

Rural Services APPG

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services
14th July 2020 at 10.00am
On-line via Zoom

RURAL TRANSPORT

The purpose of the meeting was to consider issues relating to connectivity and Rural Bus Services.

PRESENT

Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP (Ludlow)

Scott Mann MP (North Cornwall)

Lord Ewen Cameron of Dillington

Lord John Taylor of Holbeach CBE

Elliott Banks (Senior Parliamentary Assistant to Rob Butler MP)

Antony Bennett (Senior Parliamentary Researcher Jo Churchill MP)

Arthur Virgo (Office of Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP)

Nathan Weavers (Parliamentary Assistant to Julie Marson MP)

Matthew Cox (Office of Selaine Saxby MP)

Martin Gorringe (Rural Communities Policy Unit, Defra)

Ed Rowlandson (Political Relations Manager, Countryside Alliance)

External Speaker

John Birtwistle (Head of Policy UK Bus)

In attendance from Secretariat

Graham Biggs MBE (RSN)

David Inman (RSN)

Bethan Aldridge – Minute taker (RSN)

1. Apologies for Absence

Rob Butler MP (Aylesbury)

Jo Churchill MP (Bury St Edmunds)

Julie Marson MP (Hertford and Stortford)

Anne-Marie Morris MP (Newton Abbot)

Greg Smith MP (Buckingham)

Bill Wiggin MP (North Herefordshire)

Bishop Alan (St Albans)

Lord Robin Teverson

Jonny Haseldine (Parliamentary Assistant Anne Marie Morris MP)

Chris Hinchliff (Rural Economy & Communities Policy & Campaigns Officer, CPRE)

2. Notes of Previous Meeting

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 28.01.20 were accepted with no matters arising.

It was agreed to discuss Item 4 before Item 3 as the speaker was delayed in joining the meeting.

4. RSN Draft Document:

Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision

Graham explained that in March 2019, the RSN launched its campaign calling on Government to produce a Rural Strategy. The next iteration of this was to be a new document “Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision” to be launched in the Autumn. The document had 16 specific ‘topic areas’ and a draft of the work to date was currently out to consultation with RSN members. The impact of COVID-19 and the ‘Policy Asks’ were not yet included and RSN members were being asked for their views.

The 4 Sections included with the agenda papers for this APPG meeting were for information, but Graham invited comments by e mail from any APPG members – especially in respect of the ‘Policy Asks’.

Graham confirmed that this would be a live document whereby the policy context wording within the document and the policy asks would be kept up-to-date. The aim is to have a final draft by the end of September and is not specifically aimed at the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) but will be useful in any discussions in respect of the CSR.

The Chair commented that although the last CSR had been pulled, the Treasury, at the time under Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, had appreciated the input from the representational rural groups she had met. The policy initiatives were still intact and could be refreshed.

A general discussion took place within the group around issues of connectivity. The Chair confirmed that Rt Hon George Eustice MP had outlined a new plan to invest £5.2m in flood

and coastal defences. This would go some way in levelling up investment and protection for these communities, support local resilience and the local economies.

Lord Cameron confirmed that Broadband connectivity is still an issue. He had encountered problems recently when trying to put forward amendments at a virtual meeting re the RDP fund, fortunately, a colleague had been able to complete this on his behalf. It is hoped that the third reading of the Environment Bill will take place in October. There will be no conference recess this Autumn allowing four extra weeks for legislation time.

Scott Mann MP discussed the National Bus Strategy and that Cornwall had received £20m for a rural pilot scheme from the Department for Transport. This is looking into an “Oyster” style card that can be used on trains and buses, timetabling to be done digitally, apps to provide accurate information on bus times etc and all bus stops to have electric boards. If the transport system is reliable, regular and joined up then it is hoped to change transport habits away from reliance on cars to buses and give customers confidence in planning their journey.

Cornwall though has decided not to electrify its bus services as the cost was too prohibitive particularly regarding infrastructure and charging points. Instead, it has purchased 100-150 new red buses and it is hoped that changes to the bus network will enable it to join with community transport links and with the main artery links.

Lord Taylor discussed issues with buses in Lincolnshire and Norfolk. The network is in two parts, the first is “Call and Collect” which is a mini-bus service to outlying villages taking users into main towns for shopping and accessing medical appointments. It works well and is heavily subsidised by the local council and particularly useful for scattered communities on the Fens and Marshes. The second part is the regular bus service with recognised bus stops and information on all those stops available. Currently there are interim stops between the main market towns, but the information is less reliable, so people do not wish to “chance” catching the bus and therefore more likely to use a car.

3. Issues Relating to Connectivity: Rural Bus Services, Presentation by John Birtwistle (Head of Policy UK Bus)

The Chair welcomed John to the meeting and asked him to provide some background information. John explained that good public transport is essential as it links together all strands of rural life. It provides a service for keyworkers etc, essential connections for those who do not have access to cars or other forms of transport and for those with mobility issues.

The current network is under a lot of pressure to run in a commercial setting but this is very difficult to achieve and differing issues impact on the timetabling and therefore the confidence of users. Some of these issues include unrestricted car usage, increased congestion in small towns making the bus service less efficient, other types of bus transporters, difficulty in developing new routes into new housing developments as too car-centric, concessionary reimbursed travel and historic sources of funding being cut etc.

John described the key issues as being:

i) the reduction in local authority funding due to not being a statutory function. Therefore, as the bus service is seen as discretionary and where there is a shortfall in monies for other statutory functions, then the funding is quite often cut or stopped.

ii) Community Transport: This is very strong and plays an important role in rural areas filling in the gaps of the regular bus service. Despite alleged cuts to their service, there has been no change as they can still provide that service and can be complementary to the bus network.

There is a need to take a wider, holistic view of bus transport. Therefore, First Bus has put out five calls to action and these are laid out in the attached summary document (Attachment 1 and 2).

A1: Establishment of a central resource of data, advice and good practice.

There is lots of good practice across the country but it is isolated and knowledge, understanding and recognition of this is not strong. A central resource would enable consistent decision making.

A2: A call for longevity of funding looking at 5 years ahead rather than the current short-term basis. Also looking to tie into the health agenda i.e. ensuring appointments, clinics, health facilities match with timetabling to allow “right place at the right time”. The call includes mandating local authorities and health trusts to tie together various resources to help grow bus usage and sustainability.

A3: Introduction of a new regulatory regime and a trial to be established to determine and stimulate transport operator interest. This would provide a level playing field, provide a lower cost basis and be more sustainable in the long run.

A4: Decarbonisation agenda to take into account the practical constraints of a rural bus service. Running electric buses will be difficult and so need the most reliable and efficient diesel or hydrogen types. Also, help with tackling rural congestion as this will provide services that are then more attractive to customers.

A5: No additional regulatory burdens but rather an opportunity to thrive. A lighter touch regulatory scheme and a partnership approach will enable shared decision making, trust, clear outcomes and benefits for the public. The wider objectives for rural areas would be economic growth and development, health benefits, open data and availability of information.

John said that this package of measures hopes to reverse the decline, over 60 years, in rural bus services and achieve a renaissance in rural transport.

The Chair asked John how these calls for action dovetail with the national bus strategy and how they fit into the ambition of the Department of Transport. John explained that the national strategy is at an early stage which has been affected by the pandemic and it is important to get the industry back to where it was pre-Covid 19. All bus operators are reliant on the government to keep in business. During the pandemic, they were operating at between 30-40% levels of service but with only 10% of their revenues. Social distancing now

means that they are operating at 40% available capacity. The message from government not to use public transport has had a big impact and the industry now needs the message to change to say it is still important for key workers to use public transport but that it is safe for the general public as well.

John Birtwistle went on to say that the focus from government is on growth, zero carbon emissions and urban regeneration and he does not want rural areas to miss out. There is a pure economic case in urban areas that is weaker in rural areas.

It is important to ensure the whole topic is high on the agenda and that there is a call for a separate Rural Bus Strategy that promotes rural areas. The Department of Transport is aiming to publish a National Bus Strategy at the end of Autumn.

Ed Rowlandson confirmed that the submission to Green Economy discussions was crucial for affordable, regular bus transport particularly staycations and the need to keep congestion down. Ed stated that the Countryside Alliance was still arguing for rural proofing in spending reviews etc.

Graham Biggs reiterated the importance of ensuring that rural factors in all discussions in levelling up. There is a clear government commitment to levelling up and we need to ensure that it includes rural and a way to go with transport is the proposals outlined by John Birtwistle. Unfortunately, we cannot rely on calls for rural proofing alone and that is at the heart of why we called for a Rural Strategy. Lord Gardiner in May 2019 stated that the Government would “refresh the vision for rural areas” But nothing had yet been produced.

The Chair suggested a letter be written to Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, Secretary of State for Transport to pick up all the points in the call for action set out by John Birtwistle before the summer recess and to be fed into the CSR and to inform the National Bus Strategy in respect of rural considerations.

Action: Graham Biggs to draft a letter and circulate a copy before summer recess in 10 days’ time.

John Birtwistle urged action while we still have a rural bus service because once it stops operating, it is extremely difficult to bring back.

The Chair stated that there is a lot of money available from government currently for rural connectivity, mainly for Broadband, but it would be good if it was also used for Transport.

The Chair thanked John Birtwistle for his presentation and to everyone who had joined in the meeting.

5. Date of Next Meeting

The date in the diary is 28th October 2020.

The Chair and Graham Biggs will confirm the agenda topic.

Meeting finished at 11am