

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 31 JANUARY 2012

PRESENT:- Councillors Kevin Small (Chair), Peter Heaton-Jones, Des Moffatt, Eric Shaw, Vera Tomlinson, Robert Wright and Sinead Darker

Councillors Mark Edwards and Peter Greenhalgh, Cabinet Member for Council Transformation, Sustainability, Strategic Planning and Transport, were also in attendance

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Fionuala Foley (Vice-Chair), Emma Faramarzi, Andy Harrison and Kevin Parry

129. Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting.

130. Public Question Time

No public questions were asked under Standing Order 18.

131. Great Western franchise replacement consultation

The Committee received a report on the Department for Transport's Great Western franchise replacement consultation, being undertaken in relation to the operation of all passenger rail services to and from Swindon from April 2013.

Councillor Peter Greenhalgh, Cabinet Member for Council Transformation, Sustainability, Strategic Planning and Transport, briefly introduced the report, commenting that the consultation presented an important opportunity to assess the issues and advise the Department of Transport of the Council's concerns about the poor standard of rail services to and from Swindon.

Following his introduction of the report, Councillor Greenhalgh and his support officers responded to members' questions and observations on the following matters:

- the disproportionately high level of rail fares between Swindon and London and First Great Western's (FGW) unconvincing arguments for the disparity
- the impact of the high level of rail fares between Swindon and London on Swindon regeneration and business investment in the Town
- the reasons behind the Department for Transport seeking the franchise replacement at this time
- the importance of utilising every opportunity to press for cheaper rail fares between Swindon and London
- the lack of a direct rail route from Swindon to the north
- the possible detrimental effect on Swindon rail services of Swindon not being a terminus (start and finish destination)
- details of the mechanisms used to determine rail fares

- price per mile comparisons
- the lack of transparency over fare pricing
- cheaper modes of transport between Swindon and London and FGW's apparent unwillingness to recognise or address the issue of competitiveness and competitive rates for rail fares
- the term of the franchise period and the "front loading" of the contract to ensure capital investment is made in the initial period of the contract
- the promotion of improved northern links from Swindon
- the importance of ensuring that the Headquarters of any new franchisee remain in Swindon
- the future position in relation to the High Speed Train replacement programme and the anticipated benefits of the HST2 project in terms of rolling stock design
- the limited availability of discounted advance fares and the importance of protecting the walk on fare and minimising any future fare basket price increases
- the regulation and protection of off-peak ticket prices
- the introduction of the Network Card to provide discounted off peak rail travel across the Great Western region
- the anticipated service enhancements following the dualling of the line between Swindon and Kemble
- current train seating arrangements and the need to ensure a balance between standard and first class that best meets users' needs
- the adequacy of catering facilities on trains
- the need to consult rail service users on the specification for a future Great Western franchise
- the comparative usage of Didcot Parkway and the apparent advantages afforded to its users over Swindon users
- the importance of ensuring a better rail link between Swindon and Heathrow and Bristol Airports
- the potentially detrimental economic effect on Swindon of the proposal to locate a new London International Airport in the more distant Thames Estuary location

Resolved - (1) That the report to the Cabinet meeting on 15 February incorporate a summary of the various comments made by Scrutiny Committee members during its consideration of the issue of the franchise replacement and that these be considered by the Cabinet in agreeing the Council's formal response to the consultation document.

(2) That a delegation of members of the Scrutiny Committee meet with representatives of the major employers in Swindon, Forward Swindon and the Local members of Parliament to discuss the rail franchise replacement and the response to the rail consultation process.

(3) That a public meeting be organised on the topic of the rail franchise replacement and to facilitate the public's input to the consultation process. That South West Travel Watch be invited to attend, and contribute to, this public meeting.

(4) That, to further facilitate the public's input to the consultation process, an online questionnaire be set up and a further questionnaire made available at the Swindon Railway Station.

Finance

Councillor Mark Edwards, Cabinet Member for Finance, was in attendance. Following a position statement, in which he summarised performance in respect of the various service areas within his portfolio of responsibility, including his assessment of what he felt had been done well, what might have been done differently and the challenges facing his portfolio over the next year, Councillor Edwards responded to members' specific questions and observations on the following topics:

- the intention and use of the Swindon Special Rate provision
- the focus of "Stronger Together" on localities and locality needs and the need for a clear and cohesive strategy with regard to Section 106 (S106) agreements and the most effective use of S106 monies
- members' understanding of the S106 process and the feasibility of Ward Members and the Locality Chairs becoming involved in related negotiations with developers
- the allocation of S106 monies between local usage and central reserves
- the situation around the reduction and/or removal of S106 funding as part of planning and development negotiations between the Council and prospective developers
- the lack of a consistent approach in relation to S106 agreements and the use of S106 monies
- central bonus payments in relation to new house building and the use of such one-off central funds to finance specific projects across the borough
- the hard work of the Cabinet Member and the Finance Officers in "landing" a balanced budget
- staff awareness in relation to the potential of fraud against the systems that they manage and the level of such incidences
- the balance to be struck between facilitating development and requiring S106 commitments
 - "clawback" arrangements
- public consultation on the budget
 - the assessment of "broad themes" around service delivery
 - the development of an effective dialogue around the ability of the Council to achieve further efficiency savings without there being a consequent effect on frontline services and standards of service delivery
- the Council's receipt of cash payments and the potential impact on a great number of individuals of the withdrawal of this service from the Council's One Stop Shop
- the use of commercial radio to develop community dialogues on budget related issues
- concerns about the debate of S106 issues in the political arena and the need to have a policy for dealing with S106 issues monies in place in advance of the local elections

It was agreed that information requested by members during the course of the Committee's consideration of this item be forwarded to members via the Committee Clerk.

Resolved – That Councillor Mark Edwards, Cabinet Member for Finance, be thanked for attending the meeting and for his full and open responses to Members' questions on service areas and issues within the Cabinet Member's portfolio of responsibility.