

NHBUG meeting on 1st November 2024.

I apologise for any lack of detail. It was the first meeting for several years during which time I have become the only remaining committee member, so for this meeting I tried to chair and also put my own points across to the MP. I therefore neglected by official duties as Secretary.

Before having any further meetings it will be necessary to hold an AGM and appoint a Chair, a Secretary and perhaps other committee members.

Minutes of the meeting - DRAFT.

Held at Letchworth Council offices, Gernon Rd. at 15:00 on 1 November 2024

The purpose of the meeting was to put forward the general dissatisfaction among bus users at the state of bus services in North Hertfordshire.

Apologies received from Ian Mantle (NHDC), Jean Green

Attendees: David Wakelin (Chair), Peter Ellingworth (South Herts Users), David Martin (Stevenage BUG), Councillors Phil Bibby and Fiona Hill (Herts CC), Steve Jarvis (Royston DC and Herts CC), Cllr Val Bryant (Executive member for Community Partnerships NHDC), Daniel Tancock (Herts CC Transport Dept.), Claire Morgan (NHDC), Michael Harrison and John Rees (Royston Town Council), Edward Leigh (NHDC Senior Transport Officer), four other Bus Users, Chris Hinchliff MP for North East Herts.

DW outlined the problems users faced with bus services in North Herts which according to many bus users were 'worse than they have ever been', and the possible causes.

The deregulated system allows bad operators to provide poor service with no way of forcing improvement.

The worst operator is Arriva who have the majority of popular routes in North Herts and whose services have declined in frequency and reliability for several years. A particular case is the 55 service between Letchworth and Stevenage via Graveley and Lister Hospital which is so unreliable people are missing hospital appointments and avoiding using the service if possible.

DW also criticised Herts CC for failing to tackle several problems including the continued lack of real-time information, the incorrect information for the 53 service both at stops and online, and the general decline in the commercial services despite 'Enhanced Partnerships'.

Councillors Bibby and Hill mounted a robust coordinated defence denying that there was any 'lack of interest' and councillors and staff were working hard to improve bus services in

Hertfordshire giving the example of cross-border cooperation with Cambridgeshire and work on council supported services. DT stated that the figure showing services had declined by 56% in Hertfordshire were incorrect and the corrected figure was 30%. He admitted that was still not good. The Councillors claimed that things were not as negative as stated and usage had increased since the £2 fare cap and other improvements were in progress including under the Bus Service Improvement plan and the on-demand Herts Lynx service.

It was agreed by all that the current deregulated system was not fit for purpose. Councillor Jarvis said it causes difficulty in routing council supported service as they are not allowed to compete on any part of a route where there is a commercial service.

There was general agreement, including from Chris Hinchliff that a franchise system was probably the best practical option and that there should be no unregulated services.. Cllr Bibby agreed but stated that funding would be needed as it would cost £160 million. This however includes a new fleet of electric vehicles. He later admitted that other much cheaper options were possible. CH said the Better Buses Bill enabled councils to introduce franchising and that more legislation would follow if necessary.

Before leaving the meeting he said he had noted the problems and that everyone should work together to improve things.

After he left a member raised points from the recent Budget which would negatively impact bus services i.e. the increase in employers NI which will push up costs for a labour intensive industry such as bus operations, and the increase in the capped fares to £3 which would deter usage. DM pointed out it would now be more worthwhile to consider the cost saving ticket options offered by Intalink.

A member started to put forward a plan to reorganise bus services based around Letchworth Broadway. DT expressed interest. Due to lack of time a discussion was carried over to a future meeting.

David Wakelin – North Herts BUG.