

Ashford Borough Council

Report of the Chairman of the Transport Forum – 24th June 2011

1 Introduction

1.1 A Meeting of the Transport Forum was held on the 24th June 2011.

The Borough Council Members present were:-

Cllr. Feacey (Chairman);

Cllrs. Mrs Blanford, Claughton, Davey, Heyes, Robey.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 1.2 (iii) Councillor Robey attended as Substitute Member for Councillor Wedgbury.

Also Present:-

Ray Wilkinson – Engineering Services Manager – ABC

Danny Sheppard – Senior Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer – ABC

The External Representatives were:-

D Brazier – KCC – Deputy Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste

C Evans – KCC Passenger Transport

S Whybrow – Ashford Independent Taxi Driver Association

2 Apologies

2.1 Apologies for absence had been received from:-

Councillors Wedgbury, Yeo.

D Docherty – Stagecoach East Kent

S Gasche – KCC Passenger Transport

M Gibson - Southeastern

V Kenny – Ashford Town Centre Partnership

Y Leslie – Southern

3 Declarations of Interest

3.1 Councillor Claughton declared a Code of Conduct Interest (Personal but not Prejudicial) as Chairman of the Ashford Access Group. He advised the Board that going forward he would also be the Group's representative on this Board.

3.2 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.

3.3 Councillor Heyes declared a Code of Conduct Interest (Personal but Prejudicial) as he lived in close proximity to the Godinton Road Bus Gate.

4 Chairman's Report of the Transport Forum Meeting – 26th November 2010

- 4.1 The Chairman's Report of the Meeting held on the 26th November was confirmed as a correct record.

5 Kent Highway Services – An Update from David Brazier – Kent County Council Deputy Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste

- 5.1 Mr Brazier introduced himself and gave the Forum an Update on some of the highways and transportation issues affecting the Borough of Ashford and responded to some of the points raised at the last meeting.

Bus Gates

- 5.2 Beaver Road Bus Gate had been upgraded about two years ago. The Gate had been hit three times in that period and had been repaired immediately each time. The Gate had been more reliable recently but he understood why the history of incidents may have affected public opinion and confidence. There was a looming problem because the technology operating the bollard systems was becoming obsolete and an alternative solution would be needed in the near future.
- 5.3 With regard to CTRL funding for a control system at the Godinton Road Bus Gate, Officers at KCC had spent quite a bit of time researching this but could find no archived records of this money being provided. If Ashford Officers or Members knew any more about this, then they were encouraged to pass that information on so that this could be investigated further. Mr Brazier said he would respond to the Chairman with any further updates.

Rail

- 5.4 KCC would be paying for the High Speed 1 service to extend to Sandwich and Deal during the Open Golf Championship in July and Southeastern were examining opportunities to permanently extend the service there later in the year. It was hoped that this would help to support both the residents of the area and business and job prospects there in the wake of Pfizer's upcoming departure. A new High Speed Rail Service would also serve the heart of Maidstone.

Other Issues

- 5.5 Kent Highway Services (KHS) had signed their new Maintenance Contract earlier that week with Enterprise. The contract was worth £45m a year over five years and could be extended up to ten years if both parties were happy. The make-up of the contract was considered preferable to previous ones for a variety of reasons. Firstly it was based on a tariff for each job rather than time taken, so if the contractor took two days to complete a job that should take half a day, that was down to them and they would not be paid extra. Additionally KHS had the ability to withhold a certain percentage of the Contractor's profit which would only be payable if KHS were happy with the job and the overall contract could be cancelled at any time if KCC wished. These arrangements would put the County Council in a much stronger

position than with previous contracts where they were perhaps at times held to ransom.

5.6 The inaugural Flybe Service from Manston to Belfast had recently taken to the skies to add to the existing successful Service to Edinburgh. It was hoped that these would prove useful for local people and demonstrated Flybe's commitment to Manston Airport. Mr Brazier explained it was also in line with KCC's desire to promote Manston as a local airport, rather than the development of new airports.

5.7 The Chairman then opened up the item for questions and comments and the following points were made: -

- A contribution for a traffic control system at Godinton Road had been paid by Rail Link Engineering at the time of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link being constructed. Mr Wilkinson said he would review Ashford Borough Council's files again and report any findings back to KHS. He explained that a camera system, which was now legally enforceable, would be preferable to a bollard one (passive rather than pro-active enforcement) and would also overcome the concerns of the emergency services. It could also be enforced simply, in the same way as a parking ticket. One of the local Ward Members said that Godinton Road Bus Gate was abused frequently and caused great frustration amongst local people. He asked if consideration could also be given to exempting people who lived in the immediate vicinity in the same way that buses and taxis were.
- Beaver Road Bus Gate bollard system had always been controversial. The main problems were a lack of signage in the area along with people who were always prepared to 'take a risk'. However when a car was hit by the bollard the results were dangerous and very expensive.
- HGV related issues in rural areas: - HGV's were increasingly parking over night in rural lanes causing inconvenience by way of obstructions and hygiene issues. HGV's were also using unsuitable rural lanes and getting stuck. Mr Brazier explained that the overnight lorry parking problem was well recognised. Unlike in other countries a resting lorry driver had no real alternative than to park in a lay-by or an industrial estate. Theft from such vehicles was also a growing problem. It had always been presumed that the provision of lorry parking solutions would be a good business opportunity for the private sector, but that was unfortunately not the case. It was difficult to compel Hauliers and Drivers to use such Parks as they tended to want to save their money rather than paying to use a secure lorry park. Therefore, they were not financially viable concerns for private investors. There were also no immediate solutions to the wider problem of Operation Stack on the horizon. The Government were showing little interest and KCC were unable to fund even a simple lorry park by themselves. It was a national problem that needed a national solution on a commercial or semi-commercial basis and it did seem to work in this way on the continent. There was a wider problem though in that even without the parking question foreign lorries contributed very little to the UK economy. The size of some of the lorries' fuel tanks meant that they were able to come into to the UK, make their deliveries and then return home without spending a single penny on fuel in the UK and this was

extremely frustrating. With regard to HGV's using unsuitable rural roads, it was considered that this was often due to following sat-nav systems or a driver thinking they may be able to get to their destination more quickly. Signage was often ignored and it would be a problem of persuasion. It was suggested that if a particular lorry firm kept getting stuck it would be worth contacting their Head Office as they did take notice and word did get around.

- There was an area of recovered land at Dover's Eastern Docks which had been earmarked as a 'buffer zone' lorry park, but it was expected that this would only hold around 200 lorries. So whilst useful, this would be pretty insignificant in terms of a solution to Operation Stack.
- Excessive speed on rural roads was a major issue and again a problem of persuasion as there was no simple engineering solution. Similar conversations were probably happening in rural areas across the Country. People often asked for 20mph speed limits as a solution, but speed limits were only as effective as they could be enforced and simply reducing speed limits and putting up signs was not the answer. Each case had to be taken on its merits and if there was a sound case for lowering a speed limit and this was backed up by local public opinion, KHS would certainly give it serious consideration. The Government had asked Local Authorities to review speed limits on all roads and this was underway and likely to be completed by 2013.
- With regard to the ongoing improvements at Drovers Roundabout, whilst some disruption had to be accepted, the traffic management arrangements had not been as good as they could have. The non-removal of cones at peak times and the management of the traffic lights were two examples. It was also imperative that there was a review of lane markings at the roundabout as soon as possible, as the current situation was extremely confusing. It was important to get the roundabout working as smoothly as possible as there were already comments, similar to those made at Junction 10, that 'it would work better without the lights'. For reasons of safety and the volume of traffic that was not considered to be the case, but public support and trust would be important going forward. Mr Brazier explained that the computer system should now be working to allow 'smart' phasing of the traffic lights and the whole area should work a lot better once the cones had been removed, but he would take Members comments back on both the lights and lane markings. It was suggested that there could be an article produced for the local press explaining the new layout of the Drovers Roundabout and the best way to negotiate it.
- It was true to say that the available budget for dealing with highway trees, verges and vegetation simply was not sufficient to carry out all of the work that people would like to see done. Mr Brazier said he knew people had high standards for their areas and it was frustrating when they could not be met. Quite often elaborate planting schemes looked lovely initially, but became almost impossible to maintain. Privet and ragwort were examples of materials which had caused problems across the County's road network in the past but were extremely expensive to maintain. In terms of private landowners, anyone who had trees overhanging the highway had to be given six weeks to cut these back so it was not uncommon for a solution to take 2-3 months from

first being reported. It was also not always a straight forward issue to decipher who owned certain land.

- There was a need to improve the appearance of major roundabouts as these were gateways to the town. Sponsorship was an option to keep them maintained but unfortunately this often only lasted as long as the enthusiasm of individuals. Community Payback was used to weed verges, central reservations, roundabouts etc in appropriate circumstances and it might be possible to encourage local gardening clubs to maintain such areas and give them an opportunity to promote themselves. This would have to be something that was initiated locally though.
- Freedom Passes for buses would continue although there would be a price increase. The price for a school age child would rise from £50 to £100 a year. That was still considered extraordinary value for unlimited bus travel as the value to the holder was estimated at £450-£500. The starting time for the concessionary bus passes had been put back from 9.00am to 9.30am in order to save £600,000. He understood this would cause frustration to some, but in a way both of these schemes had been a victim of their own success.
- The Board were complimentary about the way KHS had dealt with the snow this winter and considered it was a vast improvement on previous years. The one issue that did need some clarification was contracts with local farmers so that they were able to clear snow in their own areas on KHS' behalf. Mr Brazier thanked the Board for their comments but accepted the point about rural lanes. Prioritisation of major roads and routes meant that there would inevitably be some smaller roads that did not get cleared and it was a fact that if you lived in a remote village you may have to make your own arrangements initially. However, if there was heavy snow all resources were mobilised and as much was done as possible. Demand for salt bins was high and this also had to be tackled on a priority basis subject to relevant criteria.
- The future of the Station Forecourt area was slightly uncertain. The Station Forecourt Improvements was one of a number of GAF3 funded projects and it was unclear how much of that money would be left over after the Drovers Roundabout and Victoria Way projects were completed. There were also land ownership issues that had to be resolved. It was anticipated that the improvements on the International Side (including the footway/cycleway) would definitely take place, but the domestic side was less certain at the moment. Board Members conceded that it was currently difficult to drop off/pick up easily on the domestic side of the Station and the phasing of the traffic lights exiting the Station did cause frustration as the road was gridlocked at peak times. Mrs Whybrow said that the taxi drivers had concerns about future rank space at the Station as they already considered they were being forced out of the town. They were not getting much passing trade where they had been put in Bank Street and signage around the town was still inadequate despite previous assurances. She said she would look back at the history of this and report to the Chairman on the issue of signage. A Member said that the original Station Forecourt Scheme would have disadvantaged taxis. The ABC Cabinet had listened to the

concerns of the taxi trade and disabled groups, agreed that the scheme did not have to be quite so complex and looked at an alternative proposal. Particularly given the cessation of Ashford's Future, there was a need for proper clarification over the future plans for the Station.

6 Industry Updates & Discussion

Taxis

- 6.1 Mrs Whybrow reported that this was a very tough trading period for taxis. There were drivers who were unable to afford to repair their cars and she was personally surprised that more companies had not folded. They could not put prices up too much at the risk of deterring customers so the increased fuel costs were in effect coming out of driver's pockets.

Bus Services

- 6.2 Mr Docherty of Stagecoach East Kent had given his apologies for the Meeting but had said that if there were any particular questions for him he would be happy to give a written response.
- 6.3 Mr Evans of KCC Passenger Transport reported that the difficulties surrounding a new bus service for Repton Park had been overcome and this would commence shortly. The agreement for the new Route 13 had been signed with Kent Coach Tours in April and would now serve Washford Farm and some other residential areas that had not previously had a bus service. In response to a question Mr Evans explained that the Repton Park service could not be extended into Orchard Heights and Lodge Wood under the current 'clock face' timetable. The Board agreed to ask Mr Docherty if the existing Stagecoach 510 Service could include Orchard Heights and Lodge Wood.
- 6.4 Mr Evans also reported that Kent Top Travel had handed back the contract for the Trans Weald 295 Saturday Service citing rising fuel costs and the additional pressures from concessionary fares. The new contract had been awarded to Renown Coaches of Bexhill who were already reporting an increased patronage.
- 6.5 With regard to the issue raised at the previous meeting about the poor condition of some of the vehicles being used, Mr Evans explained that the Traffic Commissioner licensed Bus Operators and vehicles had to pass their strict inspection criteria. In response to a question about whether KCC could be more prescriptive and stipulate a minimum standard of vehicle in their specification of tender, Mr Evans explained that there was a policy not to "go backwards" in terms of the quality of vehicles, but there was a danger in the inclusion of a quality element in the contracts. There were legal issues to consider and if vehicles had been deemed by the Traffic Commissioner to be acceptable, there would be little room for argument. Perhaps a cut off point of vehicles produced before the year 2001 could be considered, (low floor Disabled Accessibility requirements came in on the 1st January 2001), but it was a question of reasonableness and getting the balance right.

Trains

- 6.6 Both Mr Gibson of Southeastern and Mrs Leslie of Southern had given their apologies for the Meeting but had said that if there were any particular questions for them they would be happy to give a written response.
- 6.7 A Member asked about the abuse of personal stereos on trains and wondered if this could be remedied by having “quiet coaches” or simple notices or automated announcements asking people to consider other passengers. Mr Evans mentioned that the Fastrack Bus Service in Dartford had used similar signage and it had been effective. It was agreed to write to the two major train operators with this suggestion.
- 6.8 A Member also mentioned that he had recently been at Ramsgate Station during the daytime and there were no toilet facilities open and available. He had been told that customers needed to ask for someone with a key to open the toilets especially. He thought this was unacceptable for a major station on the Kent network and hoped this was simply an isolated case.

7 Date of Next Meeting

- 7.1 The next Meeting would be held on Friday the 18th November 2011.

Councillor P Feacey
Chairman – Transport Forum

MINS: Transport Forum 24-06-11

Queries concerning these notes? Please contact Danny Sheppard:
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