

# **TRANSPORT POLICY: STEPS TO IMPROVE BUS SERVICES – FEEDBACK FROM SEMINAR**

## **Report of the City Solicitor**

### **1. Why has the report come to this Committee**

- 1.1 To provide feedback on a seminar on “Transport Policy: Taking the Next Steps To Improve Bus Services Locally” organised by Westminster Briefing.

### **2. Background**

- 2.1 On 22 July 2008, two members of the Review Committee (Councillor Graeme Miller and Councillor Ian Cuthbert) attended a seminar organised by Westminster Briefing entitled “Transport Policy :Steps to Improve Services Locally”.
- 2.2 The event was chaired by Brian Goodwin, Director of GT Consultancy. The key note address was given by Rosie Winterton MP, Minister of State for Transport. Other speakers included Stephen Joseph, Executive Director of Campaign for Better Transport; Alan Hill, Chair of the Bus Services Sub Committee, Association of Transport Co-ordination Officers and Gavin Booth Chairman of the Bus Users UK.
- 2.3 The programme comprised a series of short presentations followed by questions and answers and discussions. The main issues raised during the event are summarised below.

### **3 Current Position**

*Rosie Winterton MP, Minister for State for Transport*

- 3.1 Rosie Winterton MP stressed that bus Services are a key component of the public transport system. Around 5 billion journeys were made on public transport in 2006/07, with 2/3rds of these journey’s made on buses.
- 3.2 While it is the role of central government to set the policy framework for national bus services, their success will depend on local delivery – local bus services should be accessible, affordable and comprehensive.
- 3.3 In considering national policy on bus services, Ms Winterton felt that it is important to bear in mind its impact and contribution on a number of other policy priorities – for example reducing congestion, tackling climate change and reducing social exclusion.
- 3.4 Ms Winterton considered that local authorities currently lack the powers to effectively secure such goals on behalf of its local population. Local authorities are effectively hampered by the practical difficulties involved in introducing for example Quality Contracts.

- 3.5 The Local Transport Bill will set clearer powers for Passenger Transport Authorities. There will be greater scope for PTA's to design local bus networks and influence the operation of bus services. This should help to secure a more comprehensive and balanced network and improve the service provided on the less profitable routes and to outlying areas. In the long term this should both help to stimulate bus use and allow transport planners to provide a framework for their local area to ensure a more comprehensive and planned service that better meets local needs.
- 3.6 The Government is keen to promote better partnership working between bus operators and local authorities. However, the Minister said that where voluntary partnership is not ensuring an adequate service there will be provision to introduce statutory contracts if it can be demonstrated to be in the public interest.
- 3.7 It may be appropriate to review current PTA boundaries to better reflect existing travel to work areas rather than simple administrative boundaries. It is also important to address the problems caused by cross border ticketing.
- 3.8 Bus passengers should be given a stronger voice in shaping their local public transport system. The Government are proposing to make Passenger Focus a statutory body empowered to promote the interests of bus users.
- 3.9 The Government is also seeking to revise the Bus Services Grant to make it more effective and focused.

*Steven Joseph, Executive Director of Campaign for Better Transport*

- 3.10 Mr Joseph felt there is considerable momentum for a change and improvement in provision of bus services. As well as the patchy quality of bus service provision in many areas, a number of policy priorities such as tackling climate change, congestion, pollution, economic regeneration and social exclusion are adding to the pressure for change. There is an increasing emphasis on seeing the role of bus services in its wider context rather than looking at the issue in isolation.
- 3.11 The Local Transport Bill seeks to ensure:-
- Better cooperation between bus companies and PTA's;
  - Make quality partnerships easier to achieve;
  - Raise the profile of the bus champion
- 3.12 Mr Joseph considered that the Local Transport Bill may help us to improve the quality of bus services across a range of areas; including the quality of information provided to bus users, improve infrastructure, gateways, bus priority scheme and travel cards.
- 3.13 However, we need to recognise that all of these goals will require additional funding from central government.
- 3.14 It is also important to develop quality partnerships on an area wider basis rather than just on specific routes. We also need to include other interested bodies such as local universities and the rail operators to ensure that services are integrated and meet local need.

*Alan Hill, Chair of the Bus Services Sub Committee, Association of Transport Co-ordination Officers*

- 3.15 Alan Hill noted that public funding for rail travel is considerably greater than for buses use. In practice there is little real competition between rival bus operators.
- 3.16 Mr Hill felt that there is scope for better joint working between local authorities and the bus operators and wherever possible, partnership should be the preferable way forward.
- 3.17 Issues such as punctuality and service development are best dealt with at a local level. Traffic Commissioners should be a last resort when local partnership effectively breaks down. The country's seven Traffic Commissioners are responsible for the registration of bus services and monitor and can enquire into bus punctuality and reliability
- 3.18 In practical terms it is currently very difficult to develop a quality contract and the legal complexity has deterred local authorities from going down that route
- 3.19 Mr Hill contended that we need to try direct policy initiatives to get more people to use bus services. One possibility is to consider the greater use of concessionary fares for young people to encourage them to get into the habit of using public transport.

*Gavin Booth, Chairman of the Bus Users UK.*

- 3.20 Mr Booth felt that it is important that we provide the tools to allow services to be planned and delivered at the local level. We should seek to create conditions to promote and develop partnership working between local authorities and bus operators and use Quality Contracts as a measure of last resort.
- 3.21 Bus operators have experience of running a cost efficient service while local authorities have knowledge of what local people want. It is important to find the best way of securing positive and healthy cooperation between the two.
- 3.22 Mr Booth felt that Edinburgh was a good example of what can be achieved but that in practice many areas of the country suffered from a patchy quality of service and that in many local authorities and bus companies experience an uneasy relationship.
- 3.23 It was vitally important that we focus on the needs and listen to the views of bus users – people want a reliable service, which is secure, clean, value for money, with easy to use information and friendly staff.
- 3.24 The Government should look closely at the operation of the concessionary fares scheme and the desirability of a fuel subsidy rebate for bus operators.

*Group Discussion*

- 3.25 During the panel discussion and question and answer session which followed a number of additional issues were raised:-

- The importance of obtaining the views of the people who actually use bus services;
- ensuring bus services have ease of access into built up areas and that the needs of bus use is built into new developments;
- the need to improve cross boundary services;
- Increased usage may be due to improvements in the more profitable and popular routes. However, bus usage in other areas may be falling as services are withdrawn to focus on a core of highly popular and profitable services. In many areas the Super route concept is increasing overall patronage levels but this ignores the issue is accessibility in other parts of the network. We need to look at the needs of an area as a whole and design service to best meet these needs;
- A good way forward would be to design an ideal network and then throw down the challenge to the bus operators to operate this network. We need to explore all of the options before go down the route of quality contracts. Need to encourage discussion between bus operators and local authorities;
- At the present time success is measured in terms of levels of overall bus patronage. But are we failing to take into account other factors such as cost, accessibility, economic wellbeing;
- In practice, no real or meaningful competition exists between local bus operators and existing arrangements preclude such competition;
- We need to ensure that growth in bus patronage is delivered to all parts of the city and not simply focused on a small number of popular routes;
- It was still unclear as to what additional powers will be provided to local authorities to enable them secure better bus services for their area and influence the behaviour of bus operators.

#### **4. Recommendation**

4.1 The Review Committee is asked to note the feedback report.

#### **5. Background Papers**

Notes of Conference and background papers issued by Westminster Briefing

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