

## STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

### ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Monday, 4 September 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 and Graham Snell.

**Start / End** Start Time: 6.00pm

**Time:** End Time: 7.41pm

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

Apologies for absence were received by Cllr Andy McGuinness and Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, OBE

There were no declarations of interest.

#### 2 **MINUTES - THURSDAY 6 JULY 2023**

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 6 July 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

#### 3 **INTERVIEW WITH ARRIVA BUS COMPANY**

The Chair welcomed to the meeting Michael Jennings, Area Head of Commercial for Arriva South, and Alec Bright, Arriva Network Manager for Stevenage.

The Chair asked a range of questions which were answered by Mr Jennings and included:

- Mr Jennings agreed that electric buses were the future.
- The main reasons why Arriva withdrew from the ZEBRA scheme were the impact of Covid and the financial implications from it. During Covid bus patronage reduced by three quarters and it was decided that Arriva couldn't invest into Stevenage. Instead they did invest into a new depot.
- Unfortunately there was no option to delay the government grant, as it was a take it or leave it offer and at the time during Covid it was not financially viable to invest into Stevenage. He hoped that another government grant would be available.
- He highlighted that they needed more support and needed to replace a large portion of the fleet which would require a lot of large capital investment at once.
- The ZEBRA bid was quick in becoming available and needed to be submitted

quickly with awards being made on a large scale to small areas.

- Arriva had introduced electric buses in Leicester and London, but there were no electric fleets currently in the Southeast.
- He acknowledged that there was a problem with the current service and delivery was below where it should be. He highlighted some causes for this.
- Staffing had been a big issue not only in Stevenage but across Hertfordshire. They were now fully staffed in Stevenage and had increased pay rates to £16 per hour. They had also increased starter rates and used agencies to fill any gaps in staffing.
- The depot site had been another issue. Previously they had been operating from two sites which was difficult to manage. Now they are operating from one site with the correct facilities.
- Another issue had been engineering which they were still having issues with. The current fleet was older, they had issues with getting engineering staff, and there was a lack of parts which took time to come in. He highlighted that they had an action plan which still had some way to go but they were moving forward in the right direction.

A Member asked a question regarding the average percentage of services operated and suggested this was not in line with the public perception of what had been operated. Mr Jennings agreed that the perception was negative, but it was often worse than what was operated. The impact from traffic, lack of drivers, and issues with engineering all contribute to late services and although some services were late, they still ran. He stated that ideally, they wanted to run at least 99% of services.

A Member asked a question regarding the monthly data that had been provided. Mr Jennings advised that the variations in the monthly data was affected by various factors such as school holidays, bank holidays, or how many weekends there were in a certain month.

Another Member asked why there were recruitment issues. Mr Jennings advised that there had been a challenge with drivers and engineers and had been seen across the entire bus sector not just Arriva and there were lots of reasons for this. Covid had a significant impact on this due to lifestyle changes, delayed operations, and the market changing. Brexit was also another issue as they cannot recruit from overseas anymore. They had made the job more attractive by investing in the depot and facilities, changing schedules and increasing pay rates.

A few Members asked questions about the communications through the website, app and twitter, as well as the real time information infrastructure. Mr Jennings advised that the website was good at showing the timetable, but there was a challenge in showing what was actually operating. The app gave live updates and showed what was operating but there were still limitations. Some last-minute changes aren't updated as quick. The Department for Transport had pushed for open data so other websites can access and track the data and show real time information. The real time information infrastructure was down to Hertfordshire County Council. Mr Bright also added that they had a red list of journeys that should operate daily and would take priority, for example the first or last journeys of the day.

Some Members asked questions in relation to operations in other areas such as London or Leicester. Mr Jennings advised that having electric buses in London was slightly different as Transport for London pay to operate services. Leicester also had a different market and was stronger therefore was also a good candidate for an electric fleet. Stevenage pre-covid had a strong market but it had decreased post-covid. It was also currently hard to gain investments and the business wouldn't be sustainable if an electric fleet was introduced into Stevenage. In terms of general performance there had been a mixed picture nationally and there were only a few areas which showed excellent performance. There have been major lifestyle changes in recent years, such as working from home, which changed how many people used the service. Mr Jennings didn't think bus usage would return to pre-covid levels and this was a national issue.

A few Members asked questions regarding the aging fleet in Stevenage and the use of biodiesel. Mr Jennings advised that electric vehicles were a lot more expensive and wouldn't replace diesel vehicles like for like. The biggest challenge was missed funding opportunities during covid and without funding they were more likely to get more diesel vehicles, but they already use biodiesel. They were looking nationally at what they can do to bring buses in as there was a link between the age of buses and their environmental impact. The oldest vehicle running in Stevenage was 14 years old (with two 19-year-old buses just taken out the fleet) and the average age of the fleet was 12.5 years with vehicles ranging between 9-14 years. Mr Bright added that if any investment opportunities did come towards Hertfordshire, it would come towards Stevenage. This was due to the age of the fleet as well as the potential in Stevenage.

A Member asked whether there had been an effect from the £2 fare cap. Mr Jennings advised that this had increased patronage by a small amount, and they had seen the most use from longer journeys.

A few Members asked questions regarding the practicality of electric buses within Stevenage, and it was advised:

- There were pinch points, and the biggest challenge was getting buses moving faster.
- Haycroft Road was a tight road where buses had issues, as well as roads such as Chertsey Rise were not designed for buses but remained as they were strong routes.
- Main roads and dual carriageways were good.
- There weren't problems all day, but certain areas at certain times.
- Parking was also an issue.
- They try to get buses into new developments and communicate with the developers and local councils.
- The issue with new developments was that most people who buy houses in new developments have cars and don't use buses.
- The key to new developments was to build them with buses in mind, for example no speed bumps or wider roads.
- Some developments have tight turns that make it difficult for buses to travel

the route. Ideally providing buses through Section 106 and having developments account for buses help.

- The depot was built in mind with electric vehicle charging. Ideally the buses would be charged overnight and topped up during the day.
- An electric bus can travel 180-200 miles on one charge but won't last all day.
- They could opportunity charge and charge at the end of the route.
- Technology needs to improve so bus batteries can last all day.

A Member asked what local authorities could do to make it easier for commercial providers to provide local services. Mr Jennings advised that as a commercial operator it was key to react and address quickly. Issues arise when there was a problem they cannot address, local authorities are slow to react. He also added that town vitality was key. Stevenage needs to be an attractive destination for a variety of people such as employers and shoppers. Mr Bright added that Stevenage had always been pro-bus and was one of the best towns for buses in Hertfordshire. However, it was getting harder with traffic and most households owning cars.

A Member suggested that cutting fares and increasing service would make more people use buses. Mr Jennings advised that if they increased frequency they would carry more, and if they reduced fares they would carry more. However, if they doubled the frequency, they wouldn't carry double the passengers, but it would still cost double to run.

A Member asked questions regarding the accessibility of the bus service. Mr Jennings advised that the entire fleet was fully wheelchair accessible, and some bus stops are. The next step was to make all bus stops accessible but that was down to Hertfordshire County Council. Operators are doing things locally to see what accessibility looks like and this was needed from the Department for Transport. All destination screens were electronic, and the next step was to add announcements for next stops. The Scrutiny Officer also added that they had feedback from a Hertfordshire group who work with people who are visually impaired. They raised issues around how they view boards, etc. Mr Jennings added that more work needed to be done but they had done things over the years to help understand different issues, such as guide dogs.

The Chair thanked Mr Jennings and Mr Bright for their contribution to the meeting.

#### 4 **INTERVIEW WITH BUS USER GROUP STEVENAGE (BUGS)**

The Chair welcomed to the meeting David Martin, Secretary of the Bus User Group Stevenage (BUGS).

The Chair invited Mr Martin to give an overview of the BUGS perception of the bus service across the years which included:

- The issues the bus service experienced in 2017 are not different to the issues experienced today.
- The Bus Service Act enhanced the partnership between Local Councils, County Councils, and operators. The interlink partnership was there before

but had no real power with the County Council.

- Lots of issues affect the service such as lack of drivers, seasonal changes, or holidays during the summer.
- The graphs provided from Arriva show operations from Stevenage depot, which included other longer routes out of Stevenage and generally run well. The graphs didn't represent the shorter Stevenage services and didn't reflect the complaints from residents about the local bus service.
- The open data allowed anyone to look at specific services.
- There were lots of services being dropped and the real time information wasn't available to let people know it had been cancelled.

Some Members asked questions in relation to the bus times and scheduling. Mr Martin advised that operators had to register their services with the County Council, and it took, on average, 6 weeks to implement changes. The County Council tends to rely on commercial operators to give information about which routes they want to run, although they do have some control. For example, the SB8 route had been withdrawn, but Arriva ran an evening service under contract with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC).

A Member asked how often operators consult groups within Hertfordshire. Mr Martin advised that they generally didn't. BUGs were consulted once by HCC once to develop passenger charter and bus service user plan. They didn't consult on routes and services and any changes that have happened were through grassroots campaigns, For example in Hertsmere a community investment levy fund was used to restore the bus service.

Some Members asked questions relating to the data not comparing to the experience of local passengers, as well as app usage. Mr Martin advised that passengers would rather services that came. There were many issues such as buses breaking down when they overheat, or Arriva having to take on other services and routes which created more issues with lack of drivers. The Arriva app only looks at Arriva services and was useful to see the service generally however isn't always accurate. There needed to be a multi operator zone ticket to improve service use.

A Member asked whether the improved depot would make a difference to the service and the issues it had. Mr Martin advised that the staff moral had improved with the new depot. The operations would also be better as there was an improvement in the communications and awareness.

A Member asked questions relating to the accessibility of the service. Mr Martin advised that accessibility was improving. All buses were required to have wheelchair access as a minimum. He added that the government had specified new regulations that buses would have audio and visual announcements for the next stop, as well as wheelchair users being able to see stop information. All new vehicles from November would have this built in and older vehicles would have this retrofitted.

A Member asked whether competition could help the service improve. Mr Martin advised that other bus operators did not travel on the same routes. He added that residents were interested to see other operations as they have negative perceptions

and experiences with Arriva. During Covid, Centrebus couldn't manage but worked to capacity unlike Arriva so had a more positive public perception.

Some Members asked whether the interchange had improved the service use and was working efficiently. Mr Martin advised that the interchange was working reasonably well. There were some late buses going into incorrect bays which caused issues, but this was being resolved. The real time information was the real issue and HCC were working on a new display system that would give better information. The original plans for the interchange included a mobility centre however due to Covid and the lack of funding and budgets, the space was leased to a shop. This worked well but the lack of a mobility centre was a disappointment. Mobility issues had reduced the numbers of elderly passengers, as well as Covid.

A Member asked whether bus drivers received abuse from passengers regarding the service. Mr Martin advised that social media had had a positive impact on abuse. Complaints to drivers happened from time to time, but there had been a reduction due to social media. The BUGS social media had national followers and most complaints go there rather than towards drivers.

Another Member asked whether there was any feedback from the reduction of the SB8 service. Mr Martin advised that because the service was so poor, many people hadn't noticed a difference. There had been some people contacting BUGS through social media asking for alternatives.

The Chair thanked Mr Martin for his contribution to the meeting.

It was recommended that an electric minibus should be considered to be put into place with a service running from the shops/commercial units that will be developed on the ground floor of the Guinness development, or from the Court House to the Mecca Bingo and pedestrianised shops. This would create a link from the new bus interchange to the town centre for people with mobility issues.

## 5 **UPDATED MAPPING DOCUMENT FOR THE BUS SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Chair informed Members the next Environment and Economy Select Committee meeting would be held on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October and would also be centred around buses. They would invite Stevenage Borough Council Officers and groups from the community to attend. The Scrutiny Officer added they had confirmation from a group representing those with visual impairments and confirmation from the Irish Network.

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Committee noted the updated mapping document.

## 6 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There was none.

## 7 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

8 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

**CHAIR**