

Unconfirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the Conference Room, Riverside, on **Thursday, 18 April 2024 at 6.30pm**

Members of the Committee present:

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Mark Jepson, Councillor Geoff Lynch, Councillor Stephen Molyneux, Councillor Mike Ninnmey, Councillor Sarah Plummer, Councillor Ed Thompson

Other Members present:

Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Janet Craig, Councillor Julia Ewart, Councillor Toby Hammond, Councillor Lee Reeves

Officers present: Sarah Davis (Democratic Services Officer), Nick Khan (Strategic Director), Mags Lambert (Project Officer/Business Analyst), Agnes Ogundiran (Conservative Political Group Support Officer), Ann Parker (Interim Parking Manager) and Paul Wood (Head of Economic Development and Regeneration).

Others present: Simon Barnett (SCC), Councillor Dan Clery (Assistant Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Transport), Sharon Payne (Transport East).

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

The Democratic Services Officer explained that apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Deacon, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and Councillor Clery, the Vice-Chair as he was attending the meeting in his capacity as the Assistant Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Transport, rather than as a member of the Committee. In light of these apologies, the Democratic Services Officer asked for nominations from the Committee for someone to Chair the meeting.

On the proposition of Councillor Lynch, seconded by Councillor Gooch it was:

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Mark Jepson be appointed as Chair for this meeting only.

The Chair stated that apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Deacon, Clery, Folley and Bennett, and Councillors Craig, Reeves, Byatt and Ewart were attending as their respective substitutes.

It was also noted that there had been two Committee membership changes since the last meeting with Councillor Ninnmey replacing Councillor Grey and Councillor Noble no longer being eligible to sit on the Committee when she became the Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment. A replacement for Councillor Noble on the Committee had not yet been appointed.

2 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Gooch declared an Other Registerable Interest on the grounds that she was one of the Council's representatives on the East Suffolk Travel Association but given the Association had no direct involvement with the matter being reviewed was, therefore, allowed to speak and vote.

3 Review of Rural Transport Services in East Suffolk

The Committee received report ES/1927 from the Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Transport's who explained that his Assistant, Councillor Clery, handled all transport aspects of the portfolio and would, therefore, be leading on this review.

Councillor Clery stated that rural transport was not in great shape which could be seen by the two maps in the report with one showing transport deserts where there were no scheduled services. He explained that profitable bus services provided by commercial organisations would run but, where they were not profitable, services could be supported by Suffolk County Council. Some 40 of 230 bus routes in Suffolk were operated under contract to the County Council, but almost every service was currently receiving some form of financial support. Covid had impacted on services, with some villages no longer having regular transport services. Another illustration of the problem was the number of big buses with only a handful of passengers daily which was because larger buses were used earlier in the day for the school runs. He explained that Community Transport organisations closed some of the gaps and were particularly useful for those with health or mobility issues but they had to be booked 24 hours beforehand so this stopped any spontaneous travelling.

The Assistant Cabinet Member stated that the Community Partnership Board had identified transport as an issue and two trials had started last year, namely Katch and Buzzabout. Katch was a fixed route and passengers could book the service and, when no one wanted it, it did not run; whereas Buzzabout ran two days per week and covered a specific area. The trials had not yet built up a big passenger base and did not make money but passenger numbers were growing slowly and Officers were promoting them to try to get them to be viable, although it was possible they would never make money. Buzzabout had been awarded £61K via the Bus Service Improvement Plan 2 (BSIP2), managed by the County Council, and would run for another two years. East Suffolk Council had provided £90K for the Katch service to operate for a further year.

Councillor Clery explained that a Working Group would decide what role the Council wanted to play in rural transport given it was not typical for districts to operate services, although some other Authorities were using East Suffolk as a model. He cautioned that, if the Council wanted to roll out the trials across the district, it was likely to cost a lot of money but that would be looked at by the Working Group.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Cabinet Member for his report and invited Members' questions and it was noted that:

- ESC had spent £90K on transport but it was difficult to gauge whether it would be cheaper to pay for taxis. There had been 2790 passengers using Katch of which 2312 were adults and 243 children. Some passengers were entitled to loyalty trips where they received a free trip. The Council paid a daily rate which covered insurance, the drivers' salary, bus running costs and when they broke even they returned fare income to the Council eg Katch had, for this year, given back £1,348.
- Vehicles were MOT tested to ensure they were safe and undoubtedly their emissions were tested, but were not known. Another bus would be pulled from one of their other services if the Katch bus broke down.
- The operator worked with passengers to try to ensure multi-occupancy on a journey to give best value and be as green a model as possible.
- These were trials so it was not possible to change a route mid stream as the model needed to be tested before it served other communities.
- The app was ceasing at the end of April because it was too expensive for a limited trial but passengers could still book online, by email or by phone. The Katch service was being advertised all over the district including on trains from London to try to encourage take up as we want the best possible result for the trial.
- Katch started as a County Council bid to the Government's "Rural Mobility Fund" in 2019 for a variety of demand responsive routes across the county. The bid was unsuccessful but the County Council were able to trial the route between Framlingham and Campsea Ashe station with their own funds, the route being partly determined to meet a need identified in a comprehensive report produced by Framlingham Town Council. Two electric minibuses were leased for the pilot, but despite being advertised with a range of 120-150 miles they only achieved between 50 and 80 miles between charges and were thus not suitable for continued use once the County funding ended.
- Rural poverty in East Suffolk was a fact and it was linked to social isolation, mental health issues and economic development eg getting people to work etc. Work done by Transport for the North about transport related social inclusion had looked at access to core services and mapped the whole country – it was 18% in England but for East Suffolk it was 37% with the biggest areas at risk being market towns and towns but they hoped to do more research on this.
- The Working Group would look at what the criteria for success was for the two services and the necessary conditions for moving forwards because it might be that it was too expensive for the Council to do and we would have to leave it to commercial companies but it was hoped this would not be the case as people were crying out for these services. Working with a community provider who welcomed the on-demand services and was an extension of their skills set was a good model. The next step was to understand what the market was for it and tweak the service if necessary to try to get as many people as possible using it. The Group would also look at how more people could be encouraged to use the bus at the same time through promotion, social media etc. Although bus services like this cost money it was not all about finance as there was a wider social value for providing these services. The original project had been for two years but it had been pared

back to one year and the aim now was to see how we could get the best value for money out of it and keep it going.

- The social value of providing the services needed to be analysed - all the Our Direction priorities were influenced by transport eg if villages did not have public transport services then should we be building estates in those rural areas?
- Restoring confidence that bus travel was safe and not prejudicial to passengers health was a wider societal issue and at the moment the elderly could not use their bus passes on the Buzzabout service. However, the BSIP2 grant that would allow the service to continue for a further two years, had a condition that concessions would be accepted on the service.
- Whilst it was acknowledged that people might wish to use the services at night, there was a reluctance to change the routes and timings during the trial as the bus drivers could only work limited hours. People could request to use community transport services to access night time activities as long as they booked in advance and in groups to make it financially viable. It was agreed, however, that there was a shortage of drivers for these services.

At the Chair's invitation, Simon Barnett from Suffolk County Council reported that he looked after bus, rail, estuarial ferries and anything else that did not fit in with the rest of his department. He stressed that there was no obligation on anybody to provide passenger transport except for children going from home to school. He clarified that operators tended to run only those services that made them money. Mr Barnett stated that his budget was under £1m for local bus services, but Suffolk County Council also received an annual grant of £600K from the Department of Transport. Jointly these two budgets paid for about 14% of the buses across Suffolk. The County Council had recently received an extra £1.8m from the Government because they had not been given any of the £77m additional funding allocated across the country a few years ago. He explained that the County also funded Connecting Communities services but these were reliant on volunteer drivers. Changes to driving licence rules in the 1990s meant that someone was not automatically able to drive a minibus, therefore, they needed training and it was difficult to attract those that could drive a minibus. In response to an earlier question, he stressed that it was difficult enough to find volunteers for the daytime and it was even harder for evenings and weekends. In a whole year of the original Katch trial, the number of requests for evening and weekends could be counted on two hands. Part of this was down to a national decline in bus use and he suggested some of that was within the Council's gift eg making it harder to park in Town Centres to encourage bus usage, not agreeing housing developments until a bus route was in place because when residents knew they were available from day one a route tended to stay viable. In relation to fares, he explained that the Government put money into rail not buses but First Eastern was trying to push people to use buses again. The number of bus passes had stayed the same but a lot of eligible people had not applied for them, possibly because they did not know about them but it was likely to be because a lot of older people were active and self sufficient for longer and continued driving longer. The point was made that people could have a rail pass when they were over 60 (at a cost of £30 per year to get 30% reduction in travel costs) but not a bus pass (ENCTS passes were issued at state pension age and provided free travel).

At the Chair's invitation, Sharon Payne from Transport East explained that they were the sub national transport body for the East of England and there were seven bodies

across England. As a smaller body they had limited capacity but were also unique because they worked with District Councils alongside County Councils, rail, local bus operators and they also looked at other matters such as decarbonisation and growing our global gateway eg airports and ports and our town centres and cities across the East. A Transport Strategy had been approved by the Secretary of State last year which meant he had to give due diligence to it. Transport East did not have any specific funding but worked on behalf of Local Authorities by providing capacity etc. She agreed that bus services had declined since 2010 by about 30% in rural areas but this was a national issue. She added that Local Authority supported services had been cut right across the country by about 80% and some urban areas had also been impacted. Every failure in transport services impacted on social inclusion. A parish access survey with about a 30% response rate had shown that most residents felt they had to go outside the parish for every day activities but better use could be made of halls/community centres etc. She explained that Transport East wanted to look at proving the social value of providing rural transport and to change how modelling was done so it had equal weighting when attracting funding. Suffolk had not been able to access £20m Government Rural Mobility Funding. There were lots of different models running across the country so it was possible to compare as they were subject to really robust monitoring and some did run in the evenings. She concluded that Transport East mapping had shown that such a strong proportion of the population were living in rural transport poverty and it was really positive that the Council were starting a Working Group to look at this matter.

The Chair thanked Mr Barnett and Ms Payne for their presentations and the following responses were given to Members' queries:

- The Cycling and Walking Strategy was an aspiration rather than describing where people could cycle now and it identified where in future better walking and cycling could be provided. A Working Group was currently working on it, including identifying routes, and it was hoped to have dedicated routes away from main highways and change some roads to 20mph limits to try to make them safer for non-motorised people.
- People stopped using the bus from Lowestoft to Ipswich which was going to be extended to Colchester partly because the train was always quicker than a bus. A major issue for bus companies were the changes to EU driver's hours which meant routes over 50km had to be split. First still had the same issue but they did operate routes people use. The County Council did not have much money so could only fill some of the gaps.
- There were other successful on demand services out there but it depended on how success was defined because few if any made a profit. It was possible to have demand led pricing but it would need to be recognised that some services would always need support. Under licensing conditions minibuses could only run with 16 people so even if they were paying the full fare it would not cover costs which was why the Council needed to assess the social value of operating the services.
- Post scheme monitoring evaluation was relatively poor because it cost extra money on top of the scheme costs. There had been a literature review of schemes working across England and there were different models across the world but Transport East wanted to focus on local schemes because they had similar issues/funding etc. Pilots in Essex and Norfolk were doing quite well but they were now looking at what would happen when the funding stopped. Transport for

Wales had funded an app for all Local Authorities eg licensing fees and back end admin so all their operators could use it. Transport for Cornwall had done something similar so regardless of who the operator was, buses all looked the same and tickets could be used with any operator etc.

- Last year across Suffolk, Connecting Communities had 97855 passengers which was down about 520 on the year before but a significant improvement on the year before that (2020/21) when passenger numbers totalled 80,001. Services were limited because, although the budget had increased this year, the County Council was getting less for it due to rising costs.
- A County wide app would help but consideration needed to be given as to whether to have a demand responsive service on a fixed route which would be easier to manage but might not take people exactly where they wanted, or have a totally demand led service.
- The ENCTS bus pass was a national scheme based on state pension or disability – the Government provided funding for certain times and the County Council received just under £7m per year. The County could extend times and lower the age requirement etc but last time this was looked into it was estimated to cost about £3m and the County Council did not have that money available at the moment.
- The park and ride system was originally set up to stop people driving into Ipswich and reduce congestion. An extension out the other way to Rendlesham was trialled but people did not use it. We need to encourage people to use the services we have and the benefit of P&R is that there are fewer stops.
- It cost a lot of money to run a bus and smaller vehicles did not cover the costs. One company was looking at incorporating parcel delivery with passengers but legislation did not currently permit that.
- There had been a small increase in passengers so the chances were that the withdrawal of the £2 cap might drop those numbers slightly – those using before would probably still use the service and pay the increased amount.
- About 10 years ago, Rendlesham used to have two buses an hour but people stopped using them and commercial operators do not put services on if they cannot guarantee use. The County Council was not able to extend the Katch service to Rendlesham because of the range on the electric vehicles they hired at the time.
- We had to rationalise our resources to where we knew there was an appetite for the service.

The Chair invited the Committee to debate and make any recommendations.

Clarification was sought on the Working Group's Terms of Reference, whether the vehicles used for the two Council on-demand services were meeting green standards where possible, the definition of social value for the two schemes which could be used to attract funding, how the two projects would be marketed/re-launched. Mr Barnett stated that the County Council had been looking into Social Value Toolkits for Transport. He added that petrol/diesel buses would not be able to be purchased from 2030, however, he was aware that Sizewell were looking to buy some buses which hopefully in time would trickle down into the market.

The point was also made that public transport for new developments only started to be required once they get to a certain point so perhaps Planning should be encouraging

developers to provide them sooner. It was also queried how the loss of public transport could impact on a community, including such things as air quality, population etc.

The Chair thanked everyone for participating in the review. It was clarified that there were no formal recommendations to be made to Cabinet, however, in light of the fact that Members had requested further information on several matters and made a number of suggestions, it was agreed that the resolutions would be drawn up outside the meeting then circulated to the Committee for approval.

NOTE:

The following were approved by the Committee outside of the meeting:

RESOLVED

1. That the Scrutiny Committee be provided with the following information:
 - The Terms of Reference for the Transport Working Group, including the aims and objectives of the Group and indicative timescales.
 - The social value of East Suffolk Council providing on-demand public transport eg Katch/Buzzabout.
 - How the on-demand services, including the app, would be marketed/relaunched.
 - How it was intended to attract more volunteer drivers for on-demand services.
 - The wider impact of the loss of public transport on a community such as car movements and air quality etc.
2. That the operators of East Suffolk's on-demand public transport projects Katch/Buzzabout be encouraged to use vehicles that were as green as they realistically could be given the cost limitations.
3. That Planning Officers be asked to encourage developers to include the provision of public transport at the earliest stage of new developments as possible.

The meeting adjourned at 8.10pm and reconvened at 8.15pm.

4 Cabinet Member Scrutiny Session

The Chair invited Councillor Hammond the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economic Development and Transport, to give details on the direction of travel for the services within his portfolio.

The Cabinet Member reiterated that he had split the portfolio with his Assistant Cabinet Member and he retained responsibility for Economic Development, Regeneration, Parking and EV Charging. He expressed his gratitude for the support his Officers had given him since taking up his position. He reported on each of the areas of his portfolio including:

- The amount of funding levered in from various sources and his desire to make town centres destinations.

- His priority to support his officer team to deliver projects and involve Councillors from other parties, as well as the community and stakeholders so it did not seem that it was being done to them.
- Sizewell C would have a major impact on businesses and projects as well as tourism in terms of skills displacement, however, a programme was underway to mitigate against that.
- Freeport East was controversial but there were also some real positives eg clean hydrogen.
- Economic development was not just about endless growth but about encouraging investment and keeping money within the district, eg the Council's procurement strategy would be changed so there was a circular economy.
- Supporting low carbon businesses including giving Local Discretionary Business Rate Relief.
- A Hydrogen Conference would take place in June. The Sizewell C development would use hydrogen powered park and ride buses during its construction and Conrad Energy were setting up a clean hydrogen electrolyser in Lowestoft to store offshore wind as energy.
- Civil Enforcement operation - a series of parking reviews would be undertaken over the next few years in areas across the district which would involve local stakeholders.
- The Annual Permit price had been reduced and it was hoped more would be purchased as a result.
- Encouraging private companies who already ran EV Charging Stations to lease our land/car parks.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for his presentation and he responded to the following questions from Committee Members:

- The Hydrogen Conference in June would be able to answer questions about how and where hydrogen could be used.
- More charging points were needed given East Suffolk was so rural, irrespective of the fact that private sales of electric vehicles had reduced.
- A briefing on Freeport East would be arranged for all Members.
- We want to encourage "green" building companies and they would be eligible for the Business Rate Relief.
- All Council car parks had coin operated machines available for those that did not want to use RingGo, although sometimes they were difficult to find so some were having new signage to direct people to them.
- It was great to see more buses running on hydrogen. The Council did not have a position on small modular reactors yet but these were incredibly expensive so it might be preferable to spend money on renewable energy.
- There was not yet a solution for the wind farm blades once decommissioned and the ports were not set up as construction ports so did not have lay down space for the blades.
- Air pollution and road design were beyond the scope of the parking reviews, however, the Council would be encouraging the County Council to look at these matters. Also, each area will have its own set of issues so each will be looked at individually.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for a very informative briefing.

5 Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme

The Chair reminded the Committee that the Work Programme for 2024/25 would be determined by the new Committee, once appointed, at a Workshop on 6 June with the first formal Committee meeting taking place on 20 June 2024.

The meeting concluded at 9.14pm.

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Chair