

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SELECT COMMITTEE - PASSENGER RAIL SERVICES IN KENT

MINUTES of a meeting of the Select Committee - Passenger Rail Services in Kent held in the Stour Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Tuesday, 22 June 2010.

PRESENT: Miss S J Carey (Chairman), Mr D S Daley, Mr C Hibberd, Mr R J Parry and Councillor R Andrews

ALSO PRESENT: Mr N J D Chard

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr S Gasche (Public Transport Team Leader), Mr M Sutch (Head of Planning & Transport Strategy), Mr G Walters (Public Transport Manager (Medway Council)) and Ms D Fitch (Assistant Democratic Services Manager (Policy Overview))

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Response to the Select Committee report (Item. 1)

(1) Mr Chard introduced a report which updated the Select Committee on the general progress that had been made in this area since the Select Committee had submitted their report. Mr Chard explained that he had set up a Rail Forum to give the opportunity to raise issues with the train operator, Southeastern, and Network Rail

(2) Mr Chard stated that there could be a role for the Members of this Committee in using the knowledge that they have gained through the Select Committee process to inform a discussion on the issues that arose from the meetings of the forum. There was some discussion around how the Members could assist Mr Chard in getting clarity around the rail issues for Kent. It was suggested that for a Sub Committee of the KCC's Environment Highways and Waste Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee could be established for this purpose. It was also pointed out that Members of a number of other Select Committees had formed informal advisory groups to directly assist the Cabinet Member.

(2) The enormous impact that the introduction of High Speed 1 had had on Kent and Medway was discussed. The savings in journey time varied, with the Ashford service seeing the greatest reduction and benefit. On the North Kent Line the saving in journey time was only 10 minutes from stations east of Medway, and therefore the take up of this service was not so great. It was acknowledged that some areas such as Maidstone had not benefited from the introduction of this service and in some cases had seen a reduction in service. Mr Sutch stated that overall half of Kent districts had benefited from the introduction of High Speed 1, with the most disadvantaged area being Maidstone and other areas being hardly affected.

(3) In response to a question Mr Sutch explained that rail-heading did happen to some areas such as Sevenoaks, Paddock Wood and Headcorn, but the expected rail-heading to Ebbsfleet had not materialised; part of the explanation was the cost of parking at Ebbsfleet station.

(4) Mr Walters explained that usage of High Speed 1 from Medway was growing slowly as there was less of a clear cut benefit from the service. He emphasised the importance of the fast service to Cannon Street being retained.

(3) The Committee discussed the progress made on each of the 13 recommendations. Mr Chard, Mr Gasche, Mr Walters and Mr Sutch answered specific questions on the action taken to date and action proposed:-

Recommendation 1

(5) Mr Walters stated that although there was still some strong negative feeling in Medway about High Speed 1, it was important to put into context with the positive advantages that it had brought. He supported the Select Committee decision to unanimously welcome its introduction.

(6) In relation to the slow take up on the North Kent Line, Members were informed that that there had been a reduction in the number of carriages on the peak service to and from Thanet via Faversham. The rest of the service was relatively well used.

Recommendation 2

(6) The progress made with this recommendation was noted.

Recommendation 3

(7) The Chairman expressed the view that the Visit Kent campaign had not focused on how easy it was to get to Kent by train. She also reminded Members that Locate in Kent had told the Select Committee that they did not see High Speed 1 as a significant factor in attracting businesses and she wondered if they were focusing in the right way on the opportunities that it provided.

Recommendation 4

(8) The Chairman agreed that there had been losers from the introduction of High Speed 1 and that it was important to have the knowledge necessary to make a good case for the needs of residents to be met. The Members of this Select Committee could have a role in briefing officers at a strategic level and giving ideas about the areas where efforts could be made to lobby for improvements.

Recommendation 5

(9) Mr Sutch reported that the provision of a pedestrian link between Northfleet and Ebbsfleet stations would cost approximately £9m. The Members agreed that although this was desirable it was not affordable in the current economic climate. It is possible for travellers from the Dartford direction to access High Speed 1 train services at Gravesend Station rather than Northfleet.

Recommendation 6

(10) Mr Gasche explained that improvements to stations were being carried out with various officers within Kent Highways, including improvements at High Speed stations in Thanet and the provision of bus service information boards at most High Speed stations in East Kent.

(11) Members reaffirmed their aspiration for stations to be clean and safe. They also believed there should be links to other modes of transport as part of the whole travelling experience. Mr Sutch referred to the cut in funding of £4m from the Integrated Transport budget in the current year and the expectation of even greater cuts next year part of which would have been used to deliver improved connectivity between road and rail.

(12) Members emphasised that connectivity was key and in some areas more important than the High Speed service.

Recommendation 7

(13) Mr Gasche reported on the progress that had been made including the introduction of Plus Bus tickets for use at the train destination. He stated that the introduction of Open Jaw tickets for rail journeys was unlikely, but tickets already allowed travel between two stations via different routes. Officers were encouraging travel operators to work together to form good quality rail partnerships.

(14) In relation to a question on the introduction of a Kent-wide “Oyster” type smart card, Mr Gasche stated that discussions were being held with the main operators.

Recommendation 8

(15) Members emphasised the importance of working in partnership with District Councils and rail and bus operators to encourage the provision of links between trains and bus provision, especially in commuter areas. Mr Gasche also explained that officers encouraged bus operators to provide evening commuter services to connect with both High Speed and Mainline evening trains from London.

Recommendation 9

(16) Members referred to the high cost of parking at Ebbsfleet station which did not encourage people to access the High Speed service from that station. Mr Sutch explained that the car park was not owned by the rail operators and that he would be concerned if there was significant rail-heading at Ebbsfleet as the road infrastructure was not adequate for the volume of traffic that could be generated.

Recommendation 10

(17) Mr Walters confirmed that colleagues at Medway Council would like to continue to work with colleagues at Kent County Council in relation to matters relating to rail and associated transport services.

Recommendation 11

(18) Mr Gasche informed the Committee that he attended the Thameslink Consortium and that they were aware of KCC's aspirations for a branch of the Thameslink service to terminate at Maidstone.

(19) Regarding the renewal of the Southeastern franchise in Kent in 2014, the Chairman stated that it was important to continue to lobby government to achieve the best outcomes for Kent.

Recommendation 12

(20) Mr Gasche reported that a meeting was being arranged between the Chief Executive of Gatwick Airport and Mr Chard which would provide the opportunity to set out the Select Committee's aspirations for direct rail services from Kent and Medway to Gatwick Airport. This was not contained within the new Southern franchise in 2008. To introduce this service would involve finding support from a number of sources and Kent did not have the revenue funding for this but could market the new service. The Gatwick public transport access plan was important as a large number of staff and travellers came from Kent. Councillor Andrews supported the proposal to establish this service.

(21) Regarding rail links to Kent International and Lydd airports, Mr Sutch referred to work carried out by consultants to look at extending High Speed rail links to Thanet, but the outcome was that these would not be cost effective. The way forward would be to look at reducing the journey time on the existing line. Network Rail had carried out a preliminary study which had shown that potentially up to 10 minutes could be cut off the journey time between Thanet and Ashford. Network Rail is carrying out more detailed work on these improvements and hope to complete it by the end of the year . Mr Sutch also stated that it was not viable to have a rail passenger service to Lydd airport, as the line was in a relatively poor state of repair and was only currently used to transport infrequent slow-speed freight to and from Dungeness Power Station.

Recommendation 13

(22) Mr Sutch reported that there would be clarity in a few months time around what rail services would be operating during the Olympics as this was important to help the tourist industry in Kent and Medway plan for the significant opportunities it presented them in 2012

(23) Mr Walters expressed concern about the situation on the North Kent Line and the current indications that there would not be High Speed domestic services linking Gravesend and the Medway Towns to Ebbsfleet and Stratford. He confirmed that Medway Council were part of the Olympic delivery discussion group

(24) RESOLVED that the progress made on the recommendations be noted and further consideration be given to the way in which the expertise gained by the Members of the Select Committee could be put to best use to inform the work being carried out by the Cabinet Member.