

## Colchester Borough Council – Scrutiny Panel 27<sup>th</sup> February 2018 Bus Review - Bus Company Responses

Please provide below brief responses to questions outlined below. A copy of this response will be included in the public agenda for the meeting.

What are your views on operating bus services in the Borough of Colchester?

Hedingham Chambers is part of the East Anglian division of the Go Ahead Group, well known for innovative and successful bus operations including Brighton and Oxford, and owner of the UK Bus Operator of the Year, Go South Coast. We operate 19 buses into Colchester during peak hours from our adjacent bases at Clacton, Kelvedon, Sible Hedingham and Sudbury – 10 buses on commercial routes from Clacton, Sudbury, Brightlingsea and Halstead, 3 on routes from Tollesbury and Berechurch on behalf of Essex County Council, and 6 school routes, so our contribution to the overall bus operation in Colchester is relatively small. A new senior management team has recently joined the East Anglian division.

Colchester depends upon its bus network for its economic vitality. It is already very congested and a significant reduction in bus use would produce gridlock and economic sterility. The town centre economy depends upon a level of footfall that the local road network could not provide if it was only used by cars – regardless of parking issues or matters of air quality. It is always worth remembering that research shows that bus users spend more per capita in town centres than those who visit by car.

We commend the current network of bus lanes which has helped us maintain services despite the increase in costs resulting from traffic congestion. However, more priority for buses is needed to the east of the town centre in particular if the current network is to be sustained in the face of increasing congestion, and the situation in the town centre where congestion is caused by the small proportion of people not using buses needs urgent review.

We welcome the opportunity to participate in the Colchester Blueprint meetings and see this as a secure way of developing partnership between operators and local authorities. The current level of congestion means that there should be opportunities for buses to provide solutions, however we need to work with the local authorities to ensure that buses are sufficiently attractive to entice people out of their cars.

An objective for this review is to investigate what bus companies are doing to improve punctuality of services, increase bus usage, reduce emissions and make buses more accessible. The following questions are aimed to understand your experiences in these areas.

Q1) Could you detail steps you are undertaking to improve punctuality of service?

Delays to buses are primarily caused by traffic, either unpredictable general congestion or serious incidents. Both occur frequently in central Colchester and are a major problem for us which we have to manage by inserting additional buses and drivers on an ad hoc basis.

We proactively manage both incidents and the performance of our staff in operating the bus services by using a satellite tracking system based at our bus depots. This allows us to send messages between bus and depot to deal with on the day problems. We also communicate with our customers proactively via twitter where delays occur and reactively through our local telephone line. We have a new App available which not only allows customers to buy tickets but also enables them to receive real time information and see how long it is before their bus arrives.

Generally slower moving traffic has resulted in progressive increases to the time allowed in timetables, resulting in longer journey times for passengers (despite the fact that they are not adding to congestion because they are using the bus), and extra time spent with the bus engine running and drivers on working time all of which adds to our costs and makes it more difficult to invest in newer vehicles.

We would like to work with Essex to manage the impact of roadworks on bus services more proactively and will provide more examples to assist the county in doing this. It is essential that a working Punctuality Improvement Partnership is developed between operators and county as recommended by the Traffic Commissioner.

Q2) What future plans do you have to increase bus usage in Colchester?

It is essential that we prioritise the punctual operation of our bus services as this is always the primary concern of passengers as explained in Question 1.

We plan to increase the frequency of our bus services into Colchester. This is the primary driver of passenger demand, and reflects the ready availability of cars as an alternative – ie if the bus is more convenient because we have reduced the waiting time people won't want to drive through the traffic and fight for a parking space.

We have also introduced a reciprocal ticketing agreement with First as part of the route 88 Quality Bus Partnership to Halstead which is designed to make bus use more attractive for those paying fares. We will seek to offer more attractive fares deals to encourage our customers to upgrade to day or weekly tickets and offering them greater freedom and flexibility in using the bus network.

We plan to improve the marketing and presentation of our fleet, including an expansion of the availability of wi-fi, having recently appointed a Marketing Officer. We have also started training bus drivers in order to ensure we can set our own standards for driving and customer care, up-skilling the local population and ensuring that we can crew all our operations without danger of cancellation.

**Q3) What steps are you taking to reduce emissions?**

Buses are the key to solving matters of air quality because the emissions per passenger are so much lower even than for cars, reflecting the sharing nature of bus transport. In Hedingham Chambers the fleet and its emissions rating was upgraded after purchase by the Go Ahead Group.

On the Isle of Wight the Group runs all Euro 5 vehicles as a result of an agreement with the local authority that this should be the minimum standard for services operated under contract to them. We would be pleased to make a similar investment in Essex but that would depend upon Essex County Council not just awarding tenders on the basis of price, and anticipating the extra cost that investment in newer vehicles would build into the tender cost model.

We would be pleased to invest in new, more environmentally friendly vehicles for our commercial routes. At present there is no immediate business case to do so, although we will be upgrading our fleet as mid-life vehicles with significantly improved emissions ratings become available within our Group. To invest in new vehicles we need to alter the economic model and this could be part of an agreement forged through the Blueprint. Altering the economic model means either reducing cost, by giving us improved priority so we need to use fewer buses and/or encouraging more people to use the bus, for example by increasing the price of parking or making more routes bus only. The extra profit we made would be committed to going back into running lower emission vehicles. (This is quite difficult to model with our longer inter-urban routes where buses spend a relatively brief period of their working day in Colchester).

The latest Euro 6 diesel technology eliminates nearly all NoX emissions. It is commercially sustainable and not dependent upon grant funding when delivered as part of a new vehicle order.

**Q4) Thinking of bus accessibility, is there any way this can be improved?**

Since January 2017 all local buses have needed to be “accessible”, ie meeting the Equality Act standards for wheelchair access and the ambulant disabled. However, there has been no equivalent requirement for local authorities to make bus stops accessible.

In Colchester buses are rarely able to pull up flush with the kerb, as envisaged when modern stepless entrance buses were designed, giving the ambulant disabled and drivers attempting to deploy wheelchair ramps serious challenges. Worse still buses are often unable to access the kerb at all because of legal and illegal parking, and it is probably the case that wheelchair users in particular are put off using public transport, particularly for unfamiliar journeys, because of the erratic nature of bus stop access. All bus stops should be protected by bus stop clearways to ensure 31m of clear space. The best guide on this subject is the TfL Bus Stop Accessibility Guide of 2006. It is disappointing that local authorities should let down mobility impaired users in this way after so much investment by bus companies. Progressive improvements of bus stops should be part of the on-going agenda at the Blueprint discussions.

Unfortunately the Bus Station area is also badly laid out in this respect. There are too many individual stopping points, so that buses cannot pull up easily, and these stopping points are not clearly marked by destination, making the system difficult to understand.



## Hedingham Chambers (Go-East Anglia) Bus Response

Another objective for this review is to improve the dialogue between bus companies that operate in the Borough and Colchester Borough Council, Councillors and residents. How do you feel that this could best be achieved?

Our MD Jeremy Cooper has extensive experience of long term engagement with county and district councils through voluntary joint working groups known as a “Quality Bus Partnership”. Go Ahead Group has supported similar initiatives in such places as Brighton and Poole, all of which have resulted in long term growth of bus passenger numbers. The Colchester Blueprint meeting is a similar initiative and provides the opportunity for all parties able to influence bus services to ensure that they act together to develop bus services:-

The County Council – responsible for the highway network, bus stop infrastructure, and contributes funding for parts of the network, the ENCTS scheme, and marketing/information.

The District Council – responsible for parking policy, bus shelters and development, in which operators as well as the highway authority need to be engaged at an early stage.

Bus Operators – provide investment in commercial services and develop planned improvements based upon opportunities including those presented by the other partners.

Other key stakeholders such as town centre management/BID, major employers, key education establishments as appropriate and to ensure the aspirations and opportunities of the wider

Is there anything further that you would wish to share with the Scrutiny Panel.

Our experience of operating successful bus operations has been that it is possible to achieve modal switch from car to bus if the bus service is punctual, frequent and reasonably fast, as well as attractively priced and marketed. Very often the modal switch happens over time as new commuters chose which mode to use and may opt for bus as former car users retire. It is noteworthy that 40% fewer teenagers today have a driving licence compared to 1997, and whatever the underlying reasons this change offers a great opportunity for buses both now and in the future.