



## **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**4.30 pm - 6.35 pm**

**22 October 2009**

Present: Councillor Stephenson (Chair), Cannell, Driver, Fairbairn, Jeraj, Little (A), Offord, Ramsay and Wiltshire

Apologies: Councillors Blower, Bradford and Watkins

### **1. JOINT SCRUTINY REVIEW OF LOCAL BUS SERVICE PROVISION IN THE GREATER NORWICH AREA - PROGRESS UPDATE**

(Councillor Boswell (Norfolk County Council), Councillor Debbage (Broadland District Council), Councillor Dale (South Norfolk Council), Ian Rankine and Steve Wickers (First), Steve Challis and Julian Patterson (Konectbus) and Andrew Pursey (Anglian) attended the meeting for this item).

The committee considered the report on the progress made in delivering the resolutions of the joint scrutiny review of local bus service provision in the greater Norwich area.

The meeting first considered the report on local bus service reliability and performance during 2008/09 considered by the Norwich Highways Agency Joint Committee on 25 June. The head of transportation and landscape said that he would arrange for the missing paragraphs of this report to be circulated to members.

The network project manager, Norfolk County Council, explained the benefits of the BusNet satellite tracking system. Information from the system was fed through to the bus operators and used to review services and timetables. The information was also used to identify improvements to the highways network. An example of this was the replacement of a pedestrian crossing with a traffic island near to Morrisons.

Councillor Dale expressed concerns about the way in which information was displayed on the moving signs at the bus station. He said that information about the Wymondham bus often disappeared before the scheduled departure time. The network project manager said that information was sometimes affected by the way in which it was configured in the system. Work was ongoing with operators to ensure information was displayed in real time. He hoped that it would be possible to move to a position where a real time information system was operating for close to 100% of services during 2010.

Councillor Ramsay expressed concerns about pricing levels imposed by First which were higher than other services and other cities. The network project manager said however that pricing was generally a matter for the bus company. The county council provided subsidies for only a small number of services. It was difficult to compare prices in Norwich with prices in different areas because of different operating conditions. Ian Rankine of First said that fares were set on a commercial basis. He did not consider fares to be too high. The company compared fare structures against demand and offered a variety of discount tickets to increase demand. The network project manager referred to competition between providers in Norwich. He said that if First lowered fares it could result in the loss of evening and Sunday services and the county might not have the funding to subsidise replacement services.

The network project manager said that a ticket valid for all buses in the greater Norwich area was to be introduced on 3rd January 2010. The initial cost would be £5.50 and would entitle the holder to travel on any service in the area for a day. The ticket was also transferable and a parent using the bus service to travel to work could pass it on to their child to use in the evening. The use of the ticket would be monitored and feedback considered in order to try and improve the system.

The meeting discussed the need to publicise the different tickets available. Steve Wickers of First said that this information, together with bus timetables, was included on the First website. The network project manager said that he would look into the possibility of information on ticketing being made available through the new real time information scheme to be introduced in Dereham Road. It would not however be possible to include a feature providing information on the cheapest ticket between two points in the short to medium term. Ian Rankine of First pointed out however that drivers were encouraged to offer advice on the best fares for a journey. This was covered in driver training. He confirmed that equality and diversity issues were also covered in this training.

Discussion took place on the implications of concessionary bus fares for district councils. The head of transportation and landscape explained the basis on which reimbursement was made to the bus companies. The reimbursement scheme was set out in national guidance. He understood that around 30% of fares were concessionary fares. Recent growth in concessionary fares had however started to plateau. Councillor Ramsay referred to the need to publicise the way in which concessionary fares were calculated. He was aware of people who were concerned about the level of charges being passed on to local authorities.

In reply to a question the network project manager said that he did not have any information on the extent to which the anticipated increase in bus travel in 2009/10 represented journeys that would otherwise have been made by car. Modelling exercises were however undertaken from time to time.

The committee discussed the response from the department for transport to the issues raised by the joint bus scrutiny with particular reference to the bus service operators grant. Councillor Boswell said that the response from the department of transport was not helpful. There was a clear disparity in the fact that air and train fuel were both rebated and bus fuel was not and the department of transport should be asked to reconsider the issue. Representatives from the bus companies

commented on the measures taken by their companies to improve fuel efficiency in their buses.

The committee then discussed the responses from the bus companies to the issues raised by the joint bus scrutiny. The network project manager said that the county council was in early discussions with the bus companies about proposals to work together to monitor traffic congestion caused by queues to car parks during the christmas shopping period.

In reply to a question the network project manager said that the county council executive had decided not to take bus watch forward on the basis that there were already organisations to represent passengers and they were not convinced that a local association in Norfolk would add value for local bus users. The chair said that she considered a local bus users group was an important recommendation. Councillor Debbage said that the Broadland Scrutiny Committee had been disappointed by the county council decision. Councillor Dale said however that South Norfolk had indicated a preference for a joint bus and rail user group. Steve Wickers of First said that his company would be happy to participate in a local user group. They had their own customer call centre and there had been a reduction in the number of complaints received during the last year.

Councillor Jeraj asked whether the bus companies would be able to offer a discounted ticket for christmas shoppers. Steve Wickers of First said that they were currently trialling a scheme offering a £2 ticket after 2.00 pm in Colchester. Feedback on this trial would inform future products.

The meeting then considered the discussion of the county council cabinet scrutiny committee on the county council's response to the issues raised by the joint bus scrutiny. Councillor Dale suggested that the county council should be asked to reconsider the establishment of a joint bus policy group as well as their decision on the establishment of a local bus users group.

Councillor A Little referred to the need for a map showing all bus routes. The network project manager said that a paper map was often out of date by the time it was printed because of regular service changes. Systems were however being moved from a paper to an electronic based system which should help to provide more information. He said that the new wayside displays on Dereham Road complied with the DDA in terms of design. The displays would provide audible as well as visual information and the system allowed displays to show whether the vehicle on service was accessible or not. Information at key interchanges would be provided in the five most used languages in the future.

Discussion took place on the need to re-establish the joint scrutiny committee for one or two meetings to consider the outstanding issues. Councillor Debbage suggested that the joint committee should also be asked to consider the opportunities for public transport presented by the Local Transport Act 2008 in terms of the quality bus contract and the potential regulation of local bus services.

**RESOLVED** to -

- (1) welcome the progress made in some areas including multi-operator ticketing;

- (2) ask the chair to write to the Department of Transport expressing the committee's disappointment with the unsatisfactory nature of their response in relation to the disadvantageous position of bus operators regarding duty on fuel;
- (3) ask the chair to approach other councils on the re-establishment of the joint bus scrutiny committee for one or two meetings with the following terms of reference:-
  - to reconsider the cases for the creation of both a local bus users association for Norfolk and a joint bus policy group in the light of the response from the county council and identify the added value each group would provide for local bus users and appropriate terms of reference for each group;
  - consider further the provision of a real time electronic map of bus services in the greater Norwich area;
  - explore opportunities for public transport presented by the Local Transport Act 2008.

CHAIR