

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 6 July 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, 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, Graham Snell and Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, OBE.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 7.24pm

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

Apologies for absence were received by Councillor Andy McGuinness.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 14 JUNE 2023**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Meeting of the Environment and Economy Select Committee held on 14 June 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **BUS SCRUTINY REVIEW - INTERVIEWS WITH HCC TRANSPORT UNIT & HCC EXECUTIVE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR TRANSPORT & HIGHWAYS**

The Chair welcomed to the meeting Herts County Council Officers Simon Aries Director of Transport, Waste and Environment and Dan Tancock, Transport Unit along with Councillor Phil Bibby in his role as HCC Executive Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport.

The Chair opened the debate by expressing concern regarding the situation with the poor bus service in Stevenage, the ZEBRA Scheme not going ahead, inaccurate timing information, falling passenger numbers and the tired and worn-out bus fleet.

In response to several questions the following answers/comments were given by the representatives from HCC:

- The unreliability issues of the bus services were a concern. 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;
- It was agreed that the concerns were not limited to Stevenage as nationally

bus services were struggling, with passenger numbers not recovering post covid and combined with driver recruitment difficulties;

- 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;
- The Committee was informed that if the bus operators were of the view that a route was not commercial there was nothing that the County Council could do to change their stance due to the funding model adopted;
- Franchising had been considered by HCC but the high costs involved had ruled it out and the partnership model was adopted instead. HCC advised that they might look at Franchising again to assess the viability;
- £18million had been invested by HCC across the County, much of this for concessionary travel;
- 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 would be announced at some point but again a willing partner would be necessary for this to be applied for and Arriva had ruled themselves out for commercial reasons;
- The concern regarding the condition of some bus stops in the Town had been noted. HCC advised 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;
- A new 907 route had been launched between Stevenage and Cheshunt and the SB6 would be replaced by a more frequent SB7 route;
- The Committee was advised that unfortunately the County Council had no influence on Arriva running the bus service in Stevenage as it was a commercial operation although they were willing to work with Arriva and to support them in any way;
- Cllr Bibby would be attending an East of England Forum to discuss bus services across the region;
- Cllr Bibby stated that as part of Herts Rapid Transport Links, the County Council were looking into solutions such as guided buses which run on rubber wheels along a fixed guided track, for routes linking major towns in the region (A414 ST Albans – Hatfield – Hertford corridor);
- HCC Officers would 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;

- In relation to electric buses, officers advised 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 Chair advised that Members of the Committee would be carrying out a site visit to other Towns in Hertfordshire that already used the EV technology within their fleet (Potters Bar Metro Line).

The Chair thanked Cllr Phil Bibby, Simon Aries and Dan Tancock for attending the meeting and their helpful input.

4 **MAPPING EXERCISE DOCUMENT FOR BUS SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Scrutiny Officer presented the mapping exercise for the Bus Services Scrutiny Review.

The Committee noted that at the next meeting a representative from Arriva Buses would be attending to be interviewed by Members along with a member of the Stevenage Bus Users Group.

Members also asked that the use of the new bus interchange particularly for people with disabilities be considered. It was agreed that a representative from one of the Disability Groups in the Town be asked to attend a meeting of the Committee.

Cllr Lloyd Briscoe Portfolio Holder for Economy and Transport would be at the October meeting along with Zayd Al Jawad, Assistant Director Planning and Regulatory and other SBC officers.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Mapping Document be noted.

5 **E&E SELECT COMMITTEE ACTION TRACKER**

The Scrutiny Officer presented the Action Tracker for the Committee.

It was noted that reports on the Climate Emergency would be brought back to Committee in November 2023 and March 2024 to update on where the Council was on this issue.

In response to a question regarding recycling rates and the cost of recycling, the Assistant Director Stevenage Direct Services confirmed that the Council received a substantial income from recycling and was continuously working on ways to increase the rates of recycling.

A Member raised the recent statement regarding Southern Rail's 21-day consultation on the closure of the ticket office at Stevenage Railway station.

The Committee were concerned about the possible loss of the ticket office citing the issues that this would raise for the disabled, visually impaired, people with learning

difficulties and dyslexia to use ticket machines and for the digitally excluded to book tickets remotely online.

The Committee asked that the matter be raised with appropriate officers and also Cllr Briscoe, as Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport as a matter of urgency to ask what representation and response to the consultation was being made corporately from SBC?

The Chair then suggested that current workload allowing, the Committee receive a presentation/update from officers regarding the current position with the Council's garage stock around the Town as far too many were not fit for purpose.

It was **RESOLVED** that with the suggestions raised above, the Action Tracker for the Committee be noted.

6 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

7 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

8 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR