

Ashford Borough Council

Report of the Chairman of the Transport Forum – 26th November 2010

1 Introduction

1.1 A Meeting of the Transport Forum was held on the 26th November 2010.

The Borough Council Members present were:-

Cllr. Feacey (Chairman);
Cllr. Cowley (Vice-Chairman);
Cllrs. Goddard, Wedgbury, Woodford.

Also Present:-

Cllr. Naughton

Ray Wilkinson – Engineering Services Manager – ABC
Danny Sheppard – Senior Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer – ABC

The External Representatives were:-

N Chard – KCC - Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste
D Dochem – Stagecoach East Kent
M Gibson – Southeastern Railways
Y Leslie – Southern Railways
S Whybrow – Ashford Independent Taxi Driver Association

2 Apologies

2.1 Apologies for absence had been received from:-

S Gasche and C Ellen – KCC Passenger Transport
V Kenny – Ashford Town Centre Partnership
A Phillips – Ashford's Future
S Williams - Eurostar

3 Declarations of Interest

3.1 Councillor Feacey declared a Code of Conduct Interest (Personal but not Prejudicial) as he was the Managing Director of Energyshift Ltd who worked with members of the taxi trade.

4 Kent Highway Services – An Update from Nick Chard – Kent County Council Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste

4.1 Mr Chard introduced himself and gave the Forum an Update on some of the highways and transport issues affecting the Borough of Ashford.

Bus Services

- 4.2 The Ashford Quality Bus Partnership was runner up at the UK Bus Awards in November for partnership working and had seen passenger journeys rise by 35% on Ashford town routes.
- 4.3 Bus access was still an issue for the Ashford Station Square Scheme and the scheme to re-order the front of the Station on the domestic side was still in progress.
- 4.4 A bus stand facility in Tenterden would be considered following parking tickets issued to buses standing on bus stop clearways.
- 4.5 The relocation of bus shelters at Brookfield Road as part of the Victoria Way Scheme was a work in progress by KCC's major projects team.
- 4.6 Bus access at Repton Park was still an issue, with problems arising from the demand of the developer for an indemnity payment before buses could use the estate roads (which were not yet adopted).
- 4.7 A proposed new bus service was due to commence in April 2011 with the diversion of the existing KCC Route 13 operated by Kent Coach Tours.
- 4.8 Provision of a new bus service for the Bridgefield estate remained an aspiration but there did not appear to be any developer Section 106 finance to support it.
- 4.9 With regard to Smartlink, Government had told KCC that they would not consider a scheme before 2014/15. A paper had been presented to Ashford's Future suggesting a need to reduce short term aspirations to developing/improving/extending existing bus services that could be incorporated into a more formal Smartlink system later.

Major Schemes Update

- 4.10 Drovers Roundabout and M20 Junction 9 works – Lane closures needed to stay in place slightly longer than originally intended in the afternoon, although closures were lifted during peak am and pm periods. This was to allow for the longest possible daytime construction window and not run the risk of increasing costs and extending the overall construction period. They had not received any significant complaints from the general travelling public.
- 4.11 Two reports would be taken to the Joint Transportation Board on the 7th December 2010 covering both Drovers and Victoria Way. The Victoria Way paper would report better progress after problems with utilities over the summer. It would also explain some reductions in the public realm work at the new John Wallis Square in order to keep to the agreed capital and maintenance budget.

Winter Preparations

- 4.12 A video giving the public an overview of Kent Highway Services' (KHS) winter preparations and an interactive salting route map were now available on the KCC website. Salting routes had been added and reviewed to marry up with bus routes in Ashford. If bus companies had any specific concerns about the

condition of the highway they were encouraged to contact KHS. KHS did have adequate salt supplies to deal with a winter emergency and plans had been agreed with Ashford Borough Council to make use of their contractors to undertake snow clearance and hand salting of pedestrian areas in Ashford and Tenterden in the event of a snow emergency. 20 Parishes in the Ashford area had requested salt bags which would be issued soon and four new salt bins had been issued this year, making a total of 97 bins in the Ashford Borough. These had all been checked and filled and would be re-checked periodically throughout the winter. The Ashford Winter Service Plan would also be discussed at the Joint Transportation Board on the 7th December 2010.

Rail

- 4.13 The second Kent Rail Summit had been held on the 21st October 2010. A Rail Action Plan for Kent was currently being drafted using feedback gathered at the summits. Mr Chard said he had issued a press statement earlier that week highlighting his dismay at recent further price increases for Kent's rail commuters. He intended to make it clear in the Rail Action Plan that commuters should not have to shoulder rises such as these.

Other Issues

- 4.14 A draft Local Transport Plan had been issued on the 4th October 2010 for stakeholder consultation. The consultation period ran to the end of December 2010 and a summary of feedback received would be presented to KCC Members in January 2011.
- 4.15 A new 20 year plan to keep Kent moving entitled 'Growth Without Gridlock' would be launched on the 1st December 2010. The main priorities would include plans for a third Thames Crossing; the bifurcation of traffic from Dover Docks to use both the M20/A20 and M2/A2 corridors; a long term solution to Operation Stack; maximising the benefits of High Speed Rail; developing a Parkway station for Thanet, serving Manston Airport; integrating public transport networks; further improving transport management in towns; linking new infrastructure more closely to local planning; and pressing for greater local control of highways spending.
- 4.16 KHS had just completed the short listing process for the companies bidding for the Highways Term Maintenance Contract. Procurement was progressing well and three companies had been selected to go forward to the next stage. The procurement programme had been rescheduled for award of contact on the 2nd June 2011 and for the contract to commence on the 1st September 2011.
- 4.17 A revised Road Classification Policy, procedure note and criteria had recently been produced by KHS. The changes were very minor and would take into account a class of population not included in the Office of National Statistics figures (certified holiday parks). An underestimate of population figures could place a road into a lower classification and thereby render that road unsuitable for traffic volumes. It was therefore important that an application accounted for all of the population in an area. The new criteria would allow KCC to accurately assess the potential traffic that could use the road in question and thereby classify accordingly.

4.18 The first eight months of the Kent Permit Scheme had seen 77,409 permits processed with 15,387 being subject to the full permit treatment as prescribed by the Scheme. This had resulted in 1,023 working days saved to date – a saving of 4 years and 1 month's occupation on the highway. There were now clearly displayed courtesy boards which informed road users.

4.19 The Chairman then opened up the item for questions and comments and the following responses were given: -

- In the current economic climate, KCC support for rural bus services would inevitably be reviewed. There were two main elements to consider – the overall level of subsidy per journey and the level of usage of evening and Sunday services. Services would not simply be removed in large 'chunks' but they had to be analysed properly and savings did have to be made to the overall budget.
- It would need to be national policy for the fitting of winter tyres to become a compulsory condition of motor insurance. It was perhaps more important for people to take responsibility and change their own approach in snowy conditions and only undertake essential journeys.
- 180 farmers had contracts with KCC to help clear roads and they would be receptive to employing more. They had been invaluable last year and without their help the County would be in a much worse position during snowy periods.
- A Kent version of the London Oyster Card was being considered. Discussions were already underway with bus companies and a 'chipped smartcard' could be a lot more than a travel card, offering endless opportunities including uses for schools, leisure centres and discounts for local residents across the County.
- Both Concessionary and Freedom Bus Passes would continue but there were question marks about their longer term affordability in their current forms.
- Mr Chard was not totally familiar with the VOSA lorry checking initiative at the Orbital Park, but he did have concerns about the percentage of foreign lorries driving on Kent's roads with faults and how this affected safety.
- Overnight lorry parking, was a big issue and a night after night problem for people in the Ashford Borough. Secure lorry parks were a longer term aspiration but at present a private operation could not make enough money from a park because many freight operators were running on a 'shoestring' and could not afford to pay to park. Things were slowly changing in that insurance companies were starting to take a firmer line on secure lorry parking. It was an area KCC were trying to address but there was no quick solution. The public sector did not have the money or expertise on its own to solve the problem and needed to engage the private sector, insurance companies and national Government.
- Industrial estates were one of the biggest areas of concern for overnight lorry parking, particularly on Saturday nights/Sunday

mornings. Authorities were wary about moving the lorries on as they did not want to displace them into residential areas, but it was accepted that it was having an extremely detrimental effect on the trading abilities of businesses and that the litter and toileting issues on industrial estates were also a concern. The vision of a large lorry park would alleviate the problem, but obviously the costs were very high and would have to be funded nationally.

- 4.20 The Chairman thanked Mr Chard for his extremely useful update on transport and highway issues and for answering questions so thoroughly and honestly.

5 Chairman's Report of the Previous Meeting – 14th May 2010

- 5.1 With regard to paragraph 4.3 Mr Gibson explained that a valid High Speed One (HS1) ticket should activate the ticket barriers at St Pancras. He asked Members to let him know if there were any particular problems.

- 5.2 Mr Docherm advised that Stagecoach had hoped to divert the E-Line bus service into Repton Park by now, but problems with the Developers had meant this had not been possible yet.

5.3 Resolved:

That the Chairman's Report of the Transport Forum Meeting of the 14th May 2010 be received and noted.

6 Industry Updates & Discussion

Train Services

- 6.1 Mrs Leslie of Southern updated the Forum on four key areas of Southern's business. Performance had been generally good but had dropped in recent weeks due to challenging autumn conditions. Passenger satisfaction was at 84% which was better than the London and South East average and was Southern's best ever result. December timetable changes would come into effect on the 12th December 2010 for the East Coastway route. Proposals had been drawn up to help with capacity at either end of the route, but the general feeling was that the negatives of the original proposals outweighed the benefits. However some of the smaller elements had been implemented and it would add two stations to the Ashford to Brighton service but not add greatly to the journey time. Fares had been increased by RPI +1% meaning an increase to regulated fares of 5.8% and un-regulated fares of 6%.
- 6.2 In response to a question about over-crowding and the possibility for running extra cars on the Ashford-Brighton service, Mrs Leslie said there were particular 'pinch points' on the service and the rejected proposals had attempted to address this. They only had a small diesel fleet and had wanted to use rolling stock to improve the service. They were looking for a more palatable solution to the one rejected, but nothing would happen in the short term. The Government announcement on electrification did say that there would be a cascading down of diesel units, but that meant there would be no extra diesel units until electrification.

- 6.3 Mrs Leslie explained that a lot of work had gone into winter preparedness between all rail operators and Network Rail and things felt a lot better than last year and they were as prepared as they could be.
- 6.4 Mr Gibson of Southeastern explained that unfortunately their fares would increase by RPI +3%. This was in their franchise agreement and whilst it was obviously not going to be popular in the current economic climate, it had been justified by the last Government in that Kent's railways had recently had a lot of investment with HS1 etc. A number of timetable changes were to be implemented on the 12th December 2010 and were mainly good news stories for Ashford with extended services into Ramsgate and Dover. One downgrade for the Ashford Borough was the removal of two peak stops at Pluckley. Unfortunately they had to look at the service on a network wide basis and a number of gaps had been filled, but unfortunately this was one of the costs. In terms of winter preparedness, lots of work was underway and a contingency timetable would be implemented if bad weather made it necessary. Southeastern's website also now had a London Underground style reporting service which advised of good/disrupted services etc. This had been implemented in response to passenger demand and feedback had been positive. Performance was similar to Southern in that they had experienced a good summer, but there had been some disappointing disruption during the autumn. It was hoped this would be improved by the new timetable. One major complaint was traditionally a lack of information during times of disruption, so front-line staff had been issued with Blackberries in order to pass on information from the control room to customers.
- 6.5 In response to a question, Mr Gibson said that first year figures for HS1 would be available shortly, but indications were that the Dover-Ashford-St Pancras route was very well patronised and popular. The North Kent-Medway service was less popular but there was less journey time saving there.
- 6.6 As part of their franchise agreement Southeastern had to open their Station Ticket Offices at prescribed times and stick to them. If there were examples of Headcorn, or any other offices, being closed during the afternoon when they should be open, he urged Members to pass on details.
- 6.7 A Member said that the largest fare increases seemed to be on the most expensive fares which seemed quite a cynical move and he saw a time quite soon when people would simply not be able to afford them anymore. Mr Gibson said this was a valid point. Train companies had two sources of income – Government subsidies and fares. The last Government had a policy of moving the balance of paying for rail services from the general tax payer to the passenger, by way of fare rises rather than subsidy rises. Fares were therefore by and large a Political issue and whilst he did recognise the increase would cause hardship to many passengers who had no alternative but to use the train, it would be up to Southeastern to demonstrate value for money.
- 6.8 The Vice-Chairman said he was concerned about a 'double whammy' for the travelling public with increased fares and increased car parking charges. He thought these would force 'border line' passengers back into their cars and back onto already congested roads. Mr Gibson explained that car parking charges were going up by 50p a day at some stations. They had to cover increasing rental and maintenance costs and in station car parks spaces tended to be sold only once a day unlike town centre car parks. Parking

charges at village station car parks were also raised as a problem as they were simply displacing cars out on to the streets where they could park for free but caused disruption on village roads. Mr Gibson said that this had to be looked at on a case by case basis, but it was human nature that people would choose free car parking if they could. Short-term restrictions around stations for example, 11am-12noon, were one option to deter all day parking.

Bus Services

- 6.9 The Chairman congratulated Stagecoach, Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council on the successful Quality Bus Partnership.
- 6.10 Mr Docherm of Stagecoach East Kent introduced himself as the New Operations Manager for Ashford. He explained that he had only been in Ashford for ten days and was still learning the area. He reported that additional journeys and timetable changes to the C-Line in September had improved reliability and increased passenger usage. Punctuality problems with the E-Line had been resolved and KCC wished to promote this service further to encourage bus travel to the Eureka Parks. The 'Kick Start' routes launched in 2009 (A, B and C Lines) continued to grow passenger numbers and further improvements would be made in the future. The D-Line shuttle funded by the Designer Outlet Village had a fare increase in September but passenger use had remained good. Trident buses had been transferred in to replace step entrance 'Olympians' on routes 400, 510 and 652 and work alongside more modern single-deckers on these routes. Route 10 from Folkestone had had new low floor double-deckers provided for it in the autumn and the number of non-accessible buses had much decreased and were used chiefly on school peak only routes. They were looking to make further improvements to the 510 and 652 services in April 2011. Stagecoach would still like to divert buses around Singleton Hill Estate but, much like at Repton Park, were prohibited by the Developer. In conclusion he said Stagecoach were looking to extend buses into new developments as opportunities arose now that Ashford was growing, however they needed the support of the Local Authorities to ensure Developers were obliged to encourage buses or new residents would just get used to having to use a car. Discussions were underway with KCC and they hoped for some more improvements soon.
- 6.11 A Member mentioned the problem of the bus at Furley Park School, Park Farm which did block the road at school leaving times and stopped parents in cars exiting. If it arrived three or four minutes later this might alleviate the problem. Mr Docherm explained that a three or four minute delay would have knock on effects to the timetable and if it was not successful, what would the options be then? He endeavoured to go to Park Farm and have a look at the problem.
- 6.12 Concern was also expressed about the condition of some of the vehicles used by companies other than Stagecoach, especially in the rural areas around Tenterden. The Chairman said they would try to find out who the company in question was and write to them asking for their comments.

Taxis

- 6.13 Mrs Whybrow said that parking and waiting issues in the Bank Street area seemed to be getting worse for taxis. Common sense was not being

employed towards the needs of the taxi trade to earn a living. They were not allowed to pull up next to cash points for example to allow customers to obtain funds to pay and they faced the hostility of customers by asking for proof of payment before they set off. There also seemed to be no leeway to pull up and wait if a customer was not immediately already standing at the kerb side when they pulled up. They were also legally required to provide reasonable assistance to their customers, but they were not being allowed the requisite leeway. Disabled people wanted to be able to access the Town Centre like in any other place in the country, not to be dropped at the bottom of Bank Street and be asked to negotiate the hill up to the Town Centre. Common sense had to be employed and time had to be allowed for dropping off and picking up – it could not always happen in a matter of seconds. How was this progress?

- 6.14 Mr Wilkinson explained that the Regulations and what could or could not be done in the Bank Street area had not changed. It was quite clear that people stopping on double yellow lines were allowed a reasonable amount of time to board, alight or remove luggage from the boot etc. However it did not allow for any form of waiting, such as at a cash machine. The Bank Street area was being monitored and taxi drivers had been seen taking advantage of this concession for 15 minutes or more. Passengers could be picked up from the large taxi rank at the bottom of Bank Street or the spaces outside the Phoenix pub. With buses, disabled drivers and loading bays for traders as well, there was not unlimited space in this area so it did have to be carefully policed and the message had to be made clear that it was not acceptable for taxis to wait anywhere other than the designated taxi rank.

Others

- 6.15 A Member asked Mr Wilkinson if there was any update on the status of the Beaver Road Bus Gate as there had been a nasty accident there recently. Mr Wilkinson said he would personally like to see the back of this, but it was a KHS issue and it was a shame Nick Chard had already left the Meeting as KHS did need to enforce both this and the one at Godinton Road. Money had been provided as part of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link for a control system at Godinton Road and this had not been used. The Forum agreed to write to Nick Chard to find out the status of that money and the plans for the two Bus Gates in general.
- 6.16 Updates were then given from some of the organisations who had been unable to attend the Meeting: -
- 6.17 Stephen Gasche of KCC Passenger Transport had explained that Route 13 via Chartfields Estate had not started yet, but it was hoped to introduce that service change in April 2011 at the same time as other changes to the bus network in Kent. This should provide an hourly service for most of the day via Chartfields on Monday to Friday.
- 6.18 Seth Williams of Eurostar reported that at the last Meeting in May the then recent update to Government following the winter disruption and subsequent recommendations were discussed. This did not become public until August and he wished to emphasise that it was now considerably out of date as they had made substantial progress over the course of the year. A web link was provided to the documents that were sent to the Secretary of State in May updating on progress at that time –
<http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/rail/pi/eurostarprogressreport/>

6.19 Viv Kenny of the Ashford Town Centre Partnership reported that unfortunately they had not yet been able to come to a satisfactory conclusion on the loading issue for two businesses in Bank Street and there seemed to be a significant number of businesses still confused on loading restrictions. With this in mind, with Ashford Borough Council, there would be an information evening on shared space regulations at the Civic Centre on the 7th December at 6pm. Businesses would be invited.

7 Date of Next Meeting

7.1 The next meeting would be held on Friday the 24th June 2011 (later because of the Borough Council Elections).

Councillor P Feacey
Chairman – Transport Forum

MINS: Transport Forum 26-11-10

Queries concerning these notes? Please contact Danny Sheppard:
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