

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT

Monday, 18th September, 2006 at 6 pm
in Committee Room 2, The Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Mrs Cowell (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs Turner (Vice-Chairman)
Councillors Ms Craigie, Harley, Kettle, Lowe, Stanley and Tomkinson

Officers

Director of Law and Property (as Lead Officer to the Committee),
Assistant Director of Housing, Assistant Directors of the Urban
Environment (Environmental Management) and (Development and
Environmental Protection), Head of Engineering, Principal Engineer
(Transportation Policy), (Directorate of the Urban Environment), Area
Manager Brierley Hill (Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing
Services) and Mrs M Johal (Directorate of Law and Property).

Also in Attendance

Mr Clive Whatling (Head of Bus Network) from Centro and Mr Phil
Tonks (Assistant Officer (England) Bus Users UK)

14 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of
Councillors Finch, James and Ms Harris.

15 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 27th
June, 2006, be approved as a correct record and signed.

16 **PUBLIC FORUM**

There were no issues raised by the public under this Agenda Item.

ADDRESSING THE DECLINE IN BUS PATRONAGE AND USE OF CONCESSIONARY PASSES

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted and considered together with a presentation from Centro on declining bus patronage and the take up of concessionary passes.

Mr Clive Whatling (Head of Bus Network) gave a presentation on behalf of Centro that covered the Bus Strategy, details of loss in patronage, how services could be improved, issues to be considered, improved information and marketing, infrastructure improvements, safer travel, police team and partnership working.

Arising from the presentation Members commented that the decline in bus patronage was due to the problems that people encountered whilst using the service and Members highlighted their concerns. It was pointed out that an appropriate infrastructure should exist for bus shelters, as currently buses may not stop because the driver could not see the person sitting inside and consequently people were forced to stand outside the shelter. It was also commented that anti social behaviour occurred around bus shelters and seats were removed and glass broken and, following repair, vandalism was repeated. It was suggested that where requests were made, these bus shelters should be removed.

Further comments made included the need to coordinate train and bus services to avoid lengthy travelling times. Reference was also made to the inadequate bus service to Russells Hall Hospital, which, for example required a two-bus journey from Gornal. It was also commented that people did not know whether a floor level or a step entrance bus was due to arrive, which caused difficulties for passengers with prams or pushchairs. Members also complained about the existing buses in Dudley and referred to them as being old and unreliable. It was further commented that, if customers received a quality bus network that was efficient and reliable coupled with a friendly environment, it would attract people to use the service.

In responding to the queries and comments made, Mr Whatling advised that Travel West Midlands had made significant investments in vehicles and fifteen new double decker buses had been commissioned for Dudley, although it was acknowledged that they may not be serving the north of the Borough. It was pointed out that a business case had to be submitted to the Directors of Travel West Midlands for the acquisition of new vehicles and due to Dudley not being as profitable as other areas such as Wolverhampton and Birmingham, it was more difficult for Pensnett Garage to make a strong case because Dudley carried fewer passengers. In relation to the linking and co-ordination of bus and train

services it was commented that it was difficult because of traffic congestion. However, it was pointed out that Centro had recently introduced an experimental service linking buses to trains during specific times. Mr Whatling emphasised that bus services were provided by the operators, such as Travel West Midlands, and not by Centro.

Mr Tonks then briefly commented on the points made by Members and advised that an improved quality bus network could only be pursued if funding was available. He also commented that an audit of bus services had been commissioned to capture passenger experience and he further pointed out that the audit had so far revealed and placed Pensnett as the top garage in the Black Country. In relation to the confusion in floor level or step entrance vehicles it was suggested that the floor level vehicles could be used for certain journeys and the step entrance vehicles for other journeys. However, it was pointed out that all new vehicles were floor level vehicles and by 2014 all vehicles would be floor level. He further acknowledged the difficulties being experienced with there not being a direct bus service from Gornal and Sedgley to Russells Hall Hospital but commented that it was an operational issue for the bus operators.

The Lead Officer to the Committee suggested that to capture the essence of comments made by Members the word “quality” should be inserted in the recommendation and that a further report should be submitted to the Committee.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the content of the presentation given concerning bus patronage and concessionary fares be noted.
- (2) That continued support be given to Centro in its role of promoting the use of quality bus services as part of its wider transport objectives.
- (3) That the Director of the Urban Environment be requested to submit a further report to the Committee in June 2007.

A report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services was submitted on progress on plans for the implementation of Choice Based Lettings (CBL) in Dudley.

Arising from the presentation of the report Members referred to the advertising of properties via websites and expressed concern that not all people were familiar with using computers and queried whether dedicated trained people would be available to guide them on what to do. It was also queried whether a Group involving residents would be set up to determine allocation of properties. Reference was made to Appendix A to the report submitted relating to vacancies being advertised in newspapers and the exact costing for this was queried, particularly when the allocated budget was only £150,000. It was also queried how feedback was to be provided to applicants regarding the outcome of their bidding and whether additional officers were to be utilised and engaged.

In response to the comments made, the Area Manager, Brierley Hill advised that they would be willing to train existing staff at Dudley Council Plus and staff at libraries to advise and guide applicants. It was pointed out that there was no proposal to set up a Group involving residents to aid the process of allocating properties but the intention was to have a clear lettings policy. In relation to advertising in newspapers, the Area Manager, Brierley Hill clarified that the weekly or fortnightly advertising in newspapers was only to be undertaken during the initial implementation period and the intention was to advertise the service available at Dudley Council Plus and the Housing Offices in the press but not individual properties. As far as feedback was concerned it would be tested during the pilot period and methods other Local Authorities used would be investigated. It was further anticipated that following the decrease in initial queries from customers, staff could be released to pursue individual feedback.

A Member commented that it would be useful for Members that held surgeries to also receive training to enable them to inform people appropriately.

During the ensuing discussion a Member commented that there were not enough properties and there were many people on the waiting list. Another Member expressed concern that if advertisement was not to be done through newspapers then people that worked full time or worked various shifts would be penalised as they would be missing out on properties because they would not be able to take time off to visit Dudley Council Plus or the local Housing Office. People who did not have computers would also have to rely on visiting libraries during their opening hours to access computers, which would further disadvantage them.

The Chairman commented, on behalf of an absent Member, that not all people would be able to equally access advertisements and concerns were expressed that the pilot scheme would be undertaken in a specific area, which would not be representative of the Borough. It was further commented that the previous visit that had been undertaken by the Committee to Bushbury in Wolverhampton had also represented a small

and contained area and it was suggested that a further visit to another Local Authority that had successfully completed the choice based lettings process should be undertaken.

Members also commented on the proposed banding system as part of the review of the Lettings Policy, detailed in Appendix B, which would be the subject of statutory consultation.

Arising from the concerns raised it was suggested that a Working Group be set up to consider the reservations as expressed by Members and to oversee and monitor progress of the pilot scheme and the banding proposals.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report and Appendices attached to the report, submitted, be noted.
- (2) That approval be given to the appointment of an all-party Choice Based Lettings Working Group of the Committee with the remit to consider the reservations as expressed by Members and to oversee and monitor progress of the choice based lettings pilot scheme and the banding proposals and that membership of the Working Group comprise:-

Councillors Mrs Cowell, Mrs Turner, Ms Craigie and a Member of the Labour Group (to be determined).

REVIEW OF SUCCESSION

A report of the Director of Law and Property was submitted on the decision of the Council in relation to a Notice of Motion under Council Procedure Rule 12 considered on 24th July, 2006 regarding a review of succession to tenancy. It was proposed that the process for an all party review of the present policy on succession with the involvement of the respective lead members and spokespersons for housing, be considered.

Arising from the presentation of the report it was suggested that the Choice Based Lettings Working Group should consider the review of succession problems and issues that arose for tenants, as described by Members.

RESOLVED

That the information contained in the report submitted be noted and that the remit of the Choice Based Lettings Working Group be extended to consider the review of succession.

BLACK COUNTRY WASTE MANAGEMENT STUDY

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted on the current status of the Black Country Waste Management Study.

The Assistant Director of the Environment (Environmental Management) in his presentation informed the Committee of the Work Programme as agreed by the Recycling Working Group at a meeting held earlier in the day.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted, on the ongoing progress of the Black Country Waste Management Study, be noted and that further progress reports be submitted to future meetings of the Committee.
- (2) That approval be given to the following Work Programme of the Recycling Working Group:-
 - (1) Material Recycling Facilities
 - (2) A Second Civic Amenity Site
 - (3) Domestic and Commercial Waste
 - (4) Cleaner Neighbourhood Act
 - (5) Plastics and Cardboard Recycling

HIGH HEDGES LEGISLATION

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted on further information regarding the implementation of Part 8 of the Anti Social Behaviour Act, 2003, with regard to High Hedges Legislation.

RESOLVED

That the information contained in the report and Appendix to the report submitted, be noted.

The meeting ended at 8.50 p.m.

CHAIRMAN