

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

12 MARCH 2013

Present :- Councillor Beverly Davies (Chairman)
Councillors Helen Chuah, Bill Frame, Pauline Hazell,
Peter Higgins, Kim Naish, Nigel Offen, Gerard Oxford
and Terry Sutton

Substitute Member :- Councillor Will Quince for Councillor Kevin Bentley

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Lyn Barton
Councillor Anne Turrell
Councillor Sonia Lewis

30. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2013 was confirmed as a correct record.

31. Review of Public Transport and the new Bus Station

Councillor Naish (in respect of being a Private Hire Taxi Driver) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5);

The following invitees attended the meeting for this item;

Ms. Nikki Alder, General Manager, North Essex, First Group
Mr. Julian Elliott, Network Manager, First Group
Mr. Steve Hartman, Local Operations Manager, First Group
Mr. Nick Blackall, Local Bus Manager, Essex County Council
Mr. Peter Kay, Secretary, C-Bus

Also in attendance;

Mr. Ian Vipond, Executive Director
Mr. Paul Wilkinson, Transportation Policy Manager

Have Your Say

Mr. Tim Oxtan addressed the Panel, saying the Borough's current bus transport situation could not be put better than was described in the written submission to the Panel Members from Mr. Peter Kay, Secretary of C-BUS. He said that in particular, the local authorities needed to find ways to reduce traffic and ease congestion, with buses playing an important role in this. He felt the number of car parking spaces available to the public in the Town Centre should be reduced to encourage bus use, and did not consider the new Bus Station to be adequate or fit for purpose. Mr. Oxtan said letters in the local press, and in particular, a Lawford resident who described their late night experience at the station as 'like being in a prison of war camp', confirmed other users are like minded. Mr. Oxtan concluded by saying a new location, fit for purpose, should

be found and suggested the Britannia Car Park as an alternative site.

Presentations

Mr. Paul Wilkinson presented the report 'Bus Operation in Colchester' and spoke briefly on the strategic issues around bus transportation and the key projects.

Mr. Wilkinson said this meeting follows on from the previous meeting held on 10 January 2012 and representatives from the First Group, Essex County Council and C-BUS were in attendance to help the Panel in their deliberations.

Mr. Wilkinson explained that the Core Strategy sets out the growth agenda for Colchester and the policies direct the location of the growth to the main urban area of Colchester. He spoke about the importance of a good network in Colchester, where buses are accessible to those without access to a car or do not drive and whose trips by bus represent approximately 35% of journeys. It was confirmed that 95% of households are within 400m of at least an hourly service between 7.00 – 9.00 am. Mr Wilkinson mentioned the seven customer demands for a good bus service and how these demands can be met, with the most important of these being frequent and reliable buses that stop close to pick-up and destination points.

Concerning strategic issues, Mr. Wilkinson spoke about the Council's support of the delivery of the new Park and Ride site to the north of the A12, to be operational by the autumn of 2014 and the Council's commitment to developing a low emission strategy for Colchester.

In conclusion, Mr. Wilkinson spoke briefly about the new bus station in Osborne Street that opened in November 2012, the new facilities and an on-site supervisor appointed by the Council to help direct and guide passengers about the new services, Essex County Council's commitment to upgrading the real time passenger information systems to Colchester by June 2013, and the new experimental Town Centre Traffic Reduction scheme to be introduced from 17 March 2013 that will give buses, taxis, motorcycles and cycles priority up North Hill and into the High Street, and where other vehicles will be restricted between 11.00 am and 6.00 pm.

Mr. Peter Kay, C-BUS

Mr. Kay, Secretary of the Colchester Bus Users Support Group (C-BUS) had provided the Panel with a written submission on the C-BUS views on Colchester's bus operations.

Mr. Kay addressed the Panel as representative of C-BUS, saying he felt there needed to be a definitive in-depth investigation into all the causes of traffic congestion in Colchester, something that should have been addressed years ago but had been neglected. He had concerns about the introduction of a new Park and Ride scheme, questioning the accuracy of the 2009 data being used to estimate the car usage and fare charged at the site, and the lack of opportunity to challenge the facts being presented.

Mr. Kay said the new bus station site was awful for bus users and compared badly with

other similar new bus stations, a facility that was poor and with no other alternative, allowing the user no choice, just a take it or leave it and stay at home. He felt the policy to design a facility for public use was done without determining accurate usage and with a lack of control of public spending, the local authorities had no understanding on how to provide a good service to the users. He said fiddling around the edges with the scheme, for example, the changes in Stanwell Street, will not encourage users to continue to use the service or bring back those previous users who had defected back to the car. Mr. Kay concluded by asking what the specific role was of the Bus Supervisor and whether it was fulfilling a useful function.

In response to Councillor Frame, Mr. Kay said C-BUS, a bus users lobby group, was set-up in 2003, with a major amount of time spent in a pro-active role with users and bus operators in trying to dissuade the Council and Essex County Council from closing the old bus station in Queen Street. The Group is 54 members strong (with 100 at the height of the time of the bus station closure), with an elected committee, meeting four times annually, and with four newsletters published annually. He confirmed this was one of only 20 Bus User Groups in the entire country.

The Chairman thanked Mr. Kay for his presentation and for responses.

Open Discussions

Ticket prices

With regards to ticket prices, Mr. Elliott, in response to Councillor P. Higgins said First Group pricing is competitive, and provides good value for money in comparison with other bus operators. First Group do review costs, revenues and passenger growth, from which a pricing structure is developed. Price reductions can be considered but ultimately, being able to provide a service at a reduction is a commercial judgement.

The type and age of buses

Responding to Councillors Offen and P. Higgins, Mr. Elliott said First Group typically operate two types of bus, the 43 seater single decker and double decker buses for the highest demand routes. First Group will shortly be replacing 15 older buses with newer vehicles as part of a continuous cascading programme of renewal. The replacement buses will be 7-8 years old, approximately 5 years younger than the decommissioning buses.

Whilst modern buses have better engine specifications giving reduced emission levels, Councillor Quince said that unless the Councils evoke a more stringent air quality policy the borough will continue to be fed old second hand buses. Councillor Quince remained unimpressed by the promise of new seven year old buses.

Many Councillors could not understand why smaller 'hopper' buses are not used on many of the quieter services. Mr. Hartman said 'hopper' buses are not competitive and not using them was purely a matter of economics.

Ms. Alder said she will relay members concerns about the age of replacement buses

back to the Group Directors.

Ms. Alder confirmed to Councillor Naish that First Group is considering radio communications for drivers.

Bus (bus stops) and ticketing design

Mr. Elliott responded to Councillor Offen explaining that the design of buses has improved remarkably in recent years, with more inner space and greater access for wheelchair users, prams and buggies. The vehicles now have greater driving manoeuvrability and better engine specification gives reduced emission levels.

In response to Councillor P. Higgins, Mr. Elliott said First Group are now researching and developing new ticket machines and card / ticket readers to enable a smarter and cashless way of paying. As these facilities become more common place it was agreed that this will impact positively on the passenger waiting times in the town centre.

Mr. Blackall responded to Councillor Quince in explaining that new ticketing software is planned for future installation that will provide integrated tickets for use on all buses. The real time information system in Colchester is to be upgraded shortly by ECC. The on-street displays will be upgraded and will show departures. This information will eventually be able to be fed back to the operator(s) who will be able to make improved decisions on what action to take when there are delays and through the real time information displays relay messages back to customers.

Mr. Blackall, in response to Councillor Oxford explained that in an ideal world bus timetables would be available at every bus stop and new electronic signage available at many more bus stops. He added that the public can access timetables on-line and hard copies are available at the bus station. Mr. Blackall said that S106 monies is usually triggered at various stages of new development. Erecting bus stops from day one of a new development is an aspiration they try to implement, though in usual circumstances they are done in line with the levels of new occupancy. Councillor Oxford said these needed to be erected as soon as possible to encourage households to use buses, otherwise they will be lost to car travel and then the difficulty of persuading them to change their travelling habit.

Lack of civility of bus drivers/ access to buses

Councillor Offen said that many bus drivers lack civility or politeness and many are not able to speak English.

Ms. Alder responded to Councillor Oxford, agreeing that there needed to be an agreed policy on priority use of spaces designated for wheelchair users and prams and buggies. Mr. Blackall said wheelchair users have a legal right to have priority to spaces dedicated for this purpose. That said it is a sensitive issue that a driver will need to resolve if there is an issue.

Councillor Offen said drivers needed the appropriate training and Councillor Quince said punitive action against those failing to comply should be avoided as it was

essential young parents are not discouraged to travel by bus.

Mr. Elliott said replacement buses are now DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant with a ramp facility for wheelchair users. Ms. Alder said drivers do have various training courses to attend including modules on Customer Care, Disability Awareness and One to Ones. Ms. Alder urged any members of the public who come across unreasonable or rude driver attitudes to report these. First Group will take these seriously and investigate and discipline as appropriate. That said everyone agreed it would be unfair to tarnish all drivers with the same criticisms. Ms. Alder confirmed to Councillor Naish that pay differentials did not exist, that all bus drivers are paid on the same wage scales, and further to the discussions on training, all bus drivers are accompanied by trainers to ensure a full understanding of routes, ticketing and payments.

Councillor Oxford praised the First Group drivers for their politeness.

Bus routes and utilisation

In response to Councillor Offen, Mr. Blackall explained that since the deregulation and privatisation of buses in 1985, bus companies do have a freedom to operate on bus routes and the Public Transport Authority do not have the powers to force them on or off routes. The bus operators are competing companies with no coordination of service timings between operators.

In response to Councillors Offen and P. Higgins, Mr. Elliott said there are peaks and troughs in passenger use therefore it is inevitable you will occasionally see passing buses with very few or no travelling passengers. Typically, bus routes operate along south-north corridors with the town centre acting as a hub and allowing passengers the ability to change where routes converge. Passenger number reports are studied and bus operators do operate routes around maximising bus utilisation.

Councillor Quince said peak congestion time for car and bus traffic, before and straight after office opening times of 9.00 am to 4.00 pm, was not, in terms of bus usage, addressed in the report, and if we want to encourage more people to travel into the town centre by bus to work, shouldn't we be trying to make the buses more appealing to current and potential new commuters.

Air Quality

Councillor Quince had mentioned that he believed that unless the Council's take a hard-line and evoke a more stringent air quality policy the borough will continue to be fed old second hand buses,

Mr. Elliott said in addition to annual MOT testing, buses are inspected on a 28 day cycle and this included testing for low exhaust emissions. Mr. Blackall said bus operators hold a Bus Operators Licence. To satisfy the conditions of the licence, the bus operator has to provide evidence that buses can be maintained to the required standard. All vehicles are MOTd annually and random checks can be made of bus fleets to ensure compliance. All vehicles, regardless of age, must meet the prescribed

standards of performance and emission controls.

Mr. Wilkinson said officers do have continual dialogue with the bus operators on many issues including air quality.

Councillor P. Higgins said whilst he accepted work is now being undertaken to control exhaust emissions, he could not understand why this was not addressed much earlier.

Mr. Wilkinson said it had been necessary to develop an Air Quality Action Plan (strategy). Slow moving traffic in the town centre is the main reason for poor air quality and has to improve, with the new strategy being developed with an emphasis on moving people to more sustainable modes of travel e.g. cycling and walking. This will not be an overnight fix, with the Council having little control over a large proportion of vehicle traffic, but the intention is to commit to delivering the strategy over the next eighteen months.

The new bus station and changes to town centre traffic flow

In response to Councillor Quince, Mr. Hartman said First Group would have liked to have seen multi-stands and better facilities, but they are working with Essex County Council and Colchester Borough Council to get the best out of what is provided. Mr. Wilkinson said the Osborn Street site was identified as part of the St Botolph's Master Plan and the current new site does provide the capacity required when relocating the facilities. The Councils and bus operators remain committed to this site and are working closely in partnership to find solutions to issues and problems.

Councillor Quince who said the new facility provided a welcome that sent out the wrong message to new visitors and challenged the Portfolio Holder to say if she felt it was fit for purpose. In response to his comment that the toilet facility provided was not fit for purpose, and Councillor Davies who questioned the decision to close toilets at the new site two hours before the last bus services are scheduled to leave the station, Mr Wilkinson said the idea is to provide a high standard toilet facility, and the decision to close the toilets late at night was to avoid undesirable behaviour in the toilets, a point reiterated by Mr. Ian Vipond.

Councillor Offen said anti social behaviour was not a good enough reason to close the toilet facilities early. Members of the public waiting for long periods in the evening will often need toilets and the Council through a duty of care should be providing this facility. Councillor Offen did not think this action was acceptable.

Mr. Wilkinson explained to Councillor Frame that the implementation of the new bus station was phase I of the implementation plan, and officers will be looking to make further improvements as part of Vine Yard Street re-development.

Mr. Blackall said it was not right to make a comparison with the bus stations at Chelmsford and Colchester, and whilst it will be a challenge to find the flexibility of the old bus station, it is working well and officers continue to work to make further improvements.

Mr. Wilkinson confirmed to Councillor Sutton that the Council does employ a Bus

Supervisor, in-post since November 2012. The Supervisor provides a customer service between 9am – 5pm Tuesday to Saturday. He said the Supervisor wears a high visibility vest and is responsible for providing help to bus travellers, moving on car drivers and helping bus drivers. The bus operators remain satisfied with the work of the Supervisor. Ms. Alder said First Group were pleased with the supervisory role and had received positive feedback from bus drivers and passengers.

Mr. Blackall responded to Councillor Sutton with regard to the High Street layout. Improving the manoeuvrability of buses can be achieved through better use of bus stops with simple design changes and subtle changes elsewhere will improve traffic flow. The Working Group set-up to implement the bus station project will continue, but will also work on developing and improving the new town centre traffic flow scheme. Mr. Hartman said that just slightly extending bus stop bays will enable buses to fully park on the bay and allow other traffic to flow continuously down the High Street.

Park and Ride / Car Parking Charges

In response to Councillor Davies at the effects of reduced all-day car parking charges in some town centre car parks, Mr. Elliott said regular bus users are more concerned with reliable, regular and good quality bus services, and a drop in these standards will have a greater impact on passenger numbers than reductions in car parking charges. However, if it was seen that price reductions are having an effect on bus passenger numbers, then the bus operators will need to review the situation.

Quality Bus Partnership

Mr. Blackall responded to Councillor P. Higgins, saying Essex County Council do have regular liaison meetings with the bus operators, and it is important that both parties are aware of and understand all issues. In regards to a Quality Bus Contract, Mr. Blackall was aware of the agreement currently operating at Oxford City, that can bring about better dialogue and partnership working, and can create a high quality, welcoming gateway to a town or city.

Mr. Blackall, who said the Councils generally have a very good relationship with the bus operators, agreed to circulate more information on the Oxford partnership to members.

Whilst Councillors heeded the advice of Mr. Vipond, that Essex County Council are the Public Transport Authority, Councillors Davies and Offen said the Council needed to work in partnership with Essex County Council in organising and introducing a Bus Operator Charter, with the operators signing up to act as ambassadors to the Borough and with an emphasis on customer service such as behaviour, civility and understanding.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Considered and commented on the provision of public transport in the Borough, and the extent to which these operations contribute to the Council's strategic priorities.

ii) Requested officers to write to the bus operators to express the Panel 's disappointment at their failure to attend the meeting, and to forward to them a copy of the minutes of the meeting.

iii) Requested the Cabinet to work with their counterparts at Essex County Council to bring about the introduction of a Bus Operator Charter to Colchester.

32. Work Programme

The Panel noted the Work Programme.