. They were working to update the information but had issues doing this. They had some figures, but it couldn't include scope 3 emissions such as the supply chain, water supply, or waste management as they were not systematically produced. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) added that the baseline was established when the climate emergency was declared, and progress can be compared to this. The scope was constantly increasing therefore data couldn't be obtained for some areas. Cllr Speller suggested the Committee should spend a session on this topic as they can explore it in detail.

A Member suggested that there needed to be an updated communications strategy to get residents to go onto the site. The Chair agreed that both Officers and Members should appeal to as many people as possible to signpost and share the portal with the community.

Another Member suggested it would be helpful to compare data to other new towns. They also suggested that the font size needed to be reviewed to ensure it was accessible to all.

Members suggested that as well as the Kausal Watch Platform, Officers considered a very simple infographic display for the website which could relay simple messages that would be easy to understand and simple actions for the public to take.

4 **UPDATED E&E SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023-24**

The Chair informed Members that the next meeting was looking at policy development and pre-scrutiny of the Cycle Hire scheme. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that there were some cycle groups involved in the development of the scheme and may want to attend the meeting.

A Member suggested that the Committee should look at affordability and the cost of a low-income household trying to keep a car running versus reinstating a working and reliable bus system.

Another Member suggested that the Committee should keep track of the town centre regeneration. The Chair agreed but believed it was too big to look at in the 2023/24 year and suggested it should be looked at in the next civic year. The Chief Executive added that there was another all-Member briefing on the regeneration at the end of November. They were looking at doing more of these briefings and there was a chance to ask questions over the year.

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Members noted the updated E&E Select Committee Work Programme for 2023/24.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

There was none.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR



Meeting: ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Lead Portfolio Area – Economy & Transport

Date: 12 DECEMBER 2023

DRAFT REPORT - REVIEW OF BUS SERVICES

Author – Stephen Weaver Ext No.2332
Contact Officer – Stephen Weaver Ext No.2332

Contributors – Councillor Rob Broom, Chair of Environment & Economy Select, Lead Assistant Director supporting the Committee, AD Stevenage Direct Services, Steve Dupoy.

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To consider the report and recommendations of the Environment & Economy Select Committee Scrutiny review into local bus services following the collapse of the ZEBRA Electric Bus Scheme for Stevenage.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED

- 2.1 When Members considered their work programme for the 2023-24 Municipal Year at its meeting on 23 March 2023 it was agreed to include a review item on the provision of local bus services brought about by the collapse of the Zero Emission Bus Regional Area (ZEBRA) Scheme for Stevenage. Following the decision by Arriva Bus Company not to progress with the match funding of the Government Scheme to provide a fleet of electric buses for Stevenage, Members expressed concern that this would not go ahead, with regards to the climate change impact of this decision and also on the impact on local bus users.

2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

2.3.1 The Committee met on 14 June [Agenda including scoping document - 14 June 2023](#) to agree the scope for the review, and it agreed should consider the following areas:

- Provide a focus on the state of the current bus services in Stevenage, engaging with the Bus provider Arriva, Centrebus, Hertfordshire County Council's Passenger Transport Unit, local Bus User Group BUGS
- Alternative options for zero emission buses in Stevenage. What lessons can be learned from the failed ZEBRA (Zero Emissions Bus Regional Area) scheme for Stevenage? Are there any other opportunities for future funding schemes?
- Barriers to people using public transport and ways to encourage more bus use/modal shift

2.3.2 The context of the issues facing bus services currently are as follows: Passengers are facing unreliability issues of the bus service, which is a major concern. Hertfordshire County Council are trying to encourage sustainability for the service but the combination of the issues of low passenger numbers, increased costs, a lack of drivers and an ageing fleet are all obstacles to providing a reliable service.

2.4 **Process of the review**

2.4.1 The Committee met formally on 5 occasions in 2023 and informally with a site visit on 29 August to undertake the review and received input from the following groups and people on the following dates:

- 14 June 2023, considered the scoping document
- 6 July 2023, received written responses to questions and data requests and carried out interviews with the HCC Director of Transport Unit and the Executive Portfolio Holder for Transport and Highways and considered a mapping document for the review
- 29 August 2023, undertook a Member site visit to Metroline TFL bus company garage in Potters Bar to view electric buses and charging infrastructure and interview the Garage Manager
- 4 September 2023, interview with Arriva Bus Company and consideration of the data Arriva shared with Members and interview with the Bus User Group for Stevenage (BUGS) and received an updated mapping document
- 10 October 2023, interviews with Herts Sight Vision Loss Charity and Irish Network Stevenage Older People's group, SBC Executive Portfolio Holder for Transport, Cllr Lloyd Briscoe and SBC Climate Change officers regarding encouraging uptake in public transport and consideration of an updated mapping document.
- 12 December 2023 to consider the draft report and recommendations of the review

3 **REVIEW FINDINGS**

3.1 **Conclusions of the Environment & Economy Select Committee**

- 3.1.1 Based on the input provided to Members conducting the review the Committee have made the following conclusions:
- 3.2 Catalyst for the review – the collapse of the Zero Emissions Bus Regional Area (ZEBRA) due to Arriva pulling out of the bid. In relation to the failure of the Zero Emissions Bus Regional Area (ZEBRA), it was noted that the funding would only have been available if a willing partner had been in place and HCC advised that Arriva had declined for commercial reasons. ZEBRA Part 2 had since been announced, but as Arriva were not a willing partner up nor had another company been identified, it would not therefore be going ahead. Arriva reason for pulling out of the scheme at the late stage was that the financial commitment was too great with passenger numbers in Stevenage still down since pre-Covid figures.
- 3.3 The weakness of the current national, commercial model for bus services- During the interview process with HCC as the relevant authority and the commercial operator Arriva it became apparent to Members that the current mechanism was lacking as the County Council commission the service but have no real power over poor performance other than to threaten withdrawal of the licence but there would need to be an alternative company to run the service, so without this the threat is hollow.
- 3.4 Unreliability issues - The unreliability of the bus services was a concern, as this was not encouraging greater patronage from occasional users. HCC were trying to encourage sustainability for the service but the combination of the issues of low passenger numbers/enhanced costs/lack of drivers and an ageing fleet were obstacles to this.
- 3.5 Scanning of passes - HCC Officers agreed to investigate the reported practice of bus drivers encouraging passengers to not scan passes in order to speed up the boarding of the bus as the scanning of the passes was vital for recording the use of subsidies.
- 3.6 Impact of Covid - Covid had a significant impact on this due to lifestyle changes, delayed operations, and the market changing. The demographics of an area is relevant. In the bigger cities the use of services has returned to pre-covid levels, but other areas have not fully recovered. Also, older people have not returned to the service.
- 3.7 Impact of Brexit - Members were informed by Arriva that an impact of Brexit has been that formerly they had employed bus drivers from Europe but following Brexit these drivers had left the employment pool which had caused a squeeze on the number of available experienced drivers. Other drivers have left the bus sector, for better paid driver vacancies. As wage inflation has increased, better paid vacancies have become available. Bus companies have lost out to other professional driver haulage roles who have paid more to attract drivers. Domestic based drivers can earn more in London and in other driving roles. Recently Arriva have worked on making the role for drivers more attractive, with a double digit pay rise.

- 3.8 Bus timetable Information - The Arriva website was good at showing the timetable, but there was a challenge in showing what buses were actually operating in real time. The problem is compounded by the fact that the member of staff at Arriva who updates the website re delays or non-running services was also responsible for co-ordinating replacement buses/drivers attempting to alleviate the problem, so this delayed providing accurate real time information. The App worked better than the website but was now being superseded by other competitors, which Arriva were aware of and know they needed to improve this. The real time information displayed at bus stops around the Town was in the process of being upgraded. Members were of the view, however, that the extent of investment in screens to carry the information to do this by HCC was inadequate.
- 3.9 Arriva problems- running an old fleet - A further problem for the reliability of the service is running an old fleet. The average age of buses that Arriva are operating in Stevenage are 14 years old but should be just 12.5 years old. However, there were three buses that Arriva reported at the meeting had been taken out of service that were 19 years old and subsequently two had returned to service because of operational need. Running an old fleet has a detrimental impact on the reliability of buses as older vehicles are more prone to breaking down. There had been a lag in procurement of new vehicles for three years over the covid period which was having an impact on the service.
- 3.10 New Arriva Bus Depot in Stevenage – Arriva’s new Bus depot in Stevenage is seen as positive by Members, as this had shown commitment to put investment into the area as they had previously run out of two sites but this had caused difficulties. Operating out of one site was better and had been planned for a long time. Arriva suggested that Stevenage was in a good position to receive more investment as it was fundamentally a good place to operate a bus service, but this would likely be with a modern diesel not electric fleet due to the cost of purchase. The locating of a new bus servicing depot in Stevenage gives Arriva capacity to work on vehicles. However, since the cost-of-living crisis linked to the war in Ukraine access to parts was a challenge.
- 3.11 Replacement bus stops – As part of the review Members raised concern about the rate of replacement bus stops. In their view the funding for this was wholly inadequate as it equated to 2 bus stops per district being replaced each year. Concern regarding the condition of some bus stops in the Town was noted by HCC. HCC advised Members that a programme of improvements was in place, and several had been completed but it was accepted that more work was needed on others, including the installation of real time information for bus times and which routes were running.
- 3.12 Electric buses – HCC Officers advised the review that unless battery technology dramatically improved it would be more likely to see the larger vehicles replaced with hydrogen run technology in the future. The Committee were of the view that they would remain cautious about this approach as this could be flawed if the supply of hydrogen is not improved, as Members had

heard from Metroline that they have 10 hydrogen run buses that were often out of service due to the erratic supply of hydrogen. Members suggested that HCC/Arriva consider the use of biodiesel (manufactured from used cooking oil) which produce 90% less CO2 than conventional diesel and can be used in diesel engine vehicles without any modification, and with volatile costs for conventional diesel it would in time provide more stability. Overall, the technologies for Electric Buses and other non or very low fossil fuel buses are still in their infancy, and it would likely need a third generation of Electric powered buses to be designed overcoming the cost, weight, manoeuvrability and range challenges before they are likely to be available to medium sized towns like Stevenage.

3.13 Passenger experience – Focusing on passengers who have no choice and rely on buses to commute to work, older non drivers and students. Members received feedback from a local resident regarding the bus service, the main critique was that the service is “unreliable; expensive; non-drivers have no other options; the service had deteriorated since Brexit; buses are filthy” and another user stated that they “had to leave their home at 5am to guarantee getting to work in another town in Hertfordshire for 9am start due to the unreliability of the service”.

3.14 Disabled passengers experience – Herts Vision Loss provided written and in-person evidence to the review. There main areas of concern were:

- people with vision loss wanted to travel comfortably and independently
- there was nothing visually that could tell another person they were partially sighted, therefore this contributed to the problem of using buses
- information boards were difficult to use and should have contrasting screens at lower heights
- The Sight Loss Council were working locally with Bedfordshire and Essex but were not yet working formally with Hertfordshire County Council
- The colour of the buses was difficult for people with vision loss to see as pale green or pale blue buses blended into the surroundings and was almost invisible
- The lack of real time information at bus stops was a problem
- Many people with vision loss relied on public transport and needed access to reliable bus services to get to work or hospital appointments
- Being aware of those with vision loss or other impairments should be included in the training drivers receive
- Driver training is a big issue regarding the way disabled passengers are treated. The response disabled passengers experience is variable therefore more needs to be done to ensure that all drivers are properly trained and refreshed regarding the way they engage with disabled passengers

3.15 What local authorities can do to support a thriving bus service – Arriva suggested that there are sometime unintended consequences of new

developments. Where possible try to avoid designing in problems, allow buses to run at the speed they need to, so avoid 20mph zones for bus routes. Also traffic calming measures like chicanes and road narrowing can cause major problems for buses to negotiate.

3.6 **Equalities & Diversity issues**

3.6.1 The issue of equalities and diversity were partially addressed by the input provided by Herts Vision Loss, but it is recognised that there are many other disabled groups that the review did not address with the resources available to the Committee. Members are aware that there was a scrutiny review undertaken by the County Council in 2017 which had focused primarily on disabled bus users.

3.6.2 Bus passengers who have low incomes need to be considered carefully as they reviewed heard from users who have no other viable transport choice to commute to work and to access shops and services in their area. Therefore, it is important that the Borough Council, although without any direct responsibility or leverage regarding buses, should speak up for marginalised public transport users as bus users are often well behind the needs of car drivers and train passengers when transport is being considered.

4 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 That the Environment & Economy Select Committee considers the findings of the review, contained within this report and the recommendations below be presented to the Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy and Transport, Cllr Lloyd Briscoe and with partners at HCC Highways Unit and Arriva Bus Company and that a response be provided within two months of the publishing of this report.

4.2 **Recommendation 1** - It is recommended that SBC Executive Portfolio Holder for Transport be invited to consider holding a yearly transport seminar for Stevenage bringing together the HCC transport unit and the public transport providers to hold them to account regarding the performance of their contracts with a view to champion local users' needs and bring a focus on improved performance.

4.3 **Recommendation 2** - It is recommended that Arriva be strongly encouraged to update the real time information for bus services on their website and App, as bus users rely on this information to wait for bus services, if cancelled or delayed.

4.4 **Recommendation 3** – It is recommended that (i) to help wheelchair users and disabled and the visually impaired that some (a least two or three) of the information screens in the bus interchange be lowered and the contrast of those screens be adjusted to provide a good contrast to enable those users to be able to read the information more easily, and (ii) in addition, that a similar sign to the RNIB signage used near the ticket office at the railway station be installed at the bus interchange.

- 4.5 **Recommendation 4** - It is recommended that (i) The HCC Passenger Transport Unit and Arriva need to engage in an open and ongoing conversation with disability groups like Herts Vision Loss to help refine and shape the services, as it appeared to Members that this was not currently the case; and (ii) the use of trusted apps for those with disabilities be championed by bus providers and transport authorities at HCC.
- 4.6 **Recommendation 5** - It is recommended that Arriva should revisit their driver training regarding courtesy and care towards disabled passengers. This should be looked at based on the evidence submitted by Herts Vision Loss, who reported that their members were, on occasion, not given sufficient time to be seated when boarding or were dismissed or ignored by some drivers when asking for assistance or information about the bus route etc.
- 4.7 **Recommendation 6** - It is recommended that HCC Passenger Transport Unit and Arriva advance the roll out of audio announcement on buses as well as visual displays screens, which need to be retrofitted to all existing fleet and be provided as standard on any new fleet stock.
- 4.8 **Recommendation 7** - It is recommended that during the long transition to EV electric replacement buses and considering the variable supply of hydrogen, that HCC and Arriva be invited to consider using a more environmentally friendly Biodiesel which produces 90% less carbon than conventional diesel.
- 4.9 **Recommendation 8** - It is recommended that corporately the SBC Chair of Planning and Development Committee and the SBC Planning Officers be encouraged to review the delivery of planning applications which entail new or altered road schemes to make sure that there are no unintended consequences to buses using said routes involving narrowed roads or chicanes for traffic calming measures that make bus journeys slower and therefore not run to optimum journey times.
- 4.10 **Recommendation 9** – It is recommended that regarding the new bus station interchange:
(i) SBC, fully consider the use of the Bus Station in its new location, and the user experience. Although the interconnected nature of the new bus station to the railway station is strong, the same cannot be said for pedestrians, and ease of access to the town centre shops. At this stage of regeneration, pedestrian access is frustrated, and without clear walkways, to and from the bus station into the town;
(ii) that clear signage for pedestrians be provided;
(iii) that the provision of a service like Shopmobility close to the bus station, for older and disabled residents, or another means of assisting older and disabled users to move from the Bus Station into the town, such as a shuttle bus, be considered; and

(iv) that SBC consider additional seating in the vicinity of the Bus Station to assist older residents, and those with disabilities.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications for this report.

5.2 Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications for this report.

5.3 Equalities Implications

The Equalities implications have been addressed within the report at paragraph 3.6.1 There are no further equalities implications for this report.

5.4 Climate Change Implications

Climate change implications have been addressed throughout the report but specifically at paragraph 3.12.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Links to the E&E Select Committee Meetings:

[E&E Select Committee - 14 June 2023](#)

[E&E Select Committee - 6 July 2023](#)

[E&E Select Committee - 4 September 2023](#)

[E&E Select Committee - 10 October 2023](#)