

**COUNCIL SEMINAR
30th October, 2013**

Present:- Councillor Smith (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Beaumont, Burton, Clark, Ellis, Hoddinott, Kaye, McNeely, Smith and Whelbourn.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Godfrey, Gosling, Goulty, J. Hamilton, Jepson, Roche and Sims.

ROTHERHAM VOLUNTARY BUS PARTNERSHIP

Consideration was given to a presentation from Andy Wright (Bus Services Manager) and Mike Nuttall (Network Development Officer) of the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive (SYPTTE) concerning the forthcoming establishment of the Rotherham Voluntary Bus Partnership. A briefing note and schedule of bus services was circulated for Elected Members.

The purposes of the voluntary partnership were to improve the bus service offer and the stability of the bus network, to make improvements to bus fleets and the highway infrastructure so as to reduce delays to bus services, improve reliability and punctuality and also to improve the ticketing offer.

The overall objective of the voluntary partnership is 'for bus travel to become people's choice of transport and maximise the positive effect of the bus on the environment'. The partners are: First, Powells Bus Co. Ltd., Stagecoach, TM Travel, SYPTTE and this Council.

It was noted that routine changes to bus services and timetables usually occur four times per year, in January, April, July and October and the partnership aims to reduce this frequency to longer intervals of three times per year, so that service and timetable changes occur in January, April and September each year.

The partner organisations are expected to commit to improving the bus network in the long term; there will be major route and timetable changes occurring only once per year, on one of the pre-determined, fixed/set dates in either January, April or September.

Reference was made to the example of the Sheffield voluntary bus partnership, which began during October 2012. In Sheffield, major route and timetable changes now occur on a specific date in September each year and an improved network, reduced ticket prices and improved reliability and punctuality have resulted in an increase of 5% in passenger bus journeys during the past year.

The partnership acknowledges that bus tickets are expensive (especially for young people) and hopes to establish a more cost effective range of ticket options for passengers.

The balance which the partnership hopes to create is to:-

(a) obtain the commitment from the Borough Council and the SYPTTE to invest in highway infrastructure, in order to speed up bus journey times and ensure that journey times are both consistent and predictable;

(b) encourage the bus operators to commit to fleet investment (renewing buses; improving the cleanliness and condition of buses; refurbishing bus engines to improve emissions, etc).

The public consultation exercise about the Rotherham voluntary bus partnership is taking place from Monday 4 November, 2013 until Monday 2 December 2013 and will include:-

- : a web-based internet platform, available for people to access the consultation on-line;
- : comments forms available at the transport interchanges;
- : drop-in sessions provided at various locations throughout the Rotherham Borough area;
- : information notices displayed on buses and in transport interchanges;
- : the publication of press releases.

Reports will be submitted to Elected Members after the consultation has ended. In Sheffield, after a consultation for changes on the first anniversary, there has been additional localised consultation taking place about specific bus services.

In respect of the funding of and subsidy for certain bus services from the public purse, Members noted that future budget reductions may impact upon the provision of these services. Every effort will be made to ensure that such funding reductions are kept to a minimum.

After the presentation, Members asked questions and raised the following issues:-

: the use of smaller buses – costs are similar both for the operation of smaller and larger buses; the large 52-seater buses are often full during the peak commuter hours; it is more economical to continue with larger buses throughout the day than to replace them with smaller buses;

: the public drop-in sessions – most are happening in the south of the Rotherham Borough area, because service changes will have more effect there; two drop-in sessions are being provided at the transport interchange in the Rotherham town centre;

: the withdrawal of six services (two affecting the Bramley-Wickersley area) – the drop-in sessions are not taking place in areas seriously affected by the proposed bus service reductions;

: the consultation ought to be wider, eg: making use of the Area Assemblies' public meetings; it was noted that the SYPTE representatives would endeavour to attend these meetings, provided that sufficient resources are available;

: comments were made about specific bus services and recent changes which have been made (eg: to services affecting the Dearne area, where supply sometimes exceeds demand, because two bus companies are competing with each other); Members noted that there may be an opportunity to improve the ticketing offer for passengers travelling in the Dearne area, subject to the co-operation of the bus companies concerned;

: services affecting the Woodlathes Village, Flanderwell and Sunnyside are being reduced (a petition has been submitted concerning service number 4 affecting Sunnyside); the consultation exercise ought to include a drop-in session in this area;

: bus services to the Rotherham hospital ought to be improved, in part because the Urgent Care health services are being relocated from the Rotherham town centre to the Rotherham hospital site;

: certain other bus services are insufficient (eg: journeys between Thorpe Hesley and Meadowhall; the direct services linking the Rotherham town centre and the Barnsley town centre are minimal);

: reference was made to the subsidy (via the Passenger Transport levy) provided to support certain bus services; typically for Sunday services, for evening services and for bus services to certain rural areas of the Borough;

: Capital funding and Local Transport Plan funding (much of which is provided by central Government) assist in making improvements to the highway network, for the benefit of the whole travelling public, not only bus services;

: the longer term deterioration of bus services throughout the country (since the mid-1980s, other than in London); Members commented that sometimes bus services do not arrive at all and there is no explanation provided for the travelling public; should there be financial penalties for the bus companies in such circumstances ?;

: Members noted that it is important that the travelling public should submit complaints to the SYPTE whenever bus services fall short of required standards, especially in terms of punctuality and reliability; it was suggested that a briefing note be submitted to the Transport Liaison Group explaining the complaints procedure;

: the lack of frequency of bus services during the evening;

: safety and cleanliness issues within the transport interchanges; some concerns about customer care and the helpfulness of staff; the SYPTE works closely with South Yorkshire Police to ensure acceptable standards of behaviour within the transport interchanges and the overall safety of the travelling public; it was noted that standards of cleanliness have been affected by budget reductions;

: making better use of the information screens and of tannoy announcements within the transport interchanges, particularly to alert passengers to any services which are being withdrawn or having their times altered;

: the integration of bus services and rail services; it was acknowledged that passengers prefer to make single journeys directly from place to place, without having to wait and transfer to a second bus or onto a train;

: Members expressed concerns about the contribution of the bus service operators to the Council's Transport Liaison Group and were sceptical of the prospects for the Rotherham voluntary bus partnership; further reference was made to the example of the Sheffield voluntary bus partnership which has enjoyed a positive first year of operation; Members noted the proposed governance arrangements for the Rotherham voluntary bus partnership;

: a suggestion was made that the role of the Council's Transport Liaison Group could be undertaken as part of the Council's scrutiny function;

: Members commented on the importance of the correct costing of bus services, in terms of both subsidies from public finance and also ticketing prices for passengers;

: a comparison was made between the transport regulation system affecting London and the system for other parts of the country; reference was made to the use of quality contracts (franchises for bus services) and the establishment of voluntary bus partnerships country-wide;

: reference was made to the importance of bus services and ticket prices to young people and it was noted that liaison was still taking place with the Youth Cabinet, as a consequence of the Eleven Million take-over day meeting (7th February 2013) which had considered public transport issues affecting young people in the Rotherham Borough area.

It was agreed that an up-to-date summary of the principal alterations to bus services will be provided for Elected Members.

Members thanked Mr. Wright and Mr. Nuttall for their informative presentation.