

# Transportation, Highways and Engineering Advisory Committee

Minutes of a Meeting of the Transportation, Highways and Engineering Advisory Committee held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, Ashford on the 17<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

## Present:

Cllr. Heyes (Chairman);  
Cllr. Feacey (Vice-Chairman);  
Cllrs. Burgess, Claughton, Michael, Robey.

## Also Present:

Mike Gibson – Southeastern, Yvonne Leslie – Southern, Robert Miller – Stagecoach in East Kent, Andy Beck – KCC Highways & Transportation, Toby Butler – KCC Highways & Transportation, Stephen Gasche – Principal Transport Planner – Rail – KCC, Mark Carty – Ashford Borough Council, Ray Wilkinson – Ashford Borough Council, Danny Sheppard – Ashford Borough Council.

## Apologies:

Colin Evans – KCC Passenger Transport Services, Eurostar.

## 286 Declarations of Interest

Councillor	Interest	Minute No.
Feacey	Announced an 'Other Interest' as Managing Director of Energyshift Ltd who worked with members of the taxi trade.	288, 290

## 287 Minutes

### Resolved:

**That the Minutes of the Industry Updates and Discussion Meeting of this Committee held on the 5<sup>th</sup> July 2013 be approved and confirmed as a correct record.**

## 288 Traffic Congestion Points in Ashford Town Centre

The Chairman welcomed Toby Butler and Andy Beck from KCC Highways & Transportation. He said that Members had some specific questions about congestion points in the town centre. They are outlined below with the topics in question in italics and the responses in normal text.

### *Elwick Road/Station Road junction*

A scheme had been designed to allow both lanes of traffic to turn right out of Elwick Road. The scheme included alterations to a traffic island and was expected to

proceed within the next three months. As part of this scheme the lights around the town would also need to be re-configured and the whole scheme was expected to free up space in Elwick Road.

#### *Somerset Road turning right into North Street*

There was a scheme to improve pedestrian safety here and perhaps as part of that Officers could look at the phasing of the lights if traffic was tailing back whilst waiting to make the right hand turn. The pedestrian scheme would involve moving some BT cable so could be quite costly, but it was felt it would benefit the area.

#### *Somerset Road outside Domino's Pizza*

There was a problem here with delivery vehicles stopping and taking advantage of a general exemption for loading, on the double yellow lines outside Domino's Pizza to make deliveries during peak times which blocked the whole left hand lane there and caused a lot of traffic problems. Officers acknowledged the issue. The ABC Portfolio Holder for Planning & Development said he would also look into this and see if there was anything that could be done under planning conditions.

#### *Pedestrian Crossing Points*

There were two particular crossing points (Somerset Road by the Shell Garage and Forge Lane by Lidl) where there was still huge uncertainty. People often attempted to cross when the lights were still green, either by 'taking a chance', because they were uncertain or because of some other impairment. These pedestrians then found themselves 'caught' in the middle of the road and this could be extremely dangerous. In terms of the visually impaired, a Member said it would help if audio beepers could be installed at these crossing points to improve clarity. Mr Butler referred to the previously mentioned pedestrian scheme at Somerset Road/North Street and said that the proposal was to provide a refuge island in the middle of the road near to the Shell Garage, in order to prevent people getting caught in the middle of the road when crossing. There had not been any previous reports of problems at Lidl so they would now make a point of having a look at this site. Historically there were problems with audio beepers where there were multiple crossing points in close proximity to one another.

#### *Red light jumping*

Much of the traffic congestion was exacerbated by red light jumping which seemed to have reached very high levels in Ashford. The Kent & Medway Safety Camera Partnership were keen to look at red light jumping with their cameras and this was something that could be implemented in the near future although it would require a big investment in cameras. A Member said that this was not only an issue in the town but also at other signal controlled junctions and signalised roundabouts. He referred to what was known as the 'dilemma space' where if drivers were approaching a green light they put their foot down and committed to going, regardless of whether the light then turned amber or red. He asked if roundabouts should actually have traffic lights and also about options to put speed humps on the approach to traffic lights. Mr Butler said that the 'dilemma zone' was a well-known phenomenon and it was down to individual driver behaviour – some would stop and others would not. Ultimately this would only be eradicated by enforcement. In terms of speed humps approaching lights, they had been installed in some places in Sittingbourne but it did cause gaps in the traffic and could actually worsen traffic flows and congestion.

### *Drovers Roundabout*

Officers had previously reported on the lanes and signage at Drovers Roundabout and work was planned to change approach signage and destination markings over the next few months. There had been an independent assessment of the traffic lights and this had resulted in some minor adjustments being made, but it was a fairly small junction with limited space around it to make changes. It was continually monitored and Officers would intervene if necessary. They were happy that the initial problems experienced after the opening of the new John Lewis store had now settled down. The option of installing and allowing HGVs to use the proposed bus lanes across the central island on the roundabout was seen to simply add another point of conflict to the whole process. Officers could look at modelling something to that effect, but they did not think it would produce a benefit. Filter lanes for traffic turning left were a possibility but it was unclear how much of a benefit this would generate in relation to the amount of work required.

### *Lane markings at Eureka Leisure Park Roundabout*

Over Christmas there had been congestion at the roundabout stretching back through Trinity Road and up to the Faversham Road. Three exit lanes were shown at the roundabout when there was only space for two cars on the roundabout and this was causing confusion. Officers agreed to have a look at this roundabout.

The Chairman thanked Mr Butler and Mr Beck for attending.

## **289 Rail Issues**

Stephen Gasche, KCC, gave an update on various rail issues that were of interest to the Borough of Ashford.

### **Direct Gatwick Service**

This was one of the intended outcomes from KCC's Rail Action Plan for Kent. Consultants were currently preparing a business case which should be complete by the end of February. The intention was to demonstrate the benefits of an hourly Ashford to Gatwick service to the Department for Transport so that it could be part of the 'Direct Award' franchise specification from 2018. It was dependent on the completion of the new Platform 0 at Redhill (scheduled for Christmas 2017) which would give the capacity for the train to reverse there. It was a work in progress but there was hope for a positive outcome and if agreed they were hoping that the service could start in May 2018. The journey time was expected to be 70/75 minutes. It was anticipated that such a service would be popular and help to reduce traffic on the M25. In terms of Heathrow Airport there would be a huge gain to be had from the introduction of Crossrail in London in 2019 which would provide an intersection at Farringdon and would make Ashford to Heathrow (changing at Stratford) a possibility.

### **Ashford Spurs**

This project was part of the wider Transmanche Metro project to improve rail connections in Europe. To ensure Ashford would continue to benefit from International connections in the future, there would be a need to install new signalling on about half a mile of track that linked Ashford International Station with High Speed 1. This was to ensure compliance with the new Eurostar trains and, in

the future, Deutsche Bahn trains. This would need significant investment but there was confidence that this would be done otherwise Ashford would cease to be an International Station sometime in the 2020s and as Members knew the aims of the Transmanche Metro project was to have more frequent services from Ebbsfleet and Ashford to the continent. In terms of Eurostar, they were a commercial organisation and it was up to them whether they adopted any proposals for increased services, but it would be important for all involved to continue to lobby and demonstrate the benefits. There were many opportunities in the future to improve rail connections across Europe and encouraging more trans-European journeys to be taken by rail (not only to France and Belgium, but also connecting to Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Italy and beyond). Members considered Ashford should do all it could to be part of this.

### **Journey Time Improvement Scheme**

There were improvements planned to reduce the journey times between Ashford and Ramsgate. The Department for Business had committed some Regional Growth Fund to go with Network Rail funding for this. The work entailed some improvements to the track and the closing or redirecting of some footpaths/bridleways, all of which would increase speed and reduce unnecessary speed restrictions on some parts of the line. This would knock eight minutes off journey times from Ashford to Ramsgate by 2019. Generally the HS1 service had already greatly improved journey times and connectivity with the Midlands/North of England. The first train out of Ashford in the morning was now 0543 which got into St Pancras at 0621 and allowed passengers to connect with onward trains. This was a huge benefit to business users in particular.

### **High Speed to Deal and Sandwich**

An agreement had been reached between the Department for Transport and Southeastern to continue this service after the recent trial. This was pleasing as it improved connectivity around the Kent Coast and to and from Ashford.

In response to a question, the Chairman advised that representatives from Eurostar had given their apologies for this meeting but had agreed to meet with him separately to discuss the options for more Eurostar trains being able to stop at Ashford.

## **290 Industry Updates and Discussion**

### **Southeastern**

Mike Gibson advised that he wanted to give sincere apologies to customers for what he referred to as “an appalling couple of months” in terms of performance for Southeastern. This had been primarily infrastructure related following major engineering work in October, a number of signal failures and then the severe weather over Christmas and the New Year. There were about 13,000 outstanding complaints and the situation had been taken up with Network Rail. The major issue going forward was the 2014 timetable consultation which closed on the 7<sup>th</sup> February 2014. The proposals had been influenced by four factors: - to provide the best possible service during the Thameslink construction work at London Bridge; to try and meet requests for service improvements raised during stakeholder meetings and

'Meet the Manager' sessions; for the timetable to deliver the same level of performance as the current timetable despite the reduction in infrastructure capacity associated with the Thameslink programme; and the need to work within Government affordability constraints while still offering the best possible service to passengers. Mr Gibson said that the proposed benefits were outlined within the papers. There had already been a number of comments, and whilst no draft timetable would please everyone, Southeastern were seeking the best solution. They welcomed all comments and suggestions from customers and stakeholders up to the 7<sup>th</sup> February.

In response to questions about faster trains up to Charing Cross, Mr Gibson explained it was a difficult situation as there were always objections from local people to any proposals to take out stops at smaller stations. People in Kent and East Sussex had historically fought hard to maintain their rail services going back to the 1960s and the Beeching Report.

The Chairman said that still quite often one of the toilets on the High Speed train was out of order. Mr Gibson said that at the start of the working day all toilets should be operational. During the course of the day they did tend to get abused and they had no alternative but to put them out of use. They did not have the facilities at St Pancras for toilet maintenance and he would look into the reason why this was the case. He asked Members to continue to give feedback on times and dates when this situation occurred. In response to a further question he advised that train toilets were regularly subject to disabled access audits.

Whilst the replacement of the lifts at Ashford International Station was welcomed, Members asked what the arrangements for disabled passengers were in the meantime. Mr Gibson advised that as part of their assisted travel service, if a station platform was inaccessible and a passenger could not be physically assisted by a member of staff to reach the platform, Southeastern would meet the cost of a taxi to the nearest accessible station.

A Member said that in light of ever increasing rail fares, one of the main complaints from customers was that they did not see a marked improvement for the increase. He asked in view of the fact that there was a lot happening and there had been improvements in service, was there more that Southeastern could be doing to get that message across to customers? Mr Gibson said that since Southeastern had taken over the franchise there were approximately 200 more services, High Speed Services, more stations with working lifts, the elimination of slam door trains, better overall facilities and before the recent bad weather, punctuality was at approximately 92%. These were huge improvements over the old Connex regime. The point on communication was well made and taken on board.

In response to a question from a Member, Mr Gibson confirmed that they were talking to the Department for Transport about offering more flexible ticketing options. For example season tickets for people who worked three days a week or outside of normal office hours and also options for some kind of smartcard like the Oyster card or the one now used by Southern.

Ray Wilkinson asked that now Southeastern's franchise had been extended to 2018 could they again look at parking charges at rural stations. There had been lots of complaints regarding Pluckley and Charing in particular where high parking charges

were deterring people from using the car parks and parking for free in nearby residential roads. Mr Gibson advised that this was a bit of a dilemma as the feeling had always been that those who used the car parks should pay for them rather than the costs being passed to all rail users. They leased the land from Network Rail and were charged at a market rate. Controlled Parking Zones around stations were an option. Members urged a sensible approach be adopted at places like Pluckley where there was no option but to drive to the Station.

## **Southern**

Yvonne Leslie advised that in terms of performance Southern had suffered some of the same challenges as Southeastern. High winds, landslips and flooding, particularly in areas of East Sussex had had huge knock on effects. Between 23<sup>rd</sup> December and 1<sup>st</sup> January there had been 72 fallen trees and other obstructions on their lines and these had all had to be dealt with to maintain services. Despite the bad weather over Christmas and New Year Network Rail had undertaken a lot of work on infrastructure on the Brighton mainline which would ultimately improve services. Refurbishment work had also taken place to the diesel rolling stock from Ashford to Brighton which should also improve reliability. In terms of the franchise, the deadline for bids for the new Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern (TSGN) rail franchise was 24<sup>th</sup> December 2013. The announcement of the preferred bidder to operate the franchise was expected in May 2014 with the incorporation of the franchise currently operated by Southern by July 2015.

With regard to the refurbishment of the two car Ashford to Brighton diesel units, the Chairman asked if there was any possibility of extending these to four car units as this was a well-used line and they were often full from Hastings/St Leonards onwards. Mrs Leslie advised that they did have a pretty small fleet and all rolling stock was currently used to its maximum. There was currently no extra diesel rolling stock to be had. Electrification proposals elsewhere in the country may mean a cascading down in the future but there was no guarantee that would make its way to this line.

## **Stagecoach**

Robert Miller said that the first issue he wanted to raise was the traffic congestion in and around Ashford in November and December. The reliability of services had suffered as a result with many buses running late. The E-Line service had been revised in November to take account of the opening of the new John Lewis store. There was now an hourly service from Trinity Road through to South Willesborough and a half hourly service from the Cinema to the Station, calling at John Lewis. Again there had been reliability problems due to traffic congestion and even allowing an extra 15 minutes between 4-5pm they had still initially been late and unable to keep to schedule. The problems did appear to begin at about 4pm but it was recognised that November and December were unusually busy months. The proposed improvements at Elwick Road were welcomed and would help with the timetable problems. Stagecoach had submitted a tender for the E-Line/517 service which would include Godinton Park and Repton Park. If they were awarded the contract they would look at their recent experiences and perhaps adjust running times. The improved C-Line Service was now fully operational and had added an extra 8 hours a week of running time to this route. Mr Miller also advised that Jeremy Cooper, Commercial Director at Stagecoach, had been dealing with hospitals in an attempt to

support the improvement and promotion of bus services to hospitals. With regard to Ashford, from March 2014 funding had been put in place to fund three extra vehicles providing half hourly services to the William Harvey Hospital from Park Farm, Kennington and the Station. The bus services would be promoted to anyone, but it was hoped they would be particularly attractive to staff and journey times would be designed around shift patterns at the hospital. The plans were supported by the Hospitals Trust and it was hoped there would be a good take up and that this would be a good opportunity for Ashford.

With regard to questions about the E-Line, if Stagecoach's bid was successful they would be looking closely at the timetable in order to get it right. Unreliable bus services would always lose passengers. Mr Miller said he would look into questions about the last three buses in the evening leaving Elwick Road rather than the Station, and out of date timetables at the bus stops in Carlton Road.

Members said they were delighted to hear about the proposals for the hospital. Mr Carty said there were particular opportunities with the Kennington to William Harvey service which could call at the Julie Rose Stadium and serve both the Stadium and the Conningbrook Country Park that was due to open in May. Many youngsters would be attending the new sports clubs there and there would be good opportunities to link these with a new bus service.

Mr Wilkinson said that the improved bus services to the William Harvey Hospital were part of a package of measures to improve the parking situation at the hospital. It was about encouraging a modal shift and trying to catch those people who lived closer to the hospital. As he understood it the plan was to commence the services on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March which coincided with the rise in parking charges for staff at the William Harvey and the opening of their extended car park (by 252 vehicles). It would be important to promote these new services both internally at the hospital and with the public. After all the work that had gone into this they did not want to see it fail, so perhaps some thought needed to be given to how to find the extra funding for promotion.

A Member referred to the 'health' of some of the buses and said there were often clouds of black smoke coming from the back of double deckers when they left the Station. It appeared the particular issue was with the Trident Double Decker vehicles on the B-Line. Mr Miller advised that all buses received a safety service every 21 days. Older buses were gradually being phased out because of 'low floor' requirements, and in the next few years they would all be gone, but there were still a few in circulation currently. Drivers had defect cards and were encouraged to report any problems immediately.

## **291 Dates of Next Meetings**

Monday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2014, 7.00pm (Evening Meeting on Strategic Issues)  
Friday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2014, 9.30am (Industry Updates and Discussion)

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