

Decision – 22/00052 – Bus Subsidy Withdrawal

Call-in requested by Mr Rich Lehmann (Green & Independent Group) and Mr Mike Sole (Liberal Democrats)

Reasons supplied by the calling-in Members detailed below and a summary of the Call-in validity assessment by Democratic Services is appended.

Reasons submitted for call-in:

REASON 1

17.73c – The decision was not taken in accordance with the principles of decision making set out in 8.5.

8.5(a) Action proportionate to the desired outcome.

The impact these subsidy cuts will have to communities across Kent - particularly the rural communities affected, and the elderly, disabled and low-income members of those communities – is too great a cost for the savings these measures will bring. This is not necessarily apparent looking at the published decision, but becomes so when taking into account the additional costs which will be borne by the council to provide bespoke replacement services to mitigate the damage of the decision.

Replacement services includes new routes designed to fill the network gaps arising from the decision or other network changes made as a result of the decision including the BSIP mitigation funding. Maintained services, post consultation, (Kent Karrier and 208 Service) do not have clear funding arrangements and it is not made clear whether this funding could have been used for other routes, whether the funding is sustainable and what criteria have been applied to determine these routes should have been retained.

£150k cost shunt to CYPE is based on current eligibility but does not take into account potential wider impact of increased demand because of other network reductions / route loss through this decision.

REASON 2

8.5(d) A presumption in favour of openness.

When opposition councillors requested to call the decision to cut £2.2m from supported bus services from the council's budget earlier in the year, they were told that this was not possible as no decision had been made. Yet at the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee meeting in July, Mr Brazier stated that "the £2.2m saving is immutable" and "that money is no longer in my budget and I cannot spend money that I do not have". Both statements suggest that the key decision was taken back in February, rather than in July, prior to the consultation and prior to the creation of a meaningful EqIA.

REASON 3

17.73a – The decision is not in line with the council's policy framework.

Community Strategy – Vision for Kent 2012-2022

Ambition 2 – Tackle disadvantage. And specifically, 2.3 – “Ensure there is a choice of high quality and accessible services that will tackle disadvantage”

Although the buses are a privately run service which KCC provides subsidy for, rather than a function of KCC, this decision will disproportionately impact elderly and disabled residents and those without access to private transport. This impact will be felt both directly, in the removal of people's access to transport; and indirectly, as the removal of mobility will reduce or remove resident's opportunities to access health services, and services for which KCC is directly responsible, such as schools and libraries.

REASON 4

*Ambition 3 – To put citizens in control. And specifically, 3.2 – “To encourage a more resilient society, where communities have more **influence and involvement in the shape and delivery of services** which overcomes the need for remote and one size fits all solutions from public agencies”*

Referring back to the earlier point about the saving being 'immutable' by July as that decision was made at the budget setting meeting in February. It feels, and certainly looks to residents, as though the public consultation had little chance of preventing the proposed cuts. Over 2,500 responses to the consultation and a variety of petitions with many thousands of signatories were calling for these services to be saved, but it seems that none were saveable as the budget had to be met. In addition to this, the method of 'pounds per journey' used to determine which services were considered for removal is a fairly 'one size fits all' solution. Would it not have been possible to include all of the supported bus contracts in the consultation to gauge the potential impacts of cuts to all of them? Or at least chosen a selection based on a wider set of parameters, such as the fact that cuts to bus services in rural areas with no access to other public transport options will have greater costs in terms of the disruption of communities, and greater carbon footprints for replacement journeys made by car or taxi?

REASON 5

Framing Kent's Future – page 37, point 6 – Incentivise people to choose alternative travel options to the car by prioritising the maintenance and creation of safe and accessible walking routes and cycle lanes, and providing bus priority where appropriate.

This decision will increase reliance on cars rather than reduce it.

REASON 6

Framing Kent's Future – page 37, point 8 – Work with our partners through the Kent Enhanced Bus Partnership and with Government to explore sustainable and commercially viable options for providing bus transport to meet people's needs, making the best use of Bus Service Improvement Plan funding.

As has been noted a number of times across many meetings. Although all members are aware that the BSIP funding cannot be used as a subsidy for the services we currently support, the aims of the Bus Service Improvement Plans and the Bus Back Better strategy are to provide a wide-ranging series of improvements and incentives to encourage residents to use public transport. Cutting services across the county before those incentives have been actioned means we will not be making the best use of BSIP funding.

The decision also does not make clear what consideration has been given to the impact of this decision on the wider network. It is not clear whether the decision puts other bus services at risk by removing the funding from bus operators and whether this can definitely be addressed by BSIP funding.

REASON 7

Framing Kent's Future – page 39, point 7 – Create the right conditions to ensure there is a community-based offer of activities for young people that is led by the community and meets the needs of a diverse population

The removal of bus services from rural areas will lead to many young people not being able to access any youth provision.

REASON 8

Framing Kent's Future – page 45, point 8 – Turn the curve on transport emissions and road pollution by developing approaches to road space, parking, public transport and electric vehicle infrastructure with a presumption towards more sustainable and low carbon travel modes.

This decision will increase emissions and road pollution by putting additional cars on Kent's roads. If bus services are reintroduced to any of the areas which are about to lose them entirely, it will be harder for those services to be commercially sustainable as some of the residents that currently use the services will have made alternative arrangements and created new habits which don't make use of public transport.

The full emissions and carbon impact of the decision is not explained in the paperwork, no specific mitigations are suggested and no explanation as to how this squares with the low carbon ambitions is set out.

Reason 9

In addition to the above, I am unaware as to whether one of the questions asked by Mr Baldock at the July Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee meeting has been answered. He noted that the EqIA said that the decision would not have an impact on Race and questioned whether any attempts had been made during the consultation to contact and hear from members of the Gypsy and Roma traveller community.

Democratic Services Review

Summary of Call-in assessment:

Call-in deemed valid under Reasons 1, 6 and 8 – Proportionality of decision, working with partners to explore commercially viable and sustainable options for bus transport and reducing emissions.

CALL-IN to be progressed to Scrutiny Committee consideration – all implementation postponed pending Scrutiny Committee review.