

At a meeting of the ENVIRONMENTAL AND PLANNING REVIEW COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on MONDAY, 14th July, 2008 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Miller in the Chair

Councillors Ball, I. Cuthbert, E. Gibson, Kelly, D. Richardson, Scaplehorn, Tye, Wakefield, Whalen, Wood and A. Wright

Also Present:-

Councillor Tate

Chairman's Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

Minutes of the last Meeting

Councillor Wood asked whether there was a timescale in place for the report on the Speed Limit Review.

Burney Johnson, Head of Transport and Engineering, advised that the first stage, the review of 40 miles per hour speed limits had been completed and there was a need to assess the engineering of the roads and whether there was a need to reduce the speed limits which would require consultation with the police. He apologised for not having a date set but advised that the report would be brought as soon as possible, hopefully by the end of August.

Councillor I. Cuthbert advised that within the Mori Survey and Briefing Note item there should have been a reference to "other tables" rather than the recorded "other meetings".

Councillor Miller asked whether the information showing the actual changes to figures had been made available.

Jim Diamond, Review Co-ordinator, advised that the information had been made available and would be circulated in the next Members Delivery.

Councillor Wood asked whether a date had been set for the Leamside Line item to come to the committee.

Mr Diamond stated that it would be included on the agenda for the September meeting and that the meeting could be held on a different day in order to allow Network Rail to attend.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting be confirmed and signed as a correct record subject to the inclusion of the amendment detailed by Councillor I. Cuthbert.

Declarations of Interest

Item 4 – Quality of Local Bus Services

Councillor Wood declared a personal interest in the item as a member of the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Authority.

Councillor A. Wright declared a personal interest as an employee of the parent company of Go Northeast.

Quality of Local Bus Services

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which allowed Members to receive evidence from Nexus and the Local Bus Operators on the adequacy of bus services in the City in response to public concerns regarding issues such as the cost and frequency of some local services.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Tobin Hughes from NEXUS advised that Bernard Garner, NEXUS Director General, was unable to attend so he was in attendance as the substitute. He distributed a set of slides to the members which provided information on the costs of bus service operation and the changes in bus patronage.

The Chairman commented that he was pleased to see the bus companies in attendance and that the discussion was not about blame, there was no doubt that there were issues which needed to be addressed and that there needed to be a way of finding a balance between the bus companies being commercially viable and providing the required services.

Councillor Kelly commented on the increasing cost of fares and the government targets to reduce car use and asked how NEXUS see people moving to public transport when there was a perception that fares were too expensive.

Mr Hughes agreed that there was a perception that costs were rising however the cost of motoring was also increasing which could help encourage people

to use public transport more and that ultimately it came down to money with the bus companies needing to be commercially viable.

Councillor Kelly then referred to the recent meeting held in Usworth and the meet the managers day at Concord Bus Station where the threatened services were discussed. He advised that people were finding it difficult to cope with the reductions in services.

Vince Hills from NEXUS advised that it was down to the individual operators to decide whether cuts were needed.

Phil Southall from Go Ahead North East advised that the W3 and W4 services were Nexus secured and that Go North East felt that the services could only grow if the evening services were in line with the daytime services. He also stated that the W4 had stopped running through Sulgrave in the evening however few people used the service.

Councillor Kelly then commented that the removal of services resulted in people paying more which caused some people to struggle and asked whether this was justifiable.

Mr Southall stated that rising costs were affecting the industry and that fuel prices had increased by 40 percent in the last year, staff wages had increased and the number of insurance claims against the companies had increased and that these factors had resulted in some services becoming unsustainable and that if there was a need for a service in the areas with service cuts then NEXUS would ensure that services were continued.

Councillor Kelly then stated that if the current trend continued then more buses would disappear and that fuel prices affect everyone and with the increase in fares being more than inflation how do the companies intend to meet the government target of a 12 percent increase in bus and tram journeys by 2012.

Mr Southall advised that new fares had been introduced in 2006 with a flat fare for journeys within Sunderland which had resulted in an increase in bus use. There had also been the introduction of branded routes for the core services and an investment in new buses. He also commented that there had only been small increases in the costs of week and month tickets and that NEXUS were responsible for ensuring that the interchanges were suitable.

Councillor Tye asked for the operators opinions on Quality Contracts and commented that the cuts in services in Silksworth had been disguised by the rebranding of vehicles, he had also received complaints regarding competitiveness between the bus companies and that there were no longer any night time services.

Robin Knight, Commercial Director of Stagecoach in Sunderland, stated that to implement a London style system in Sunderland would cost £960million.

Mr Southall commented that it would cost £89 per person compared with the £4 per person bus services currently cost Sunderland residents; he also advised that the subsidies in London total £880million.

Mr Knight advised that there was a need for the companies to generate revenue and that there were differences in fares between the companies due to commercial factors. He also stated that he welcomed the idea of Quality Partnerships and that none of the services removed had been classed as essential and that the company was well placed to work with NEXUS without the need for a Quality Contract to be in place.

Mr Southall advised that there was already a partnership between Go Ahead North East and Gateshead Council and that the bus companies were not consulted with regards to the new Netto store in Castletown, Quality contracts would also be a step too far and partnerships would be better.

Mr Hughes commented that the partnership in Gateshead was the first example of a voluntary partnership and it was the best model in the region with an enhanced level of dialogue between companies and that NEXUS want what is best for the local residents.

Councillor E. Gibson asked whether consideration would be given to residents of the housing estates and commented that the residents of Tunstall Bank Estate felt trapped and unable to walk to the bus stops and Stagecoach had been asked to do a trial route.

Mr Knight advised that he could not comment on specific cases although full services were still in place in the regeneration areas as people were more likely to use buses if the services were in place before they moved into the area.

Councillor E. Gibson advised Mr Knight that Tunstall Bank Estate was not a regeneration area.

Councillor Wood commented that it appeared not to matter who owned the services as the biggest cuts had been seen in 1983, while the services were owned by the Council. He also advised that nexus were unwilling to fund services if few people used them and that the bus industry was ahead of inflation.

Mr Hughes advised that there was a requirement to design the best network for meeting residents needs and that there needed to be a balance with both profitable routes and less profitable essential routes being provided.

Mr Hills advised that there was the Linkup Bus Service which ensured that people were not excluded from the network by identifying where there was a need to provide a service but a bus service would be unsustainable, the Linkup buses would collect people and drop them off at a connection to the bus network.

Councillor Kelly stated that there did not appear to be much cohesion between the companies when answering the questions and asked whether this was the reason why residents were suffering.

Mr Southall advised that it was not as fragmented as it sounded and that there were three distinct elements to the network: the core commercial services which provided revenue; core daytime services which needed subsidies for early and late buses; and core services which required subsidies and were provided based on social needs.

Mr Hughes agreed that the system was fragmented and stated that there was a need to ensure that the network was designed to meet the needs of residents and nothing fundamental would change until the Local Transport Act had been implemented.

Councillor D. Richardson commented that the number 71 no longer ran through Fence Houses during the evening or on Sundays and when a Linkup Bus had been requested this had been denied. There was a Taxi Link service which was running excellently until it was withdrawn and replaced with a much poorer service which was more expensive

Mr Hills advised that the Linkup Bus service was demand responsive and was provided where there was a recognisable need but there was not enough demand for a regular bus service to be viable. Consultation had taken place with regards to the Taxi Link service and workshops had been held with disability groups. He advised that the average journey was between two and three miles and that this would cost around £4 with NEXUS covering £2 of the fare, the NEXUS contribution would be on a card pre-loaded with credit. He also advised that by 2011 all buses would be Easy Access and fully Disability Discrimination Act compliant, there were also plans to introduce helper cards which would allow a helper to accompany a disabled passenger for free.

Councillor D. Richardson commented that the Linkup Service only works if it is available.

Mr Hills advised that the service needed to be booked by users.

Councillor D. Richardson then stated that people had tried and that the operators had refused to send the Linkup buses into the estate.

Mr Hills and Mr Tobin both agreed to look into the matter and provide a response to Councillor D. Richardson.

Mr Southall advised that the 71 still travelled through Fence Houses and that it connected to the 35 to get into central Sunderland.

The Chairman stated that there was a requirement to look at needs and that there needed to be a balance between commercial services and essential services. He stated that it seemed that only the core corridors were supported while the peripheries were a major concern with the service residents both

needed and deserved not being provided. He advised that the bus companies needed to communicate effectively with NEXUS and the Council and the Review Committee would be able to help with this. He also commented that there was a perception that there were only services on major routes and that there needed to be better services. He advised that he was going to London with Councillor I. Cuthbert to meet with the minister and that he would feed back to the September meeting.

Councillor A. Wright commented on the increasing fuel prices and the Government target to increase bus and tram journeys by 12% by 2012.

The Chairman advised that as part of the charter for growth there needed to be the correct service frequency and network otherwise the changes would be a waste of time.

Councillor Kelly stated that the lack of consultation needed to be taken on board to address the growing public concerns.

Councillor Wakefield commented that the residents of Houghton did not believe there was a bus service.

Mr Hughes stated that there were many factors and that he will provide more information. He advised that there had been an increase in use and suggested that he could come back to the committee once the Local Transport Act had been passed.

The Chairman commented that the key dates provided were useful.

Mr Southall stated that consultation had already begun with information on the website regarding consultation for the Red Arrows services.

The Chairman then stated that this was an important issue which needed to be given further consideration.

2. RESOLVED that consideration be given to the evidence received and that the report be received and noted.

Allocation of Additional Funds for Highway Maintenance

The Director of Development and Regeneration submitted a report (copy circulated) which informed members on the spend profile for footway and carriageway works for 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 and updated members on the proposed works for 2008/2009 in relation to the allocation of additional funds for Highway Maintenance.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Burney Johnson, Head of Transport and Engineering, presented the report and advised members that due to increases in construction costs the

estimates for the total costs of the works had increased from £2.2million to £2.8million.

Councillor Wakefield commented that the costs for footway maintenance seemed high when compared with the costs for carriageway works.

Mr Johnson replied that the costs included replacing flagstones as well as supporting the footways and replacing kerbing.

Councillor I. Cuthbert stated that the spending in Washington East was welcome and requested details of the spending. He also commented that there appeared to have been a lack of joined up thinking with the resurfacing works as when the works were carried out disabled ramps were not included.

Mr Johnson agreed to provide Councillor I. Cuthbert with the information regarding Washington East and agreed to find information with regards to the access ramps and circulate it to the members.

Councillor Tye advised that the issues raised in Silksworth as part of the Gone to Pot campaign had all been completed.

Councillor Wood advised that in other areas the work had not been completed and that he hoped action would be taken.

The Chairman requested a breakdown of the costs detailed in Appendix B of the report.

Mr Johnson agreed to circulate the information to the members.

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and that further reports be submitted to the committee.

Sunderland Central Area Urban Design Strategy

The Director of Development and Regeneration submitted a report (copy circulated) which advised Members of the responses received following consultation on the proposed policies and proposals outlined in the Sunderland Central Area Urban Design Strategy and sought the committees views on the strategy.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Keith Lowes, Head of Planning and Environment, presented the report and welcomed questions and comments from Members.

Councillor Wood commented that it was a substantial document and asked how quickly changes would happen with the Vaux site, what consultation had taken place with the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Authority and what the likely development for Holmeside was.

Mr Lowes advised that the document was eye-catching to investors and that it was hoped that work would be underway on the Vaux site by mid 2010. He commented on the development in Sunnyside including the Echo24 building and the development of Market Square which was funded through the Strategic Initiatives Budget. He also advised that there was a flexible approach to parking and that if necessary the Council would go beyond the government standards. He also stated that there was a preferred developer for Holmeside and that the programme of work was due to start in 2011.

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Policy Review 2008-2009

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which allowed Members to consider a topic for policy development and review as part of the Committee's work programme for 2008/09.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Jim Diamond, Review Co-ordinator, presented the report and advised that the work of the Committee in delivering its policy review would support the Council in achieving its Strategic Priorities of an Attractive and Inclusive City and a Prosperous City as set out in the Sunderland Strategy 2008-2025 and the Local Area Agreement 2008-2011.

The Members suggested possible topics for policy review and considered the merits of each.

5. RESOLVED that:-
 - (i). Public Transport be examined as the policy review
 - (ii). There be a working group set up to discuss parking issues with Councillors E. Gibson, Wakefield and A. Wright comprising the working group with Councillor Wakefield in the chair.

Overview and Scrutiny Handbook

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which allowed members to consider additional information for inclusion in the Overview and Scrutiny Handbook.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Jim Diamond, Review Co-ordinator, presented the report and advised that the handbook had been updated each year since its introduction in 2003.

6. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and the additions be supported.

Waste Management Partnership Agreements

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which allowed the Members to consider the report of the Director of Community and Cultural Services which was approved by Cabinet on 26th June, 2008.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Paul Dobson, Director of Community and Cultural Services, presented the report and advised that the Cabinet had agreed to authorise further public consultation; approve the method of procurement and nature of the contracts to be let; approve the procurement exercise for a three year contract from April 2009; and authorise the Director of Community and Cultural Services, the City Solicitor and the City Treasurer to prepare the necessary tenders and contract documentation.

Councillor I. Cuthbert commented that when the Outline Business Case had been scrutinised it had not been fully scrutinised as the Committee had not been permitted to discuss any financial information and that he felt that scrutiny had been treated with contempt as the report had been sent to DEFRA before going to Council. He then asked which sites had been visited by the Joint Executive Committee and stated that he hoped there would be better consultation.

Mr Dobson stated that this report looked at the interim solution and that there would be other reports produced which would look at the long term solutions. He accepted Councillor I. Cuthbert's comments on the consultation and advised that consultation would occur at the right time.

Councillor Wakefield commented that he was disappointed to see that the public consultation had not been carried out in the area most affected by the current waste management operations.

Mr Dobson advised that the areas mentioned in the report were purely venues for community spirit consultation and that residents from across the city had been consulted.

Councillor Wakefield then commented that the timescales were disturbing as 2013 was a long time into the future and there needed to be a solution developed quickly.

Mr Dobson stated that it would be difficult to implement a solution any quicker and that if a PFI was chosen then it would take time to secure the funding for procurement.

Councillor I. Cuthbert asked whether the authorities involved in the partnership would be entering separate agreements.

Mr Dobson advised that within the partnership the procurement approaches would be shared and that the host authority would want flexibility with collections.

7. RESOLVED that:-

- (i). The report of the Director of Community and Cultural Services be received and noted; and
- (ii). The progress being made in meeting the objectives of the Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy be monitored.

Kerb-It Recycling Scheme – Progress

The Director of Community and Cultural Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which detailed the progress made in bringing the Kerb-It recycling collection in-house as requested by Councillor I. Cuthbert.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Bill Seymour, Operations Manager for Refuse Collections, presented the report and advised that the Council had taken over responsibility for the Kerbside collections on 1st April, 2008.

Councillor I. Cuthbert thanked the Director for his response and commented that the Kerb-It box was strategically important and that it was important to ensure that public confidence remained high. He also asked whether the staff would normally have worked Saturdays.

Mr Seymour advised that the remuneration had not been sufficient reward for the employees giving up their Saturdays and that this situation had now improved.

Councillor I. Cuthbert then asked whether there had been anything contracted to pass on the costs of the backlog.

Paul Dobson, Director of Community and Cultural Services stated that there were obvious cost savings and that satisfaction levels were an issue. He also advised that there was still a relationship with Premier Waste Management and that the timing of the hand over was a problem.

Councillor I. Cuthbert commented that he welcomed the work that had been done and that he had asked for the report in order to get the information into the public realm. He then asked whether the increased absenteeism would impact on costs.

Mr Dobson advised that there was a need to make the crews feel integrated and that there was a level of sickness within any services and that high levels of sickness would impact on costs.

Councillor Tye congratulated Mr Seymour on doing a good job and stated that the public did not realise how big a task the change was. He also commented that there were previously complaints and that these had reduced, he then asked when the vehicles would receive the Sunderland City Council branding.

Mr Dobson advised that the rebranding was being done as quickly as possible.

Mr Seymour added that three vehicles had been rebranded already and that the vehicles were being fully refurbished rather than just painted.

8. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Planning Consents – Biddick Woods, Shiney Row, Houghton-le-Spring

The Director of Development and Regeneration submitted a report (copy circulated) in response to a request from Councillor I. Cuthbert in relation to the provision of on-site play facilities proposed as part of the Biddick Woods housing estate.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Keith Lowes, Head of Planning and Environment, presented the report and advised members that he had asked for a planning contravention notice to be served and would report back to the committee.

Councillor I. Cuthbert thanked Mr Lowes for his quick response and commented that it was good to see that the developer was responding and asked whether the play area was still covered by the original planning application.

Mr Lowes advised that the play areas were covered by the existing consent and that phase two of the development should contain the play areas.

Councillor I. Cuthbert then asked what the chances of other developments having similar issues were.

Mr Lowes stated that it was impossible for the Council to know what happens at every site and that feedback was the main driver for enforcement.

Mr Dobson advised that there was a partnership with the Section 106 agreements to decide how best to spend the money and that the funds were provided by the developer, the Lottery fund and other sources of funding.

The Chairman stated that it was unfortunate that the play provision had never been provided and commented that this was only one application out of 2000 every year. He also congratulated Mr Lowes for dealing with the situation promptly.

9. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and a progress report be received later in the year.

Request for Inclusion of an Item on the Agenda – System for Residential Planning Applications in Relation to Open Space/Play Space Arrangements

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which allowed members to consider a request from Councillor I. Cuthbert to include an item on a future Committee agenda.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Councillor I. Cuthbert presented the report and asked that a report be brought to a future meeting of the Committee.

Keith Lowes, Head of Planning and Environment, advised that the Section 106 agreements only concerned play areas and that the Supplementary Planning Document covered all aspects including play areas and open space. He also advised of uncertainty from Central Government including talks of Planning Charges.

10. RESOLVED that there be a report on the Item submitted to a future Meeting of the Committee

(Signed) G. MILLER,
Chairman.