



Meeting: ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Lead Portfolio Area – Economy & Transport

Date: 12 DECEMBER 2023

DRAFT REPORT - REVIEW OF BUS SERVICES

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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](#)