

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 10 October 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, Sarah Mead, Ellie Plater, Graham Snell, Forhad Chowdhury and Anne Wells

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 7.42pm

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

Apologies for absence were received by Councillors Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater and Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, OBE.

Councillor Anne Wells substituted for Councillor Claire Parris, and Councillor Forhad Chowdhury substituted for Councillor Conor McGrath.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - MONDAY 4 SEPTEMBER 2023**

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 4 September 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

A Member commented on the nudges that were done to stop car drivers moving round freely as this also had an impact on the bus services as well as cars. Buses needed to get round in certain times so this affected traffic flow. The Scrutiny Officer advised that the unintended consequences of this would be picked up and has been noted in the review.

3 **INTERVIEW WITH HERTS VISION LOSS CHARITY AND STEVENAGE IRISH NETWORK FOR OLDER PEOPLE**

The Chair welcomed Alison MacDougall, trustee for Herts Vision Loss, and Lorna Whitaker, Herts Vision Loss service user and a local resident with lived experience, to the Committee.

The Chair asked whether they were able to use the service easily. Ms Whitaker informed Members that there was nothing visually that could tell another person they were partially sighted, therefore this contributed to the problem of using buses. She

explained that the information boards were difficult to use, and it would be useful if they were a darker blue so the writing was bolder and brighter, and if they could be lower as they were too high up. When buses came unexpectedly into other bays there was no way of knowing without reading the information boards quickly, which was often difficult for those with vision loss.

The Chair asked whether all the screens should be lowered. Ms Whitaker advised that people with vision loss wanted to travel comfortably and independently. There were individual screens for each bay so all screens should be lowered so they could see the information quicker. There were also signs high above the doors that would be missed by people with vision loss.

Ms MacDougall informed the Committee of a sight loss council which partnered so far with 18 Councils such as Bedfordshire and Essex but there was not one in Hertfordshire yet. The sight loss council in London was currently working with TfL and was implementing audio announcement buttons for bus arrival times and display screens which provided clearer information. The Scrutiny Officer advised that the Committee heard from the County Officers that this would be implemented soon, and Arriva confirmed all buses would be retrofitted.

The Chair asked whether Ms Whitaker felt she could get onto buses safely. Ms Whitaker advised that the colour of the buses was difficult for people with vision loss as pale green or pale blue buses blended into the surroundings and was almost invisible. She suggested that it would help if buses contrasted with their environment, so they were easier to spot. She also expressed issues with not being able to see the display on the front of the bus and advised that LED displays were much easier to see. Ms MacDougall advised that there was a slight delay as people with vision loss needed to see which stop they were at before alighting and often didn't know.

The Chair asked whether the buses were regular and reliable. Ms Whitaker advised that there was a period where they were unreliable but now the issue was whether they were just late or if they were cancelled. The information at bus stops only displayed which order the buses would come in, no real time information as to what time it would come if it was late or if it was cancelled. She suggested that real time information would be helpful. Many people with vision loss relied on public transport and needed access to reliable bus services to get to work or hospital appointments. Ms MacDougall added that a larger font option would be helpful.

The Chair asked whether the apps helped or whether people used this. Ms MacDougall advised that she believed it was an age issue regarding the apps. Older people might not use them. She also suggested an app being trialled by the Bedfordshire sight loss council.

Ms MacDougall informed Members that there was a section on the interlink website for visually impaired people and there was a card scheme she had never heard of that she could promote through the charity. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the County Council and Bus Operators controlled this. He also advised that Arriva had a journey assist card which could be printed or requested directly from Arriva.

Ms Whitaker advised that being aware of those with vision loss or other impairments should be included in the training drivers receive. In her experience, some drivers were very communicative, and this was helpful when calling out stops and letting her know where to get off. She also suggested that it would be helpful to ask bus drivers what would help them, for example an identification badge. Ms MacDougall asked whether this was included in their training and offered to assist and create training if needed.

The Scrutiny Officer suggested that it would be helpful for groups such as Herts Vision Loss to have direct conversations with Arriva to talk through some issues.

The Chair thanked Ms MacDougall and Ms Whitaker for their contribution to the meeting.

The Chair then welcomed Ann Meldrum, a local resident and bus user, to the Committee.

Ms Meldrum described a petition she started calling for a decent, reliable, and regular bus service in Stevenage. It originally started because of the Bedwell buses only having one bus an hour which created a lot of issues and she found that unhappiness surrounding the bus service was a lot of Stevenage residents experience. The petition received 3021 signatures and most of the comments were that they were unreliable.

Ms Meldrum informed Members that Arriva brought in someone to deal with these issues. They have made some services longer, but she believed that if the longer services were more reliable then this was a positive improvement. She also explained that Bedwell had a Number 7 bus as well as the Number 6 which had made a difference to bus use in Bedwell.

The Chair asked Ms Meldrum some questions about the petition. She advised that she started it in August/September 2022 and the new timetables came into force in September this year. The petition went to Arriva and interlink.

Ms Meldrum advised that information on the time boards was key. In Peterborough every bus stop had real time information on when the next bus was coming. This would be helpful to implement in Stevenage and she had been discussing this with Hertfordshire County Council since January. She added that if users did have an issue there was contact information in the station that they can use to send in complaints. She encouraged people to do this as it could help solve the issues people have.

The Chair thanked Ms Meldrum for her contribution to the meeting.

4 **INTERVIEW WITH SBC EXECUTIVE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR ECONOMY & TRANSPORT**

The Chair welcomed Councillor Lloyd Briscoe, Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy & Transport, to the Committee.

The Chair asked for Cllr Briscoe's view on Arriva pulling out of the ZEBRA scheme. Cllr Briscoe advised that it happened last March, and he had been having conversations with County Councillor Phil Bibby as the lead for transport at HCC. The same issue had happened in Milton Keynes. He explained that SBC were upset that they were losing the electric buses as it was also about the carbon emissions. He raised issues with Arriva's comment that there was a reduced customer demand post pandemic as the reason for pulling out the scheme and that private operators were not accountable to democratic services. He explained there was a new scheme called ZEBRA2 which HCC are applying to for funding, but this wouldn't come to Stevenage due to Arriva and HCC nominating another service provider.

The Chair asked whether there was a way to encourage the County Council into awarding the scheme to Stevenage, and whether there was opportunity to regularly discuss bus services with HCC and Arriva. Cllr Briscoe advised that there was a bus service improvement plan on the HCC website, and this was a positive move. It was his opinion that the bus operators were there to provide a service to residents, not to just make profit, and believed that private suppliers weren't meeting customer demand for buses.

A Member agreed that Arriva had broken the understanding about electric buses which SBC had put a lot of work into and asked how much it cost SBC and HCC to prepare. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that it cost SBC Officers time. HCC had consultations so they would've paid extra for that.

Another Member asked whether there were any timeframes, whether there was a demand for the service and whether this changed depending on different times of the day. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that Arriva hadn't said anything about shifting the buses they used. Buses being smaller would be more economical and efficient but still required drivers and was a capital expense. Cllr Briscoe advised that the Baroness Taylor spoke about the ZEBRA scheme in Stevenage in the House of Lords and described a cyclical issue with people believing the service was unreliable so not using it, but Arriva could not invest as they were concerned about lack of use so didn't provide the service.

The Chair raised issues around the connectivity of the bus stations and to the town centre and asked whether this would be improved with the Stevenage Regeneration. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that there was an immediate improvement to the signage, drop kerbs, and easier routes which was worked on by the regen and engineering teams. The new civic hub and town square would create easier access routes when completed. There was also an ongoing discussion with Age UK to support shop mobility. The shop in the bus station was originally intended for them but they didn't want it and wanted to be based in the indoor market.

A few Members asked why Age UK didn't want the shop as the indoor market could be inaccessible and was only open a few days a week. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the response from Age UK was that they didn't want to run two facilities and so declined the shop and remained in the indoor market, however made a note that more discussions could take place.

Some Members raised issues with connectivity and suggested a small train to connect the bus station and the town. They also raised issues with the design of Lytton Way bus lanes. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that as regeneration takes place, the town centre will grow towards the bus station. He also advised that Lytton Way was still a work in progress and there would be a north south bus route which would improve bus connections.

The Chair thanked Cllr Briscoe for his contribution to the meeting.

5 **INTERVIEW WITH PLANNING POLICY AND CLIMATE CHANGE OFFICERS REGARDING BUS SERVICES**

The Chair welcomed Zayd Al-Jawad, Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory), and Fabian Oyarzun, Head of Climate Action, to the Committee.

The Chair asked how much awareness was there around climate issues. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that from a climate perspective, the main goal was to achieve modal shift rather than making existing journeys have a lower carbon footprint.

The Head of Climate Action informed Members that when it came to the sustainability of services they considered 3 types of sustainability – financial sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability.

The buses in Stevenage represent 1.9% of the territorial emissions, and less than 5% of the transport emissions. He believed that buses weren't reaching the audience they could, and this was the base of the demand problem as they weren't providing services for everyone, or they weren't engaging with all the users they could.

Stevenage was currently below the UK emission limits for air quality but was still above UN limits. The initiative that should be promoted was to be technologically neutral and exploring different technologies such as hydrogen to look at zero or low/ultra-low emissions. 95% of local emissions were from private cars so they needed to explore ways to make people use buses more and how to make those buses more efficient.

A Member stated that 80% of hydrogen extracted for transport had its own carbon emissions. The Head of Climate Action advised that decisions hadn't been made in central government around the use of hydrogen emissions and suggested this could be 2025 or later. The hydrogen used came from fossil fuels and was transformed into blue hydrogen by capturing and storing the CO₂, but this was not market ready yet. Green hydrogen used water to capture the CO₂ but was more expensive due to the technology involved. He suggested that new technologies could be made cheaper and more efficient soon.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) and the Head of Climate Action for their contribution to the meeting.

6 **UPDATED MAPPING DOCUMENT FOR BUS SCRUTINY REVIEW & FEEDBACK FROM MEMBER SITE VISIT TO POTTERS BAR GARAGE ELECTRIC BUS**

The Chair expressed that the Potters Bar site visit was very helpful in having conversation around the use of electric vehicles, understanding how viable electric buses could be, and how the technology was changing.

Members discussed how interesting they found the visit and how honest the conversations they had were. They described how heavy the buses were due to the batteries and how the batteries were affected by extreme temperatures. The Chair hoped that third generation buses would be more commercially viable.

The Scrutiny Officer added that there was an annual report going to the Executive Committee in October looking at the use of biofuels. The Stevenage fleet was something that was being actively considered for this. Biofuels produced 90% less CO2 than diesel, and although it was not perfect it could be used as a transitional technology. Additionally, biofuels could be used in diesel vehicles so no adaptations to the fleet would have to be made as the vehicles were more reliable and cheaper than electric.

The Chair thanked the Committee for their time on the topic of buses and concluded the bus scrutiny.

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Committee noted the updated mapping document for the bus scrutiny review.

7 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There was none.

8 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

9 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR