

Ashford Borough Council

Report of the Chairman of the Transport Forum – 18th November 2011

1 Introduction

1.1 A Meeting of the Transport Forum was held on the 18th November 2011.

The Borough Council Members present were:-

Cllr. Feacey (Chairman);
Cllr. Yeo (Vice-Chairman);
Cllrs. Mrs Blanford, Claughton, Heyes, Mortimer, Wedgbury.

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

Also Present:-

Cllr. Burgess

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

The External Representatives were:-

C Evans – KCC Passenger Transport
S Gasche – KCC Public Transport
M Gibson –Southeastern
T Howe – KCC Highways & Transportation
N Instrall – Stagecoach in East Kent
T Ruck – Hackney Carriage Drivers
R Tandy – Stagecoach in East Kent
S Whybrow – Ashford Independent Taxi Driver Association
P Wyborn - Southern

2 Apologies

2.1 Apologies for absence had been received from:-

Cllr. Davey

V Kenny – Ashford Town Centre Partnership
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.

- 3.2 Councillor Yeo declared a Code of Conduct Interest (Personal but not Prejudicial) as the President of the Transport Salaried Staff Association (TSSA).

4 Chairman's Report of the Transport Forum Meeting – 24th June 2011

- 4.1 The Chairman's Report of the Meeting held on the 24th June 2011 was confirmed as a correct record.
- 4.2 The Chairman raised the discussion at the last meeting about CTRL funding for a control system at Godinton Road Bus Gate. There had been no further update on this from the Deputy Cabinet Member and all files appeared to have been passed to the County Council at the time of the Highways transfer. Mr Howe endeavoured to see if he could track down any further information on this.
- 4.3 A Member referred to a point he had raised at the last Meeting about the abuse of personal stereos on trains. Mr Gibson said this was a difficult issue and generally if a passenger had a valid ticket they were permitted to travel on their trains. There were obviously Railway Enforcement Officers who had the power to issue fixed penalty notices if people were causing trouble, but it was difficult to enforce against personal stereos. Perhaps this was a generational thing as it was certainly something that irritated him personally.
- 4.4 With regard to Drivers Roundabout, a Member said that some of the lane markings were still incorrect despite repeated pleas to correct them. They were simply dangerous and therefore this could no longer be ignored. Mr Howe said that at the Joint Transportation Board Andrew Burton had commented on this and said that both the Police and Road Safety Team had looked at this and were comfortable with the safety situation. He said he would take the points back and stress the importance that local Members were placing on this matter.

5 Industry Updates & Discussion

Bus Services

- 5.1 Mr Instrall of Stagecoach in East Kent reported good news for Ashford in that there would be various enhancements to Ashford Town Services and routes to neighbouring towns coming on board in 2012. The new bus routes at Repton Park and Singleton Hill appeared to have settled down after an uncertain start with some residents. In response to a question about the lack of late buses from the Station to Park Farm, Mr Instrall explained that whilst the last bus of the regular Service left at 19.30, there was a 23.00 295 Service that served Park Farm.
- 5.2 Mr Evans of KCC Passenger Transport said that there were a number of potential changes coming up for Ashford Services in the near future. The 517 Service from Godinton Park to Little Burton had been extended for another year and it was hoped that this could be tied in with the E-Line Service next year. All other existing Services would be tendered on a like for like basis except the 13 Service from Ashford to Washford Farm operated by Kent

Coach Tours, which would no longer be a 'circular' service, but a 'to and from' service as before.

- 5.3 Mr Gasche of KCC Public Transport reported that there would be some changes to the Supported Bus Network in line with KCC's significant savings targets. The reductions for the Ashford Borough were relatively small but potentially significant and would involve: - the withdrawal of the 295 (Ashford to Tenterden) evening service on Mondays to Saturdays; the withdrawal of the 293 (Tenterden via Wittersham, Stone and Appledore) on Wednesdays and Thursdays; and the withdrawal of the 298 (Tenterden to Tunbridge Wells) on Sundays. One of the early Saturday morning journeys on the 400 (Ashford to Tenterden) had also been withdrawn. Following extensive consultation the 293 had been retained on Mondays and Fridays and the 12RL (Tenterden to Headcorn) had been retained as at present.
- 5.4 In response to a question about the 293 Service, Mr Evans reported that this had been reduced because of very low passenger numbers and the retention of the Monday and Friday Services should be seen as a positive outcome for those villages. Passenger numbers were monitored on a quarterly basis and there had been a significant year on year reduction. They did keep up to date with planning permissions and new developments through Quality Bus Partnership Meetings and similar, so the situation was kept under review.

Highways

- 5.5 Mr Howe reported that Kent Highway Services had been re-branded KCC Highways & Transportation (KCC H&T) and that there was a new team in place for Ashford headed up by Lisa Holder. One of the main aims of the new team was to forge better links with Borough and Parish Councils and their Members. KCC H&T had signed their new Maintenance Contract with Enterprise and all parties were very positive about the future. He would report on KCC H&T's winter preparations under that Agenda item.

Trains

- 5.6 Mr Wyborn of Southern said the most significant piece of news he had to report was the essential repair work to the Ore tunnel in January. This would result in the complete closure of the Ashford to Hastings line for a period of 9 weeks from the 9th January 2012. The work was essential to improve the drainage and repair the lining inside the tunnel to prevent water seepage. At the same time other work including upgrading points and signals to improve reliability and the maintenance of bridges and tracks that could lead to higher line speeds, would also be taking place. For the period of work, Southern would be providing rail replacement bus and taxi services between Hastings and Ashford International. It was accepted that this would be an extremely disruptive period and the issue had obviously been the subject of much discussion. All alternatives to closure and other possible arrangements had been discussed but they were simply not viable and the work was essential. Members said they were extremely uncomfortable about the closure and one Member asked if it contravened their franchise agreement. Could a shuttle not at least be run from Ashford to Rye to minimise disruption? Mr Wyborn explained it did not contravene the franchise agreement as these were essential works and they had to come up with the best solution for the circumstances. Ashford to Rye had been considered but the cost of this would be at least five times higher than the replacement bus service. Members

agreed to write a letter to Southern expressing their disappointment that they were not proposing to offer at least an Ashford to Rye Service and asking that if the journey was to take two and a half times longer because of the bus replacement service, then passengers should be compensated. They did not want passengers to be pushed back in to their cars as a result of these works and then not return to the train. Mr Wyborn thought there would be some sort of incentive scheme for this period.

- 5.7 Southern had also launched 'The Key' – a pilot scheme for an Oyster type smartcard on its services. It was currently being trialled on the Brighton to Seaford line and it was hoped to extend that to Bexhill and beyond in the New Year. It was Southern's aim to be the first train operator to have its own fully fledged smartcard ticketing system, and to hopefully eventually integrate that with buses and for use in London and on the Underground.
- 5.8 A Member mentioned the toilet facilities on the Ashford to Brighton line and one journey he had experienced where both the standard and disabled toilets had been out of order. Passengers had been told to speak to the Guard if they wanted to use the toilet and it transpired that the water tanks had simply not been filled. Mr Wyborn said he could only apologise for this and if the Member could give him specifics he would look into it. He recognised that toilets had been a problem area for Southern in the past, but there had been a 25% improvement in recent customer surveys and was something they were looking to continuously improve on.
- 5.9 Mr Gasche advised that KCC had produced a Rail Action Plan for Kent which included two elements for Ashford. These were: - a bid to enhance the Ashford to Thanet line and reduce travel times; and the need to upgrade the Ashford to Hastings line and remove some of the more impractical speed restrictions. The need to improve journey times between Ashford and Hastings was well recognised and that went hand in hand with the works taking place whilst Ore Tunnel was closed. Electrification of the Ashford to Hastings line was a longer term goal although some way off. In the shorter term, further electrification at Oxted was expected to release more of the diesel cars so that units from Ashford to Hastings could be extended. There had also been initial discussions as part of the Rail Action Plan about a direct Kent to Gatwick Service (potentially via Ashford, Tonbridge and Redhill) when the contract came up for renewal in 2015. The Forum agreed to support this plan and write a letter to Mr Gasche accordingly.
- 5.10 Mr Gibson of Southeastern said that performance was currently running at 91-92% on mainline services and 97-98% on the High Speed which were both comfortably above target. An amended timetable was to come into affect from 11th December 2011 and the chief impact for Ashford would be the cutting of some of the waiting times for both High Speed and Mainline Services at Ashford International, thus reducing overall journey times. The Olympic Timetable was to be published later that day and Southeastern had worked with the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) to refine their plans and ensure the majority of services were able to be operated for regular commuters. Where possible trains would also be lengthened as it was expected services would be busy throughout the Olympic Games with an additional nine million visitors coming to London for the Games. Following extensive consultation and in response to representations from KCC, services from Ashford were more or less unaffected and would remain to timetable, and Southeastern would be offering late night High Speed Services between Stratford and Ashford, after

these had not appeared in the original proposals. Details of compensation for those most directly affected by the changes to the timetable had also been agreed and High Speed season ticket holders, of one month or longer, would be contacted directly by Southeastern next year and provided with compensation. A Member said he was extremely pleased that a late night High Speed Service would be retained between Ashford and St Pancras during the Olympics. He could not understand why there had been any proposals to take this away bearing in mind the large number of extra people that would be trying to get to and from London. If anything, there should perhaps be extra trains or options for semi-fast services via Tonbridge during the duration of the Games. He was still concerned at the lack of off-peak semi-fast mainline trains as these seemed to have been abandoned since High Speed 1 came on board. Mr Gibson said he took the point about the lack of a semi-fast service with trains stopping at smaller Stations such as Pluckley and Marden, but it was a difficult balance to reconcile the demands of the smaller Stations. There had been a lot of cuts to smaller Stations across the Country and Kent had largely avoided these because of vocal campaigns by local people.

Taxis

- 5.11 Mrs Whybrow reported that there had been a recent spate of muggings against drivers which had seen calls for CCTV systems in cars. If anybody was able to help or advise on this that would be greatly appreciated. With regard to fare increases she hoped that extra consideration would be given to the smaller firms or independents as they were not in the same situation as the bigger companies. They did not change their meters every year and some had not been re-calibrated for three years because of the costs involved. The larger companies were able to do this because they could make savings elsewhere through economies of scale etc so they would not be on a level playing field when it came to fares.
- 5.12 Mrs Ruck mentioned the new operating system for the Beaver Road Bus Gate. Taxi drivers had been given their tags to operate this which was appreciated and after an initially slow start it did now appear to be operating correctly. Mr Wilkinson asked if this system would also be fitted to the Godinton Road Bus Gate and Mr Howe endeavoured to find out. The whole issue of enforcement cameras at Bus Gates was again raised and there was consensus that these were needed. This was a longstanding issue and it was frustrating that no answer could seem to be found.
- 5.13 Mr Evans mentioned that Bus Operators often criticised the taxi drivers for queuing out of the ranks at the Station and blocking the road. Both Mrs Ruck and Mrs Whybrow said the same thing could be said about buses at the Station not using the bus stops correctly and driving too quickly. In reality there was simply not enough room there and the phasing of the traffic lights at the top of the hill when exiting the Station did not allow enough traffic to exit at peak times.

Other Issues

- 5.14 The Chairman directed Forum Members' attention to a letter that had been tabled from Viv Kenny, Town Centre Manager, regarding Town Centre signage. The letter asked for input from Forum Members to identify the best

locations for appropriate signage following the re-modelling of the Town Centre and surrounding areas.

6 Winter Preparations

Highways

- 6.1 Mr Howe reported that an extensive Winter Service Plan had been produced by KCC Highways & Transportation and the Plan covering Ashford had been included within the Agenda papers. Significant changes this year included the provision of more salt bins, allowing Parish Councils to order and maintain their own salt bins, closer dialogue and working with the Highways Agency, Eurotunnel, the Ports, Railway Stations and Farmers, and the new Highway Operations Centre in Aylesford which would oversee winter preparations across the County. The new maintenance contract with Enterprise came with a new fleet of Gritting Lorries this year which was also a welcome development.
- 6.2 A Member said that whilst he knew not every road could be cleared he had concerns about the footways at Godinton Road as this was a major pedestrian route and the footpaths were never cleared at times of snow and ice. He also asked about the legal position of residents clearing snow in front of their own houses as there appeared to have been confusion about this in the past. Mr Howe said that main routes, including links to Doctors and those used by the elderly, were normally prioritised but he would take the point about Godinton Road back. With regards to clearance there had been a lot of discussion about this last year in relation to the increasingly litigious society we lived in, but he thought people should be encouraged to help out around their own properties.

Trains

- 6.3 Mr Wyborn said that Southern had approached winter preparations differently with Network Rail this year. In summary, certain lengths of the conductor rail would be heated this year to help stop ice forming and prevent trains drawing power and getting stranded. The number of multi-purpose vehicles for clearing snow and ice had been increased from four to seven as well as a new additional ice treatment train. The 377 units which made up the majority of Southern's train fleet had had improvements to their ice mode capability which would allow them to function whilst drawing less power so they should be able to work better in ice and snow. Covers were being fitted to the motors of the 455 and 456 fleets (used in the London Metro area) to help prevent snow getting into them and causing problems as it melted. Plans and equipment were being put in place to de-ice steps, train doors and couplers prior to trains entering service and at main terminal stations. Foil blankets were already provided on trains for emergencies, and they had ordered some additional emergency lighting in the form of snap lights and wind-up torches. An external contractor had been appointed to keep the main routes within train maintenance depots clear, including gritting and snow clearance. This would leave the engineering teams free to concentrate on keeping the trains running without being diverted to snow clearance duties. 4 x 4 vehicles were also being introduced to help engineers reach trains in the event that a train broke down and could not be restarted by on-board staff. Two contingency snow timetables had been developed and these would be loaded onto the

industry system to ensure all passenger information sources, such as National Rail Enquiries and Journey Planner were using the correct information.

- 6.4 Mr Gibson advised that along with Network Rail's investment in additional multi purpose trains and conductor rail heating, Southeastern had purchased snow clearing equipment for use on station platforms and forecourts and were working closely with KCC to ensure that station approach roads were gritted. Pre-published contingency timetables were already in place in case of adverse weather. A copy of Southeastern's full winter plan had been made available for Members of the Forum to take away.
- 6.5 A Member said that every year we were told that the train companies were better prepared than ever for the severe winter weather but they always seemed to be caught out. The biggest complaint at times of disruption was always a lack of information for passengers. This had been particularly bad last year and was a real public relations own goal. Mr Gibson responded that we were quite fortunate in the UK because despite that last couple of years, we did not suffer the extremes of winter weather that other countries did, so the level of investment in winter preparations had to be balanced and proportionate. Both train companies had looked closely at how to better communicate passenger information and were issuing staff with Blackberries for real time information and pushing ahead with smart phone apps, Twitter feeds and automated email alerts for passengers. Mr Gibson said he understood why passengers had been frustrated last year and in the event of severe weather this winter, realism had to be the order of the day. They had to be realistic about the level of service they could actually operate and give early and honest assessments before customers left home.

Buses

- 6.6 Mr Instrall said there was not much to add to what had already been said on winter preparations, but it was worth noting that Stagecoach did now have direct access to the mobile phones of KCC Duty Managers responsible for gritting and clearing roads and this would help immeasurably as there had been problems last year getting messages from their drivers to the right people.

7 Date of Next Meeting

- 7.1 The next Meeting would be held on Friday the 18th May 2012.

Councillor P Feacey
Chairman – Transport Forum

Queries concerning these notes? Please contact Danny Sheppard:
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