

SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL

Economic and Environmental Wellbeing Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Meeting held 15 December 2020

(NOTE: This meeting was held as a remote meeting in accordance with the provisions of The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.)

PRESENT: Councillors Denise Fox (Chair), Ian Auckland (Deputy Chair), Dianne Hurst, Alan Hooper, Abdul Khayum, Bryan Lodge, Mohammed Mahroof, Barbara Masters, Ben Miskell, Sioned-Mair Richards, Chris Rosling-Josephs, Martin Smith, Paul Turpin and Alan Law (Substitute Member)

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1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Neale Gibson, with Councillor Alan Law attending as his substitute, and Moya O'Rourke.

2. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the public and press.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 There were no declarations of interest.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

4.1 There were no questions raised or petitions submitted by members of the public.

5. IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON BUS SERVICES IN SHEFFIELD

5.1 The Committee received presentations from representatives of the bus operators in the city on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their respective services and on the city.

5.2 In attendance for this item were Phil Medlicott (Managing Director, Stagecoach), Nigel Eggleton (Managing Director, First South Yorkshire), John Young (Commercial Director, Stagecoach) and Matthew Reynolds (Transport Planning and Infrastructure Manager, Sheffield City Council).

5.3 *Phil Medlicott, Stagecoach*

5.3.1 Mr Medlicott stated that, although there had been a number of lessons learnt

along the way due to the unexpected circumstances of the lockdown, the Company had adhered reasonably effectively to the Government guidance relating to reductions in service, social distancing and additional cleaning. The Company had worked closely with the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive (SYPTTE) to ensure that appropriate levels of service remained in all areas of the city. The levels of service had fluctuated throughout the changes in Government advice, with passenger numbers reflecting such changes. Full service had been maintained following Lockdown 2. Mr Medicott stated that social distancing rules had been adhered to throughout, with a distance of 1.8 metres being allowed on buses due to their design. This had enabled the buses to carry only a maximum of 20% of their capacity. A distance of one metre had later been agreed, which resulted in an increase in capacity. The financial support provided by the Government had been both required and welcome. He reported that approximately 50% of Stagecoach staff had been off work under the shielding or furlough schemes in March and that all but 2% of staff, who had been deemed medically vulnerable under Government guidelines, had returned to work in September. The Company had not been forced to lay off any frontline staff to date. Mr Medicott concluded by stating that the pandemic had represented a very challenging time for Stagecoach, and every effort had been made to ensure that the Company continued to provide the best service possible for Sheffield residents.

5.4 *Nigel Eggleton, First South Yorkshire*

5.4.1 Mr Eggleton stated that the Government funding, whilst being welcome, had only allowed First to breakeven, as bus companies were not able to increase or reduce their bus fares. The operators had also received funding from the Department for Education in connection with the provision of school bus services. Whilst there had been some concern regarding the operation of services for school children following their return to school, the Company had experienced few problems in this regard. In the light of the capacities, specifically regarding social distancing measures, First had only been forced to deny passengers access on to buses on a few occasions. Mr Eggleton stated that, surprisingly, First had experienced an increase in vandalism on its buses. In terms of funding going forward, the operators had been guaranteed financial assistance from the Government up to Spring 2021, and would receive eight weeks' notice of the withdrawal of such funding. This remained a concern for the operators on the basis that forecasts had indicated that passenger numbers were likely to return to only 80% capacity after the pandemic.

5.5 Members of the Committee raised questions, and the following responses were provided:-

- In terms of school pupils travelling to schools on buses, there were two applicable rules. The first related to pupils travelling on normal public service routes, where they would be counted on to the bus by the driver, and required to adhere to social distancing rules and wear a face mask. The second related to school bus contracts, where social distancing rules did not apply, but the pupils would still have to wear face masks.

- It was acknowledged that if the operators were to attract passengers back after the pandemic, the quality of service would be more important than ever. In terms of future modelling, there may be a requirement to make small reductions to frequencies on some of the main bus corridors. Any major changes going forward would require additional Government funding, and discussions had commenced between the operators and the Department for Transport in this regard.
- Whilst major improvements had been made in technology in recent times, such as improved ticketing options, contactless payments, the use of apps, websites and real time information, there was always the opportunity for further advancement in this area.
- The operators did not have any major concerns going forward, and it was hoped that some of the ideas highlighted as part of the South Yorkshire Bus Review, which included a number of positive suggestions from members of the public, could be implemented as a means of further service improvements. It was envisaged that a large proportion of services in the Sheffield City Region would remain in place after the pandemic, albeit with the help of additional funding, particularly regarding those marginal services which had been struggling prior to the pandemic.
- The Council fully understood the adverse impact of Covid-19 on the city's public transport network, acknowledging the fact that passenger numbers were down, due mainly to the reduced need and ability to travel. The Council acknowledged the huge efforts made by the bus operators in terms of the action taken to adhere to Government guidelines regarding Covid-19, including the implementation and management of social distancing measures and additional cleaning. This position was reflected both nationally and internationally, and the Council was actively looking for examples of best practice across the world. There would obviously be a need for the operators, working closely with the Council and the SYPT, to build in a number of contingencies going forward. The benefits of an effective public transport system were still viewed as being vital, for both environmental reasons, particularly with regard to the aims to reach net zero carbon by 2030, and for the social benefits. Connecting Sheffield comprised a £150 million funding package from the Government, and the Council was currently working with the bus operators and the SYPT to look at initiatives which could be funded through this initiative.
- It was difficult to predict the level of cuts which may be required to be made to bus services following the pandemic. It was not envisaged that there would be any major changes or reductions, just minor timetable changes. It was expected that all areas of the city would still be covered.
- The Council would continue the implementation of projects under its capital programme, although this would not include any major transformation of projects. Improvements would continue to be made to

the city's cycle and walking network, with projects being funded from the Active Travel Fund. The Council would continue to respond, where possible, in connection with the implementation of highway projects, subject to resources being available.

- There had been continuous debate regarding the issue of driver and passenger safety during the pandemic. Drivers did not have the power to enforce the Government guidelines regarding social distancing and the wearing of face masks, which was welcomed by management due to a potential for conflict in those circumstances where passengers did not adhere to the guidelines. The bus operators worked very closely with the police, who would provide assistance subject to resources being available. Around 95% of bus passengers had adhered to the Government guidelines.
- There had been plans for the bus operators to upgrade their fleets, but a number of orders for new vehicles had been cancelled at the start of the pandemic. There was a possibility that the operators would place small capital orders this year for 2022. The operators would also be looking to use funds made available under the Clean Air Zone proposals for undertaking improvements to their fleets. Sheffield had been successful in obtaining funding from the Clean Bus Technology Fund, and the Council was working with the operators to look at possible upgrading options.
- The bus operators had not been adversely affected by staff having to shield due to being classed as medically vulnerable. 40 Stagecoach staff (4% of its workforce) had been forced to shield at home. This number had then reduced to 20 following the change in the Government advice. All these members of staff had now returned to work. Six First drivers and two engineers had been forced to shield at home, and 13 members of staff had been forced to self-isolate. The recent rise in Covid-19 cases in the city had not resulted in any reduction in service for First, with staffing cover being drafted in from other areas. First had closed all its work canteens in order to stop the spread of the infection.
- The operators would always try and ensure that there was adequate service in all areas of the City. As Stagecoach and First were commercial operators, they were able to reinvest any profits into improving services. Every effort would be made to use the additional Government funding to make necessary improvements to the network. Whilst comments suggesting that the first cuts to services should be on those higher frequency routes were noted, it was stressed that such services operated due to the demand for them, so this would be counter-intuitive. It was accepted that the operators needed to strike a balance in terms of potential service cuts/reductions and the provision of a fair and efficient bus service for use by all Sheffield residents.
- The city centre was changing, and the bus operators needed to keep in regular dialogue with the Council and the SYPTTE in terms of how the bus

network could adapt to such change. The operators had raised concerns regarding the proposed pedestrianisation of the lower end of Pinstone Street, being one of the main central bus routes through the city centre, but they would look to ensure that their passengers did not have to walk too far to reach a bus stop. It was hoped that the level and frequency of discussions between the bus operators and councillors could increase, particularly given the changes to the City Centre. The changes to the lower end of Pinstone Street had been undertaken due to social distancing requirement. Whilst a number of positive comments had been received regarding such changes, it was not yet known whether these changes would become permanent after the pandemic. The changes made at Shalesmoor had been funded through the Emergency Active Travel Fund and, again, a number of comments had been received from the public, some positive, regarding these changes.

- In terms of action to deal with anti-social behaviour on, and vandalism to, its buses, First had run a Trojan bus in those areas affected, with police on board. This had proved successful, with the perpetrators being apprehended, and no further problems being experienced in these areas. Stagecoach had also experienced similar problems, and had worked with First, South Yorkshire Police and the SYPTA, with regard to taking any necessary action.
- Whilst there was no specific data available regarding customer satisfaction during the pandemic, comments on social media had been mostly positive, and had indicated that punctuality had improved as a result of there being less other traffic on the roads.
- It was believed that the majority of services would continue after the pandemic, and every effort would be made to ensure that the level of service provided in each area of the city was based on usage and demand.
- Evening and late night services would potentially be more challenging to maintain existing provision due to declining usage. It was important that the operators provided services to enable people to access venues and facilities in order to support the night-time economy.
- Efforts would continue to look at providing new and improved ticketing options, particularly for those families on low incomes, who struggle to afford to travel to leisure and other facilities. Both First and Stagecoach offered a group ticket option where up to five people could travel for £5, for use after 5:00 pm on Fridays, and throughout the weekend.

5.6 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

- (a) notes the information reported by Phil Medicott, Nigel Eggleton, John Young and Matthew Reynolds, together with the responses to the questions raised;

- (b) thanks the representatives of the bus operators and Matthew Reynolds for attending the meeting, and for responding to the questions raised; and
- (c) requests the Chair, on its behalf, to write to the representatives of the bus operators, expressing its sincere thanks and appreciation for the excellent work undertaken by all staff in order to maintain an efficient level of service in very difficult and challenging circumstances, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

6. DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21

- 6.1 The Committee received a report of the Policy and Improvement Officer (Deborah Glen) containing the draft Work Programme for 2020/21.
- 6.2 Members made a number of suggestions in terms of possible issues it could scrutinise, together with a number of possible amendments to the Work Programme.
- 6.3 **RESOLVED:** That the Committee:-
 - (a) notes the report now submitted, together with the information now reported; and
 - (b) arising from the issues now raised, (i) requests the Policy and Improvement Officer to make arrangements for reports on updates on Business Recovery and City Centre Development/Growth to be submitted to its meeting to be held on 23rd March 2020, and (ii) agrees that (A) the Active Sheffield Strategy Working Group concludes its work and (B) the Sheffield City Trust be invited to attend a meeting of this Committee early in the 2021/22 Municipal Year.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- 7.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be held on Tuesday, 19th January 2021, at 4.30 pm.