

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7th May 2008

PRESENT:-

Conservative Group

Councillor Atkin (Chairman), Councillor Jones (Vice-Chairman) and Councillors Mrs. Farrington, Mrs. Hood and Mrs. Plenderleith.

Labour Group

Councillors Bambrick, Lane and Mrs. Mead.

In Attendance

Councillors Bladen, Ford and Roberts (Conservative Group) and Councillor Mrs. Brown (Independent Member).

OS/52. MINUTES

The Open and Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 26th March 2008 were taken as read, approved as true records and signed by the Chairman.

OS/53. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Bambrick and Ford declared personal interests in the item on the Public Transport Review, as both were Members of Derbyshire County Council and served on Swadlincote Community Transport.

OS/54. REVIEW OF BROADBAND IN SOUTH DERBYSHIRE

The draft review report on broadband in South Derbyshire was submitted for the Scrutiny Committee's consideration. The Committee had concerns that the broadband infrastructure in South Derbyshire was inadequate, especially in rural areas. It had investigated the plans British Telecom had in place to upgrade and develop the broadband infrastructure and how existing problems could be solved. Background was provided on the different organisations that made up British Telecom, the problems with the existing infrastructure and the impacts on broadband speed and continuity. The report summarised the presentation from Tom Hamilton, the BT Regional Manager for the East Midlands and the subsequent debate on this matter by the Committee at its Meeting on 26th March 2008.

Comments were sought on the draft report. There was a consensus that this project was still in progress. Following the press release to seek public feedback on broadband issues, a summary of the feedback was still awaited. It was noted that some 50 responses had been received to date. A view was expressed that the original remit of the review could not be pursued much further. This matter was also generating some national interest and it might be prudent to defer the conclusion of the review. The Chairman suggested a further press release, noting that the closing date agreed for responses was the end of May.

It was agreed that the conclusion of this review be deferred to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting and that a further press release be issued, to seek public feedback.

OS/55. PUBLIC TRANSPORT REVIEW

It was reported that representatives of train service companies and public transport authorities had been invited to attend the Meeting to contribute to this review. In attendance were Kevin Williams, an Officer from the Public Transport Unit at Derbyshire County Council, together with Gavin Bostock and Julia Mapp from Cross Country Trains. Apologies had been received from representatives of Staffordshire County Council, Derby City Council and Brian Lucas, the County Council's Cabinet Member for Environmental Services. A series of questions had been prepared and submitted to the contributors. Details of the questions had also been circulated to the Committee, together with the responses received from the representatives of Staffordshire County Council and East Midlands Trains.

Following introductions, the contributors were invited to give an overview of the current position. Initially, Mr. Williams explained the complicated arrangements following the privatisation of rail services. He explained the responsibilities of Network Rail and spoke about the recent review of franchise arrangements. For this area, there were now two main service providers, being Stagecoach (East Midlands Trains) and Arriva (Cross Country Trains). There was a complex financial arrangement between these companies and the Government and reference was made to subsidy arrangements.

The County Council had a dual role, comprising statutory duties and some wider social roles. An example of this was the school bus service. The County Council had an enforcement role, working alongside Government agencies such as VOSA. It had a role in producing timetables and a marketing budget, which was targeted to help and support certain services. The County Council was responsible for special needs transport, bus shelter administration and community transport. Concessionary fares was a further area that was currently topical and there was a new area of responsibility for accessibility planning. The County Council had an influencing role to seek service improvement. It sought to access dedicated funding for such things as station improvements and a role to encourage the transport of freight by rail.

Gavin Bostock then spoke about the Cross Country franchise, which commenced in November 2007. Geographically, Cross Country had the largest franchise area, across the length and breadth of the country. It was a long distance operator and had inherited most of its services from the previous franchise holder, Virgin Trains. Some services had been taken over from central trains. He explained plans to improve and refurbish the company's fleet of trains and to provide high speed trains for some routes.

Mr. Bostock then referred to the Willington Station. He spoke about the tender process undertaken and the minimum requirements for four stops at this Station in either direction, each day. As a private commercial company, Cross Country would only increase the frequency of services on commercial grounds and there was no commercial justification for such an increase. He also referred to passenger perceptions about the number of stops.

A consultation process had been undertaken on the service review, which was outlined, together with the feedback received from the Willington Area and the local Member of Parliament (M.P.). Following a request from the M.P., representatives of the Company had attended the Station to provide commuters with information. There had been ongoing liaison and survey work through the County Council which had provided useful data. He

concluded that the surveys did not justify more than the minimum requirement for calls at this Station. These services visited at the morning and afternoon peak periods, together with a lunchtime service and one in the evening. Mr. Bostock also explained a planned review of the morning peak service, to bring it forward by half an hour. It was noted that where cancellations took place of such minimal services, arrangements would be made for the next like service to stop at the Station.

The Chairman invited questions to the contributors. An enquiry was made about community transport, comparing the services provided in Derbyshire and Staffordshire. The representative of the County Council was not the specialist on community transport and he requested that all such questions be forwarded to the Clerk or Chairman and then passed on to the Cabinet Member, Councillor Lucas.

A Member considered that the revised services were a disaster for South Derbyshire, given its rapid population growth. He understood the limitations, but it seemed that local services were being sacrificed to meet commuter needs. He asked how local services could be improved and reiterated the scale of development in the South Derbyshire area. Mr. Bostock acknowledged this view, which was echoed around the Country. As a rail operator, Cross Country could not solve all these issues, as it provided just one mode of transport. The Member agreed that rail services were a victim of their own success. It seemed that franchisees were looking only at the minimum requirements. He felt they could move away from this framework and be more commercially minded, to deliver a service. Mr. Williams added that Stagecoach had a similar responsibility and the planned reduction in services would have taken place anyway, as the services in question were not commercially viable.

A Member submitted questions about the results of surveys undertaken and the numbers of passengers required to achieve a break even position. Details were provided of the survey results, which typically were just over ten passengers either boarding or alighting at each of the peak periods. Even with the anticipated population growth, it was projected there would only be a marginal increase in passenger numbers. It was difficult to be exact, but typically, hundreds of people would need to use the Station every day to make it commercially viable to introduce additional services.

A related issue discussed was the community rail initiative. An example was given elsewhere in the Country where this initiative had resulted in increased passenger numbers using a station.

It was questioned how Cross Country would respond to trains being full to capacity and if there was a need to provide additional rolling stock, how long this would take to secure. The representative replied that planned train refurbishments would make better use of available space and increase their capacity. Discussions were ongoing with the Government about securing additional carriages, but these would need to be targeted. If people could not use the service due to capacity issues, this would not be satisfactory and would be investigated.

It was questioned whether the line adjacent to Willington Station could be designated as a community rail line. There were specific criteria which had to be met and in Willington's case, it would not qualify. It might be possible to get a local service dedicated as a community service, but it was noted that Willington was on a high speed line. Another suggestion was to establish a "Friends of Willington Station" group. This could provide a regular dialogue,

to notify of minor issues at the Station and give a valuable local liaison mechanism. Mr. Williams explained how a similar scheme in the north of the County had been successful.

A Member referred to the local survey undertaken, noting that many users of Willington Station travelled to it from other areas, because of the free car parking. He noted that some service users had no alternate means of transport to reach their current employment and so would have to make difficult decisions if services were withdrawn.

Another Member commented that this Station should have been located elsewhere within the Village. He confirmed the scale of development planned for South Derbyshire and questioned whether the Council should lobby the Department for Transport. He spoke about the services from both Derby and Burton-on-Trent stations, the congestion on roads leading into the City and the parking charges at Derby Station.

Mr. Williams considered that the County Council could not influence stopping patterns at the Willington Station, but he did accept the growth in use of rail services in the north of the Country. Mr. Williams provided background on why Willington Station had been built, as part of the Ivanhoe Line project, which subsequently ran into difficulties.

In response to a further question about establishing a “Friends of” group, it was confirmed that this approach had been successful at Whaley Bridge, Furness Vale, Glossop and Dronfield. The latter station was most similar to Willington, in that it was on a high speed line, but Dronfield had a population of 27,000. Details of this group had been passed to one of the complainants in the Willington area and the local Member also requested details of this scheme. There was discussion about service cancellation rates, about the levels of off-peak usage and the availability of information for commuters. A localised marketing campaign might boost usage levels. Mr. Bostock spoke about how Cross Country would be able to inform commuters through email and text messages, to give service updates.

There was further discussion about the County Council’s survey and the other mechanisms that Cross Country employed to assess the usage levels of Willington Station.

It was questioned how the County Council fed into the Regional Spatial Strategy on infrastructure. Mr. Williams explained the liaison that took place with County Council colleagues involved in long-term planning issues and how the District Council contributed through the Local Accessibility Partnership. The Planning Policy Officer confirmed that he and a Member attended approximately three partnership meetings each year and where significant issues were identified, these were brought to Members’ attention. Another Member commented that the area once had a thriving rail network and it had lost five stations since that time.

The Chairman referred to the questions circulated prior to the Meeting and asked contributors to consider and respond to these, to provide further information for the review. The Chairman thanked the contributors for their attendance and assistance with this review.

Note: At 6.30 p.m. Councillors Bambrick, Ford and Roberts left the Meeting.

The Committee considered its draft Annual Report for the 2007/08 municipal year. The report comprised a background, which explained the composition and main purposes of the Committee. The main section of the report looked at the areas of activity and achievements. These comprised flooding issues, broadband provision, budget proposals, public transport issues and Willington Station. A schedule of the other issues considered was also reported, together with details of a planned focus session, to determine the work programme for 2008/09.

It was agreed that the draft Annual Report be approved and submitted to the Annual Council Meeting on 22nd May 2008.

OS/57. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee reviewed its work programme, noting that this was the final meeting of the current municipal year. Arrangements were being completed for a scrutiny focus session, just after the Annual Council Meeting.

It was agreed that this focus session would be held at 1.00 p.m. on 29th May 2008 at The Old Post Centre in High Street, Newhall.

N. ATKIN

CHAIRMAN

The Meeting terminated at 6.40 p.m.