

# Ashford Borough Council

## Report of the Chairman of the Transport Forum – 16<sup>th</sup> November 2012

### 1 Introduction

1.1 A Meeting of the Transport Forum was held on the 16<sup>th</sup> November 2012.

#### **The Borough Council Members present were:-**

Cllr. Feacey (Chairman);  
Cllrs. Mrs Blanford, Claughton, Davey, Heyes.

#### **Also Present:-**

Cllr Hicks  
Tim Read – Transportation Manager – KCC Highways & Transportation  
Ray Wilkinson – Engineering Services Manager – ABC  
Danny Sheppard – Senior Member Services & Scrutiny Support Officer – ABC

#### **The External Representatives were:-**

D Bruce – KCC Passenger Transport  
P Delalande – Eurostar  
D Docherty – Stagecoach in East Kent  
C Evans – KCC Passenger Transport  
S Gasche – KCC Public Transport  
M Gibson – Southeastern  
P Southgate – Stagecoach in East Kent  
S Whybrow – Ashford Independent Taxi Driver Association

### 2 Apologies

2.1 Apologies for absence had been received from:-

Cllrs. Wedgbury, Yeo

Lisa Holder and Toby Howe – KCC Highways & Transportation  
V Kenny – Ashford Town Centre Partnership, Y Leslie – Southern, T Ruck -  
Ashford Independent Taxi Driver Association.

### 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 Chairman's Report of the Transport Forum Meeting – 18<sup>th</sup> May 2012**

- 4.1 The Chairman's Report of the Meeting held on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2012 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. Mr Howe from KCC had been in touch to say that this funding had been found and would be subject of a future report to the JTB.
- 4.3 With regard to the state of the area around the station that had been raised by Mrs Kenny at the last meeting, the Chairman said he had written to Network Rail in the run up to the Olympics to try and get something done about this, but despite follow up letters and phone calls he had only received a general token response and nothing had been done. This was very disappointing. It was only after further communications after the Olympics had finished through Damian Green MP that he had received a reply from Mike Gibson at Southeastern which was unfortunate as it may have been something that could have been resolved within this Forum.
- 4.4 The issue of the future of rail franchises would be addressed by Stephen Gasche in his Industry Update. Sue Whybrow would also address issues of taxi parking in the town.
- 4.5 With regard to the lane markings at Drovers Roundabout, the Chairman reported that John Farmer from KCC was coming to the next JTB meeting in December to address this.
- 4.6 The Chairman said he wanted to place on record his thanks and congratulations to all those involved in transportation during the Olympics, particularly Southeastern and Southern. Their sterling work in keeping passengers moving and the level of information, extra staff and volunteers that were in evidence was to be applauded.

## **5 Update from KCC Transportation – Tim Read**

- 5.1 Mr Read gave a presentation which covered the following points: - the new set-up of KCC Highways & Transportation following the recent restructure; an overview of the major sites and road schemes in the Ashford Borough; the delivery of 'local' schemes (from S106 developer contributions and SPG6); KCC's public transport role; sustainable transport initiatives; the Quality Bus Partnership; access and exit improvements at Ashford International Station; improvements to town centre signing; trends on road casualties; and the proposed KCC Member Highway Fund scheme for Ashford.
- 5.2 The following responses were given to questions/comments: -
  - There were still tailbacks at the traffic lights at the Elwick Road/Station Road junction at peak times and the timing of the traffic lights at various locations around the town was causing delays to buses. There was also a particular problem with buses not being able to exit the bottom of Vicarage Lane due to backed up traffic from the next set of traffic lights. Mr Read said he would have a look at the timing of the lights at these junctions. They did not have

real-time visibility of the whole road network and were reliant on local accounts, so that was useful.

- The removal of the 'pinch-point' at the proposed entrance to the Conningbrook Park development was dependent on the timing of the planning application. The land did constrain what could be achieved but it would be progressed as quickly as the planning application progressed.
- The dualling of Chart Road had been a longstanding aim but it was a matter of collecting the relevant developer contributions. Realistically, the timescale for this was 3-5 years but it was a project that would be promoted and delivered by KCC.
- The money for the community transport scheme in rural areas could be accessed through a bidding process. The scheme did not provide transport itself but could help with training, publicity campaigns etc.
- The decision to automatically renew the Concessionary Travel Scheme passes for the elderly next year was applauded as it would help avoid confusion. It was hoped that everyone would be made aware of this.
- In terms of the number of schools who were enrolled in the Walk to School project, whilst there was not a huge amount of resource for this, Officers considered it was a case of 'the more the merrier'.
- Town centre signage was recognised as an area that needed attention in Ashford. De-cluttering in terms of redundant signs as well as making sure that the ones that remained were up-to-date was important. ABC's Environmental Services were currently looking at this closely but this needed to be a joined up exercise with KCC.
- The issue of exiting the station at peak times was still a big problem and there were a number of buses queuing up there on a daily basis.
- The 'New Ways 2 Work' initiative could potentially assist with longstanding parking overspill problems at both the Eureka Park and the William Harvey Hospital.
- Whilst KCC administered the Freedom Pass, the supported travel situation for students 16+ was slightly different. The Educational Maintenance Allowance had been withdrawn about a year ago and a lot of that money had gone directly to schools and colleges. KCC had tried to step away from that to an extent so it could be dealt with directly by the educational institutions.
- The new bus stops in New Street were part of the Quality Bus Partnership work. The new stop outside Lidl linked in with the changes to the 10 Service and provided a stop at the top end of town. The existing stop outside the British Volunteer had been moved slightly to move it away from the roundabout.

## **6 Industry Updates & Discussion**

### **Eurostar**

- 6.1 Mr Delalande wanted to re-affirm Eurostar's continued commitment to Ashford. Ashford International was included within the service to the Swiss Alps via Lille. Ashford International was certainly a priority for customers travelling from the South East. A Member asked about the situation where some passengers still had to catch a train from Ashford to Ebbsfleet to go back to Brussels and that this was extremely counterproductive, especially with Ashford growing. Was this not just a case of trying to put Ebbsfleet on the map? Mr Delalande said there was still a daily return service that stopped at Ashford as opposed to the two or three that stopped at Ebbsfleet, but this was not about forcing people to go to Ebbsfleet, rather about achieving the right balance between convenience, commercial needs and faster services. If there were any specific requests to change services he could put them to the commercial team but he wanted to re-iterate that Eurostar was committed to both Stations.

### **Rail Franchising**

- 6.2 Mr Gasche gave the Forum an update on the current national situation with rail franchising. Following the debacle over the Inter-City West Coast Mainline franchising process, Richard Brown had been tasked with undertaking a review of rail franchising which would commence in December. This was an important review which would have a knock on effect for the future of the whole process. Upcoming franchise renewals (including those currently operated by Southern and Southeastern) would be delayed until at least 2014 and perhaps later, so the Forum's intention to invite bidders for the Thameslink franchise to one of their meetings should be held over until the November 2013 Meeting at the earliest. In terms of other rail issues, Mr Gasche said that the extended High Speed services to Deal and Sandwich would commence in December and there would be additional capacity improvements to the High Speed services including a 50% increase on the 0743 Ashford to St Pancras service.

### **Bus Services**

- 6.3 Mr Southgate of Stagecoach in East Kent gave an outline of the development of bus services in Ashford over the last 12 years. Since 2004 there had been an 80% uplift in bus usage and a much better customer base and quality of service had been established. As well as Stagecoach's own investment he considered the establishment of the Quality Bus Partnership and the commitment of the Local Authorities had created a much better awareness of bus services in this Borough. He considered that the increased use of buses was keeping a lid on traffic levels in the town centre and Stagecoach wanted to build on that success and offer an even wider bus service in and around the town and especially in new areas. With that background he wanted to outline a couple of the problems that Stagecoach was currently facing in Ashford. These were chiefly brought about as a result of the Borough's semi-rural nature and with the aftermath of some early planning decisions on out of or edge of town development. It was important that public transport was provided from day one in new developments before people got their travelling habits in place. There were particular concerns about the development at Park Farm South where they could simply not get in with their buses. People were now

living in these areas but roads had only just been adopted and space for buses to manoeuvre, turn round etc had simply not been provided. They would like to extend the B-Line to serve Park Farm East but to do this the accommodation bridge would need strengthening to provide access and this would need funding. He understood a significant amount of developer money had been put aside for a Rail Halt and wondered if there could be a re-think and some of that money be re-directed into providing this bus service. After all, this was still public transport infrastructure and would almost certainly be used by a lot more people. A Rail Halt would probably only be able to provide an hourly service, whereas for around £250k a year they could provide a quarter hourly bus service to that development. After three years it was likely that the service would be self funding. He asked if the Council could look into this and investigate if the wording of the Section 106 Agreement could be changed to facilitate provision of public transport rather than purely a Rail Halt.

- 6.4 In terms of operational matters Mr Docherty reported that as Mr Southgate had said bus usage was growing in Ashford and Stagecoach were pleased to be a big part of that. Stagecoach had taken over the previously withdrawn KCC funded 295 Service, which would also increase capacity and quality of service. The Olympics had seen some disruption to service across the board but things were back on track and looked good for the future. In response to a question Mr Docherty explained that they would like to extend the C-Line Service back in to the Highfield Estate and that would be investigated.
- 6.5 A Member asked about the boarding and alighting arrangements for disabled passengers in the town. Mr Southgate replied that the Quality Bus Partnership had done a lot of work on the accessibility of buses. At present 80% of their vehicles were fully DDA compliant and they were ahead of the game in terms of the 2015 and 2017 deadlines for 100% accessibility. This target would be comfortably met. Staff did receive specific training and were regularly reminded of good practice when dealing with disabled people. The number of complaints about such issues was relatively low and these were generally about the behaviour or attitude of individuals rather than facilities. There were still some improvements to be made around the human interface, but he felt they had come a long way as a company from where they were in the past. He said he would be happy to establish a link with Ashford Access on such matters if that was considered beneficial.
- 6.6 Members mentioned that some buses appeared to be emitting excessive levels of exhaust smoke and asked if this had been noted and how often buses were serviced. Mr Southgate said that they were required to service buses every 28 days but Stagecoach did this every 21 days. They also had an annual MOT inspection. The majority of engines in the buses currently were of a Euro 4 or Euro 5 standard which self monitored and shut down if they were emitting too high a level of nitrous gases. This was also tested as part of the 21 day check. Mr Docherty said he was aware of one instance of this recently and the bus was taken off the road and inspected within one hour but he was happy to have a closer look at the existing fleet.
- 6.7 Mr Read said he would like to place on record his thanks to the Stagecoach reps in Ashford as administration of the school pass system had caused problems across the County, but this had not happened in Ashford.

- 6.8 Mr Evans of KCC Passenger Transport said that the team was heavily involved in preparing tenders for the upcoming contracts in 2013. There had been frustration in extending the E-Line into Godinton/Repton because the link bridge had not been completed yet and this was not expected now until autumn 2013. This would eventually provide an enhanced service between the Eureka Park and the Town Centre incorporating Godinton, Repton and Little Burton Farm. Mr Bruce confirmed that the team, along with Stagecoach, would continue to be pro-active in promoting bus services on new developments as plans came forward.

## **Trains**

- 6.9 Mr Gibson of Southeastern said that the key occurrence of the last six months had been the Olympic Games. These had been extremely successful for Southeastern with performance of 97-98% on most days and an excellent working partnership with Network Rail, Transport for London and the bus operators. This showed what a truly integrated transport system was capable of. Government had announced that they would be increasing fares by an average of 4.2% in January 2013 and it was considered that this could have been even higher as they have been capped at RPI +1%. Timetable changes would come into effect on 9<sup>th</sup> December with improvements to the HS1 service at morning and evening peaks. HS1 had been a great success as demonstrated with the extensions and enhancements to the service, and Southeastern were grateful for the support of both ABC and KCC. There would be timetable changes on mainline services due to engineering works between 24<sup>th</sup> December and 1<sup>st</sup> January so any passengers travelling between Christmas and New Year were advised to check ahead. Looking further ahead, significant construction work was planned for the London Bridge area and this was something for the Local Authorities to keep an eye on. This would not affect Southeastern services until 2015-16, but then services would not be able to call there for a period of time.
- 6.10 A Member said that there were still issues with the toilets on HS1 trains. They were quite frequently out of order and didn't seem to be attended to properly by on-board staff. He also asked about signage for High Speed trains at Westfields Shopping Centre which appeared insufficient and a lack of communication at Ashford when a High Speed train was starting its journey there. Mr Gibson agreed that the situation on toilets was unacceptable and if he could be provided with times and dates of incidents he would investigate them. They had taken up the issue of signage at Westfields with management there and it was something they wanted to improve. He would be disappointed if staff at Ashford were not making appropriate announcements and he would speak to the Station Manager there.
- 6.11 Parking charges at rural stations were raised and the previous assertions that if station car parks were less than 50% occupied there was a chance that charges could be reduced. The current charges were pushing cars out on to surrounding roads and, taking Pluckley as an example, it was likely that these roads would shortly be subject to double yellow lining so it would be a good gesture to encourage those motorists who currently parked for free to use those car parks and encourage them with lower charges. Mr Gibson endeavoured to speak to colleagues to see if there had been any developments on this.

- 6.12 A Member said that as the Council's representative on Marshlink, she had some comments on that line and Hamstreet Station. The Station Master at Hamstreet had retired and not been replaced and the station and ticket office were therefore no longer manned. Were there any developments with the Public Right of Way Crossing at Hamstreet Station? This just needed a safety gate that was triggered when a train approached. Marshlink users had been concerned with the state of Ashford International – was there an overall cleaning strategy in place? Mr Gasche explained that Hamstreet Station was managed by Southern so that comment could be fed back to Yvonne Leslie. In terms of the crossing, this was being investigated by Network Rail. There were plans to improve this but it would not be on the scale of the improvements at Elsenham as sight lines up and down the line were good and this was a public footpath. He would add this to the agenda for their next meeting with Network Rail. Mr Gibson said he would speak to the Station Manager about cleaning. He wanted to give them an opportunity to sort this out but it might be worthy of a site visit or spot checks in the future. The Chairman said that the Council's new street cleansing contract would commence shortly and there was an opportunity for Southeastern to make a contribution in return for ABC including the roads around the station. If this was something they were interested in they were urged to contact Paul Jackson at ABC as soon as possible.

### **Taxis**

- 6.13 Mrs Whybrow said that plans for the future of the town centre were all well and good, but in her view they were based on false pretences. Shops were closing, buses were blocking routes in the town centre and taxis were unable to serve the people who needed them. Parking Wardens did not offer taxi drivers any flexibility to drop off and pick up and she asked where taxis could safely load and unload passengers within the town. Access to the service area at County Square had previously been arranged but Parking Wardens were starting to patrol there as well now. Could Mr Wilkinson confirm that taxis were not allowed to drop off or unload on taxi ranks?
- 6.14 Mr Wilkinson advised that he was not entirely sure on this point and would come back. In relation to the wider point, there was competition for road space between all users of the town centre including blue badge holders, delivery vehicles, bus operators and the taxi trade. There was limited space available and whilst he knew taxi drivers would like a rank at the top of Bank Street this was not practical. They did have more spaces overall with the six outside Debenhams and the two outside the Phoenix pub and it was difficult to know what more could be done. The Council had no direct control over County Square or the use of their service yard and this was something for taxi drivers to take up directly with them. He could not understand how ABC could be stopping its use. Mr Wilkinson said he was sympathetic to the plight of taxi drivers but sometimes as a group they did not help themselves. At the station for example they quite often parked outside of their ranks or on double yellow lines and there were ongoing issues with how this affected buses and other traffic. Perhaps the whole relationship of buses and taxis in places like the Station and Bank Street would benefit from some kind of summit.

### **Other Issues**

- 6.15 Mrs Kenny had apologised for the meeting but she wished to raise the out of date finger pointing signage that had been raised in the local press recently,

particularly with regard to the Gateway and other recent developments. Mr Read had endeavoured to take this point away as part of the overall plans to improve town centre signage.

## **7 Winter Preparations**

7.1 Lisa Holder of KCC Highways & Transportation had apologised for the meeting but had submitted KCC's Winter Service Handbook for the Forum's information.

7.2 Mr Gibson gave details of Southeastern's winter preparations. He said that since the severe winter of 2010/11, when the weather had generated a number of problems and complaints, a number of measures had been put in place: -

- Network Rail had upgraded conductor rail heating which should minimise frozen points and power stoppages.
- There had been a lot of work with KCC and Transport for London to keep station approach roads clear.
- Contingency timetables had been put in place in the event of severe weather so an honest assessment of services could be made.
- Hand-held snow ploughs had been provided to staff to use on platforms and car parks.
- Improvements to communications including a long line PA system to make useful announcements at all stations, an upgrade of Customer Information Systems, more training for customer facing staff and increased use of social media.

Clearly if severe winter weather was experienced they could not guarantee that there would be absolutely no disruption across a network of 200+ stations, but he was confident they were in a much better position than previously.

## **8 Date of Next Meeting**

8.1 The next Meeting would be held on Friday the 17<sup>th</sup> May 2013.

Councillor P Feacey  
Chairman – Transport Forum

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Queries concerning these notes? Please contact Danny Sheppard:  
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