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Minutes of the meeting of the **SCRUTINY (COMMUNITY AND REGENERATION) COMMITTEE** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Wednesday, 13 December 2017 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor L A Keen

Councillors: S F Bannister (as substitute for Councillor N A G Richards)
T A Bond
P I Carter
G Cowan
R J Frost
P J Hawkins
M J Ovenden
G Rapley

Also Present: Mr M Arnold (Stagecoach)
Mr P Lightowler (Kent County Council)
Mr P Norwell (Stagecoach)

Officers: Democratic Services Manager
Democratic Services Officer

82 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor N A G Richards.

83 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that, in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 4, Councillor S F Bannister had been appointed as substitute for Councillor N A G Richards.

84 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

85 MINUTES

The consideration of the Minutes was deferred to a future meeting.

86 PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Democratic Services Manager advised that a number of members of the public present at the meeting had indicated that they wished to speak and three members of the public had registered to speak on Minute No. 92 (Bus routes in the Dover District).

The Chairman indicated that the public speakers for this item would be taken at the start of the relevant item.

87 DECISIONS OF THE CABINET RELATING TO RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE SCRUTINY (COMMUNITY AND REGENERATION) COMMITTEE

There were no items of business for consideration.

88 ISSUES REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE BY COUNCIL, CABINET, SCRUTINY (POLICY AND PERFORMANCE) COMMITTEE OR ANOTHER COMMITTEE

There were no items of business for consideration.

89 ITEMS CALLED-IN FOR SCRUTINY OR PLACED ON THE AGENDA BY A MEMBER OF THE COMMITTEE, ANY INDIVIDUAL NON-EXECUTIVE MEMBERS OR PUBLIC PETITION

There were no items of business for consideration.

90 NOTICE OF FORTHCOMING KEY DECISIONS

The Democratic Services Manager presented the Notice of Forthcoming Key Decisions to the Committee for its consideration.

RESOLVED: That the Notice of Forthcoming Key Decisions be noted.

91 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Democratic Services Manager presented the Scrutiny Work Programme to the Committee for its consideration.

Members asked that an item on the community impact of noise pollution be added to the work programme.

RESOLVED: That the Work Programme be noted subject to the inclusion of an item on the community impact of noise pollution.

92 BUS ROUTES IN THE DOVER DISTRICT

The Committee welcomed Phil Lightowler (Head of Public Transport, Kent County Council), Philip Norwell (Managing Director, Stagecoach) and Matthew Arnold (Commercial Director, Stagecoach) to the meeting to answer the key questions that it had set.

The Chairman, with the consent of the members of the committee, invited the members of the public that had registered to speak on the matter. The summary of the points that they raised was as follows:

Ms P Skelton

- That cuts to the bus timetable impacted most on families with young children and the elderly.
- That in Northbourne there were 12 bungalows with accommodation for the elderly and without the required bus services they would not be able to access services.
- That the bus service to Deal from Northbourne on a Monday only allowed for a one hour stay in Deal before the last bus departed for Northbourne.

Ms S Harris

- That the no.14 bus had a big impact on the community at Northbourne as the village had no post office or village shop. In addition, internet access was poor.
- To express concern that as people became older and stopped driving that they would have to leave the village of Northbourne in order to continue accessing the services that they needed. This would change the character of the village as many of the older residents were active in the community and would turn Northbourne into a commuter village.
- That when her family moved to Northbourne they did so in the knowledge that the no.14 bus service would enable their children to get to/from school.

Ms R Harris

- The loss of the no.14 bus service meant that she could not get home from school and instead had to walk home. It also meant that her freedom was restricted at the weekend to travel and see friends.
- That the cut to the no.81 service was a disaster.

The Chairman thanked the members of the public who had spoken and asked that the representatives of Stagecoach and Kent County Council address the committee's key questions.

Q1. What is the rationale for withdrawing services, e.g. what is the evidence?

Members were advised that Stagecoach ran services on a commercial basis and that it had 75 vehicles operating in the Dover district. Stagecoach faced increasing issues of congestion on routes into Canterbury and as a consequence services required a longer turnaround time than the previously allocated 7-8 minutes.

A review of the timetable and an analysis of the passenger journeys had led to the development of a new timetable that operated more buses but also allowed for a longer turnaround time in Canterbury.

It was recognised that there were different needs for rural and urban services but Stagecoach needed to offer services that were reliable and sustainable on a commercial basis. Stagecoach served the majority of places in the district but it was accepted that for Northbourne it had been unable to provide an off-peak service as it was only serving an average of six people per day off-peak.

Stagecoach was required under the Transport Act 1985 to operate each route on a commercial basis and couldn't cross-subsidise a route. This was to avoid a dominant provider from blocking potential new entrants to the market. As a consequence some routes would never be commercially viable and in those instances it was for Kent County Council to decide whether it wished to exercise its discretionary powers to subsidise them or not. Members were advised that in the current budget climate Kent County Council was unable to fund as many services as it would have liked. They had manipulated a subsidised service in order to provide for the one hour stay in Deal.

In response to a question from Councillor R J Frost it was stated that under the Bus Services Act 2017 there was no revenue provision from the government for franchising. In addition, franchising applied to mayoral combined authorities.

Kent County Council was able to offer advice on running a community bus service. As the service would not be funded by Kent County Council it was important to ensure that sufficient volunteers existed to operate any service. However, Kent County Council did provide funding to assist communities purchasing small buses for this purpose.

The future of subsidised bus services by Kent County Council was dependent on the amount of funding available and it was hoped that through innovation and working with communities more could be done to preserve services. Any changes to services by Kent County Council would be subject to consultation and would ultimately be the decision of the relevant cabinet member.

The Kent Karrier 'dial-a-ride' service which was available to those in isolated rural areas (i.e. more than 500 metres from a bus stop or train station) or with certain medical conditions was cited as an example of an alternative service. Members were advised that in comparison to other districts the Dover Kent Karrier service was underused and the cause of this was being investigated.

In respect of a question concerning the request for a third bus stand in Deal, Members were advised that this was to alleviate congestion in South Street and that it would only be used 2-3 times a day.

Q2. How was the original consultation on the bus service conducted? Who was involved and when as no information was forthcoming before bus passes were paid for in July? The 14 service stopped in the first week of September. Why were the public not told about the full nature of the cuts or the alternative available transport?

It was acknowledged that Stagecoach had learnt lessons following the consultation and that any future consultation would be undertaken differently in light of this. The original consultation had been over a 2 week period which was then extended in response to comments. In addition, the consultation had been based on an outline of the changes rather than on the proposed timetable and this would change for future consultations.

Q3. Why are so many double deckers now used when previously was single decker (e.g. route 15)?

Double decker buses were assigned to routes where the peak time passenger volume was sufficiently high enough to warrant one. On many school routes the maximum load for a double decker bus would be achieved twice per day and although there would be a smaller volume of passengers during off-peak times the peak time volume warranted a double decker bus on the route.

Q4. Why can't Stagecoach run community buses the size of large minibuses/small coaches?

Stagecoach advised that they were not best placed to operate community bus services as minibuses were not financial viable for them. However, they would be willing to co-ordinate with community service providers to link their services to the Stagecoach bus network.

Q5. What part can/will the Quality Bus Partnership (QBP) play in extending public transport provision to the many isolated villages in our District?

The QBP provided a forum for matters to be discussed with Stagecoach. It would consider matters such as what needed to be done to serve new housing developments and community transport integration.

Q6. What will be the effect of the withdrawal of school buses when children have bus passes?

This depended on the type of bus pass held. For those who held a Young Person's Travel Pass there was no statutory obligation to provide transport to school and there would therefore be no alternative provision and they could apply for a refund on the pass. For those holding a different type of young person's pass Kent County Council would in certain circumstances make arrangements for alternative provision to get the child to school.

Members expressed concern that grammar schools were not recognised as the nearest school for the purpose of the bus pass and that it should be based on the nearest school of the child's ability level instead.

Q7. Given the latest news coming out of KCC about cuts to subsidies can we have assurance that the radical cuts we've just seen in this district will not be extended.

This had been answered as part of an earlier question. The nature of any future changes to subsidised services was dependent on the amount of funding available.

Q8. Persons living in Aycliffe find themselves abandoned after the 6pm bus if planning to visit River (maybe to visit friends/ church/ club) and would arrive in River at about 6.30pm. Doing the return journey to Aycliffe, or just into Dover, would result in having to leave on the 8.05pm from River, after this time no bus will get you back to Aycliffe. This will not only affect those wishing to visit the area, but the youngest who will soon be hoping to come into Dover to see a picture at the new cinema.

Members were advised that the evening service was a tendered service operated by Regent Coaches and not Stagecoach.

Q9. A local newspaper article said that the 16 Bus from Canterbury to Folkestone may no longer run in the evenings. If true, this would be disastrous for people working in the extensive evening service industries in both towns, and also for potential customers who wish to access them – in each of the two towns, and the several villages along the route. This must not be allowed to happen – what is KCC going to do about it? Why can't Stagecoach use smaller vehicles if there is less demand than during the day?

Stagecoach advised that there were no plans to end the no. 16 bus service.

Q10. What was the rationale for withdrawing dedicated route 61 (St Radigund's and Buckland Hospital service)?

Prior to September the service terminated in St Radigunds. However, it now continued onto other destinations in order to link marginal services to local town services but in order to do this it was necessary to exclude part of the old route. The new route gave better rural access to Buckland.

Q11. The changes to the rural bus service mean that elderly, teenage & disabled bus pass holders are unable to travel at appropriate times into the local towns. This will have the knock-on effect of altering the social demographic of villages where non-drivers will have no incentive to stay in the community and seek housing elsewhere, rather than facing isolation. In the village of Northbourne, this includes accommodation designed for the elderly & disabled, adjacent to the bus stop, which houses residents who can no longer access appropriate public transport. Phoenix House, a residential care home, has staff & clients who were totally reliant on the Northbourne 14 bus service. How does the council propose to address this situation?

This had been answered as part of an earlier question. It was agreed to provide Members with further information on the Kent Karrier service.

In response to a question from Councillor G Cowan, it was stated that a review of the criteria for the Kent Karrier service was being considered.

Q12. One student has problems returning from school. She can no longer get back to Northbourne from Dover and cannot use the Young Person's Travelcard from the village, despite Stagecoach's promise that it allowed travel out of school times and weekends. What is KCC doing about this?

This has been answered as part of a previous question.

Q13. Parents state that Stagecoach have recently employed drivers who have no knowledge of the normal bus routes and children have recently been late for school where a driver has taken the wrong route and last week were left stranded as the school service missed the village completely. Those waiting at the Northbourne bus stop only found out by communication from fellow school children on the bus. When it was pointed out to the driver that he had missed out the village, he replied 'too bad'. On Monday 4th Dec, the school bus took a route which missed out school children waiting at a stop in Eastry and returned on a different route, thus arriving late back to the village. How can parents avoid the unauthorised absence and safeguarding issues which inevitably results from these mistakes? What is KCC doing about this problem?

Members were advised that more details would be needed for Stagecoach to investigate specific issues. However, drivers would have had to learn the new routes following service changes.

Supplementary Questions

In response to a question on the introduction of hybrid powered fleets it was stated that Stagecoach invested in the cleanest vehicles it could. The buses purchased by Stagecoach last year were Euro 6 Standard and had emissions lower than that of the average family car.

In response to a question on the closure of the South Street, Deal waiting room it was stated that Dover District Council had reduced its opening hours due to vandalism.

RESOLVED: That it be recommended to the Cabinet:

- (a) That a letter be written to Kent County Council:

- (i) To request changes to the criteria relating to community bus services and to ask why rural communities have insufficient services which has severely impacted on the quality of life for the elderly and vulnerable.
 - (ii) That as the Northbourne Monday and Friday bus service only allows for one hour in Deal before returning, the operator (Regent via Kent County Council) be requested to consider the possibility of amending the service so as to allow for a return to Northbourne of at least 2 hours after arrival in Deal.
 - (iii) That Kent County Council be urged to examine ways to increase the use of the Kent Karrier service in the district given that it has not been as successful in the Dover District as in other areas.
 - (iv) That Kent County Council be asked to actively look at changes brought by the Bus Services Act 2017 to improve services countywide, including the use of franchising.
- (b) That the apology from Stagecoach for the inadequate public consultation last summer and their assurance that they have learnt the lessons and will make improvements in the future be welcomed.

The meeting ended at 8.29 pm.