

Minutes of the meeting of the **DOVER JOINT TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY BOARD** held at the Council Offices, Whitfield on Thursday, 8 December 2022 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Chairman: Councillor J S Back

Councillors: M Bates
E A Biggs
T A Bond
D G Cronk
M F Hibbert
N S Kenton
S C Manion

Also present: Ms Susan Horn (Head of Business Improvement, Stagecoach South-East)
Ms Louise Sills (Operations Manager, Stagecoach South-East)
Mr B W Bano (Deal Town Council)
Mr R S Walkden (Dover Town Council)
Mr K Gowland (Kent Association of Local Councils)
Mr A P Minns (Kent Association of Local Councils)

Officers: Dover District Manager (Kent County Council Highways)
Public Transport Planning and Operations Manager (Kent County Council Highways) (attended remotely)
Head of Commercial Services
Transport and Parking Services Manager
Democratic Services Officer

103 APOLOGIES

It was noted that apologies for absence had been received from County Councillors N J Collor, D P Murphy and O C de R Richardson, and Dover Town Councillor P M Brivio.

104 APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that Dover Town Councillor R S Walkden was the nominated substitute for Councillor P M Brivio.

105 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

106 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 June 2022 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

107 BUS SERVICES

Members received a presentation and report from the Public Transport Planning and Operations Manager (Kent County Council Highways) (PTPOM). He advised

that the report had been written in response to a petition received with 1,200 signatures campaigning to save rural bus services. He summarised that bus services were provided in a de-regulated, privatised environment where services were operated by private companies based on an assessment which took into consideration demand, fares and costs in order to ensure that services were commercially sustainable. Whilst Kent County Council (KCC) had been able to provide subsidies for bus services in the past, reductions in general funding, which had necessitated the need to make savings of £2.2 million, meant that KCC was no longer able to intervene and replace services that were affected. Many services were at present being supported by Government funding in the form of the Local Transport Fund (LTF) and Bus Recovery Grant, but this funding was currently only secure until the end of June 2023 and its long-term future was unknown. Other factors affecting the commercial viability of services were the reduction in passenger numbers arising from the pandemic, increasing fuel and driver costs, a shortage of skilled drivers and engineers, and concessionary travel payments now being made on a sliding scale to reflect actual usage. The LTF had managed to save a number of services and alleviate the worst effects of the pandemic, but its withdrawal would undoubtedly cause some hardship, particularly to rural communities.

Louise Sills (Operations Manager, Stagecoach South-East) advised that passenger numbers in the Dover area were around 70% of pre-pandemic figures. She clarified that Government funding provided through the LTF had actually been extended until December 2022. Large hikes in fuel costs, together with a rise in salaries for drivers who were proving difficult to recruit and retain, had given the company no option but to increase fares, which had not risen since 2019, in April and again in November 2022. She reassured Members that she and her team at Dover were committed to providing a good service. She had recently visited Eastry and understood the concerns raised there about the loss of rural bus services. On a positive note, she advised that there were plans to introduce a demand response service for the Elvington/Eythorne area towards the end of February (albeit there was no firm date as yet). Susan Horn (Head of Business Improvement, Stagecoach South East) advised that her team strived to provide a reliable service for customers, focusing on punctuality and network improvements. One particular area for improvement was the dissemination of information to passengers on delays, pinchpoints, etc.

The Chairman commented that with the reduction in funding and the withdrawal of seven services it was likely that people would turn to their cars at a time when they were being encouraged to use public transport.

Councillor Linda Keen (Aylesham, Eythorne & Shepherdswell ward Member) spoke, querying why the service from Kingsdown to Deal had been reinstated when Aylesham and Eythorne had a greater need. She expressed dissatisfaction with the level of upfront information given out by KCC and Stagecoach, particularly to ward Members and especially in relation to the minibuss service. She had been inundated with e-mails from residents regarding bus services. She questioned how residents of outlying villages were expected to access the new leisure centre at Whitfield or make use of the new facilities offered by a regenerated Dover town centre. She urged KCC and Dover District Council to work together to identify sources of funding and submit applications. She suggested that KCC should contact Aylesham and Elvington to help them with a bid for the Community Bus Fund. She added that the bus network must be responsive to need and not profit driven.

Councillors Malcolm Ledger (Eythorne Parish Council) and Jamie Pout (Aylesham Parish Council) spoke and made the following points:

- Eythorne was particularly isolated given that it did not have a railway station
- The bus service to Eythorne had been withdrawn on 31 October and, whilst a school bus to Dover and Sandwich had been reinstated, this was due to be withdrawn in July.
- Residents would struggle getting to hospital appointments
- The withdrawal of services had created additional worry and uncertainty for families who were already under pressure because of the cost of living crisis.
- To change or stop services mid-year was unfair
- The level of usage of bus services depended on their regularity and convenience.
- Thousands of new houses were being built in Aylesham and it was debatable who would want to live in them if the train service was poor and there was no school bus service.

Ms Sills and Ms Horn reiterated that they sympathised with residents' concerns and advised that they would be visiting the towns and parishes.

The PTPOM reminded Members that the industry operated in a deregulated/privatised form and operators would always make operational decisions based on costs/profit. Services could not run at a loss so rural communities with smaller populations and usage were always likely to lose out. KCC was not in a position to control this. All it could do was use its funding (currently £6 million but reducing to approximately £4 million for 2022/23) to subsidise or pick up some of the services that had been withdrawn. These decisions were based on a set of criteria including purpose of journey, availability of other services, and access to schools, employment, shopping and health care. A value for money assessment would also be made based on the number of journeys taken calculated against the amount of funding needed. These decisions were not taken lightly and officers were well aware how critical these services were to residents. With regards to communications, information had been posted on the KCC website about changes to services. However, he acknowledged that more could and should have been done to publicise these changes. He advised that there was a 70-day notice period between operators notifying the Department for Transport and bus services being terminated. This was the period during which opportunities to provide alternative services would usually be explored.

In terms of funding, the PTPOM clarified that the Government had launched national bus strategy funding in 2021. KCC had made a successful bid and had been advised of an indicative allocation of £30 million, although the money had not yet been received. That being said, it was possible the funding would be reduced due to the national economic environment. Whilst not all the funding could be used for services, it was hoped that it would help to mitigate the impact of some of the changes. The Community Transport Grant was a pot of money offered every year and communities could bid for money to resolve local transport problems. He undertook to contact Aylesham and Elvington to offer help with submitting a bid.

Councillor M Bates thanked the Stagecoach representatives for attending the meeting, and commented that Stagecoach was a private company which was caught between running a viable business and solving social transport issues. He referred to the no. 92 service in Eythorne which had been used by pensioners and schoolchildren but was now withdrawn. He had received a number of letters from St Margaret's residents about their service which had been drastically reduced. He

observed that information about the Community Transport Grant did not appear to have been circulated to the towns and parishes who were seemingly unaware of it. As the deadline for applications was 13 January and coincided with the Christmas and New Year break, he asked that this be extended. He acknowledged that there had been a gap in communication between KCC and DDC, and lamented the fact there was no vehicle for discussions to take place about bus services. He noted that the Quality Bus Partnership (QBP) had not met for several years.

Councillor Ben Bano (Deal Town Council) welcomed the reinstatement of the no. 84 service in Deal, but noted that it did not appear to be running on a Saturday as per the timetable. He raised concerns about the lack of timetables at bus-stops in Deal, and the poor publicity and marketing of bus services generally. Councillor D G Cronk stressed that people were struggling with the cost of living yet they had no option but to carry on using their cars as there was either no bus service or not one that could be relied upon. Younger people had also been affected by the changes. He criticised the withdrawal of the no. 90 bus and agreed that the QBP would have helped in this situation if it had still been in existence. Councillor E A Biggs queried how much of the £4 million funding would be allocated to Dover district. He also questioned how new housing developments allocated in the emerging Local Plan would be affected if bus services could not be provided. He requested further information about the demand responsive service and urged Stagecoach to install electronic indicator boards at bus-stops.

Councillor T A Bond referred to there being two sets of subsidies – one being for Covid and the other from KCC. Most of the KCC subsidy had been spent in west Kent with part of the Covid subsidy spent in east Kent. The Covid subsidy had been due to finish but an extension was announced by the Government in mid-October. He expressed concerns about Stagecoach's attitude towards the marketing of bus services and its poor communication around changes. He felt that an opportunity had been missed to attract more passengers and keep services buoyant, caused by a lack of effort on Stagecoach's part. Making sense of services and routes was difficult for passengers, and much better information was needed. He expressed support for installing electronic boards at bus-stops. He was disappointed that the QBP, which had been a valuable forum in identifying issues and resolving them quickly, had been disbanded. He suggested that Stagecoach did not have a very good understanding of how its services were used and saw the decline of bus services as a national problem.

Ms Sills explained that she was not in a position to explain or defend decisions made at a higher level within the company. She accepted that there had been unacceptable delays in publicising timetable changes, but explained that the operating situation had changed so quickly that it had proved difficult to keep on top of publicity. She confirmed that the no. 84 bus ran four times a day, including on a Saturday, and took on board comments made about the public's lack of knowledge regarding the bus service from Deal to Canterbury. She recognised that paper timetables were popular with the public but they were expensive to produce so customers were directed to the website. Timetable displays were on order and would be at bus-stops soon. She acknowledged that the website could be better and accepted that the company had not got its communication right. She apologised for the mistakes that had been made and repeated her offer to visit the towns and parishes to show the human face of a big organisation.

The PTPOM undertook to find out what had happened in respect of the extension to the LTF. The technology for real-time information at bus-stops existed and relied upon equipment at the roadside and in the vehicle. The majority of operators were

equipped with ticket machines that supported real-time displays but there was obviously a cost involved. It was a fact that roadside displays had somewhat fallen out of favour because the same information was now available on mobile phone apps. Whilst it could not be installed everywhere, he agreed that increasing its use should be considered. He advised that funding received as a result of Covid had been rather erratic but vitally important nevertheless. Since Covid there had been a period of huge instability which was likely to continue into 2023. He shared the views of Members who lamented the demise of the QBP which had been superseded by the enhanced partnerships scheme of the Government's National Bus Strategy. Meetings associated with the partnerships scheme did not replicate those of the QBP. He agreed that partnerships should be district-led, and undertook to look at setting up district focus groups for all twelve districts in Kent whose focus could be similar to the QBP's.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

108 HIGHWAYS FORWARD WORKS PROGRAMME 2022/23 AND 2023/24

The Highway Manager (Dover) (HM) presented the report which provided an update and summarised schemes that had been programmed for delivery in 2022/23 and 2023/24. She advised that there had been a 'blitz' on potholes, the money for which came from a separate pot.

The Chairman mentioned Archers Court Road and the junction with Courtland Avenue. He requested that a single yellow line there be lengthened by 3.4 metres to prevent traffic meeting head on. The HM thought that the scheme had been funded by Whitfield Parish Council as part of its Highway Improvement Plan. In response to Councillor Bond, she clarified that the report only included roadworks that required road closures. A website called roadworks.org showed all roadworks except emergency works. She asked Members to let KCC know if they encountered problems around roadworks traffic management, such as unmanned traffic signals. In response to Councillor Cronk, she advised that KCC was looking to find a better solution to the bollard outside the Mill Road Co-op as it was taking up time and resources.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 7.45 pm.