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**From: Peter Osborne, Cabinet Member for Highways & Transport**

**Simon Jones, Corporate Director for Growth Environment and Transport**

**To: Growth, Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee – 5<sup>th</sup> May 2026**

**Subject: Gravesend to Tilbury Ferry service final report**

**Decision no: N/A**

**Classification: *Unrestricted***

**Past Pathway of report: N/A**

**Future Pathway of report: N/A**

**Electoral Division:** Gravesend East and Gravesham Rural: Georgia Foster, Garry Sturley, Diane Morton.

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**Summary:** The purpose of this report is to provide a final response to the petition, setting out that following Thurrock Council's withdrawal of funding for the ferry service, and despite extensive efforts by Kent County Council, no alternative funders have come forward. Work to identify a potential commercial solution is now being led by the Port of London Authority, which KCC will continue to support.

**Recommendation(s):**

Members are asked to note contents of this final report and the Council's ongoing engagement with partners in relation to the future of the Gravesend–Tilbury ferry service.

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**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Ferry service operating between Gravesend and Tilbury provided an alternative mode of transport enabling passengers to commute between Kent and Thurrock.
- 1.2 The service had previously been supported through subsidy by each Council (Kent and Thurrock). Kent had been the lead in procuring and managing the contract with the previous Ferry operator.
- 1.3 In April 2024 the Ferry service was ceased due to the withdrawal of funding from Thurrock Council. Kent was unable to bear the full cost of continuing the service due to the high levels of subsidy required.
- 1.4 Since the cessation of the Ferry service in April 2024, there has been local and political interest in reviving the service. The matter was pickup by the Thames Estuary Growth Board who were a government agency who until recently were

leading on efforts to reinstate the service, which consisted of various partners including Kent, Thurrock, Gravesham and the Port of London Authority.

- 1.5 The Growth Estuary Thames body has since been disbanded, and the activity is now being led by the Port of London Authority.
- 1.6 Kent has engaged with the previous board and now the Port of London Authority and contributed to the costs of a study commissioned by the board to determine whether the Ferry service could operate wholly commercially or through a contractual arrangement with the various partners.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 As this subject has previously been reported, only a brief summary of the background is included.
- 2.2 A passenger ferry has operated across the River Thames between Gravesend and Tilbury for centuries and, until 2000, ran without public subsidy or local authority involvement. After the operator collapsed in 2000, fares were insufficient to cover costs and the service became subsidised, with Kent County Council (KCC) and Thurrock Council funding on a 50/50 basis and KCC holding and managing the contract.
- 2.3 Historic data indicated around 60% of passengers travelled from Thurrock to Kent for education, employment and shopping, with Kent use linked mainly to employment and onward connections. In the last full year, around 113,000 journeys were made; costs were forecast at c.£440k, with c.£230k from fares and a subsidy requirement of c.£210k.
- 2.4 The contract was due to expire in October 2023; a short extension to March 2024 was negotiated to enable tendering and secure a longer-term arrangement from April 2024. During those negotiations Thurrock Council advised it could no longer fund the service and withdrew its contribution
- 2.5 To avoid an unmanaged cessation, KCC funded the service in full from October 2023 to March 2024 to allow reasonable notice to passengers, consultation, an Equalities Impact Assessment and exploration of alternatives.
- 2.6 As the ferry is a non-statutory service, KCC cannot be expected to fund it alone and the contract ended in March 2024. Reinstatement is not a KCC obligation. KCC remains one stakeholder within a multi-agency working group led by the Port of London Authority.

## **3. Options considered and dismissed, and associated risk**

- 3.1 Options to fund or deliver the ferry service directly by KCC were considered and dismissed due to the service being non-statutory, the absence of an allocated budget, and the financial risk of ongoing subsidy. KCC will therefore focus on its statutory obligations and value-for-money services. Alternative options continue to be explored through work led by the Port of London Authority, which KCC officers will support.

#### **4. Financial Implications**

- 4.1 The cost to reintroduce the Ferry service is currently unknown, and work continues via the Port of London Authority to establish the service levels and subsequent operating costs.
- 4.2 Based on previous subsidy levels required to sustain the service and inflationary cost pressures in recent years, it would be highly likely that greater levels of subsidy would be required to support the operation of the Ferry service.
- 4.3 KCC has no budget assigned to support the Ferry service; any subsequent agreement to contribute to the service would require moving funds from other sources. If, in future, relevant external funding opportunities were to arise, these would be considered in the normal way alongside other council priorities, subject to affordability and governance.

#### **5. Legal implications**

- 5.1 There are no legal implications to KCC for this activity.

#### **6. Other corporate implications**

- 6.1 Should The Ferry service being reintroduced and supported by KCC, communication and consultation would likely be required.

#### **7. Conclusions**

- 7.1 The cessation of the ferry service did not result from the actions of Kent County Council alone, and responsibility for any future reintroduction would not rest solely with the Council. Thurrock withdrew their funding to support the service during negotiations for an extension from October 2023 to March 2024 leaving KCC to solely manage and fund the contract until it expired.
- 7.2 The Ferry service is a non-statutory service, and KCC is not able to fund or manage the contract.
- 7.3 Discussions with the Port of London Authority are continuing with all interested parties to seek a potential commercial solution or funding formula to re-introduce the service.

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#### **8. Recommendation(s):**

- 8.1 Members are asked to note contents of this final report and the Council's ongoing engagement with partners in relation to the future of the Gravesend–Tilbury ferry service.
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#### **9. Contact details**

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