

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held Online on Wednesday, 10 February 2021.

PRESENT: Mr A Booth (Chairman), Mr J Wright (Vice-Chairman), Mr M A C Balfour, Mr P V Barrington-King, Mrs P M Beresford, Mrs R Binks, Mr R H Bird, Mr D L Brazier (Substitute for Mr A M Ridgers), Mr G Cooke, Mrs T Dean, MBE, Mr D Farrell, Mr R C Love, OBE and Dr L Sullivan

ALSO PRESENT: Mr M D Payne (Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport) and Mr E E C Hotson

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs B Cooper (Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport), Mr B Watts (General Counsel), Mrs S Holt-Castle (Interim Director of Environment, Planning and Enforcement), Mr S Gasche (Rail Project Manager), Mr M Welch (Principal Transport Planner) and Mrs A Taylor (Scrutiny Research Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

30. Declarations of Interests by Members in items on the Agenda for this Meeting *(Item A3)*

No declarations were made.

31. Decision 21/00011 - Kent Rail Strategy 2021 *(Item B1)*

Mr M Payne, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport; Mrs B Cooper, Corporate Director Growth, Environment and Transport; Mrs S Holt-Castle, Director of Environment, Planning and Enforcement; Mr S Gasche, Rail Project Manager and Mr M Welch, Principal Transport Planner were in attendance for this item.

1. The Chairman introduced the item and invited the proposer of the call-in, Mr Bird, to provide an overview of the grounds for his call-in request, Mr Farrell as the seconder and Mr Hotson as a local Member were invited to speak in addition. Mr Farrell reserved his right to speak.
2. Mr Bird stated his disappointment that his request that Cllr Martin Cox, Leader of Maidstone Borough Council and Mr Geoff Miles, Chairman of the Kent and Medway Economic Partnership be permitted to make verbal representations was not agreed by the Chairman. Section 17.63(e) of the Constitution was cited, that the Chairman and Group Spokespersons on the Scrutiny Committee shall agree which other witnesses are asked to attend, with the Chairman being responsible for the final decision where agreement could not be reached. The Chairman asserted that written representations would have satisfied the criteria.

3. Mr Bird presented the justification for his call-in request. He gave an overview of rail travel trends in Maidstone, addressed previous Kent travel strategies, and cited previous commitments and dialogue with the Secretary of State for Transport and Minister of State for Railways. He noted the demand from commuters for a direct service to the City of London of one-hour or less, which had been reflected in previous policy documents. It was contended that the Thameslink service supported in the Kent Rail Strategy 2021 could take up to 75 minutes, which contradicted the Key Requirements of the Rail Action Plan for Kent (2011). Mr Bird raised his concerns that the support of a Thameslink service between Maidstone East and London Blackfriars via the Catford loop could inhibit the development of faster Thameslink services in the future.
4. Mr Hotson outlined his concerns with the Maidstone East Thameslink service supported in the Rail Strategy. He stressed the need for direct Thameslink services between Maidstone East and London Blackfriars and suggested that support be given to a faster service, than that endorsed in the strategy. It was noted that a significant volume of commuter road traffic from Maidstone to Staplehurst and Marden stations had developed as a result of the town's poor rail links to the City of London, a comparison between rail services on the South East main line and Maidstone line was made.
5. Mr Payne confirmed the role of the Kent Rail Strategy, to act as an advisory document to central government, which gave KCC the opportunity to shape and inform future policy decisions. He informed the Committee that KCC did not have access to Department for Transport rail strategy plans. Mr Payne confirmed his attendance at a series of meetings involving Kent MPs and the Minister of State for Railways and that subsequent MP-Minister meetings had been conducted, the outcome of which was anticipated. He stressed the need to continue to campaign central government for rail service improvements.
6. Mr Gasche, the Kent Rail Strategy policy author, confirmed that the strategy supported the principle of Thameslink services between Maidstone East and London. He stated that serious operational difficulties, which included limitations with automatic train operations at stations and track layouts, required services to travel via the Catford loop. Mr Gasche reassured Members that the supported service would be 'semi-fast' and take 65 minutes from Maidstone East to London Blackfriars. In relation to government strategy, Mr Gasche confirmed that the Department for Transport were aware of the impact operational limitations had on future services.
7. A Member asked to what extent KCC had influence on the implementation of the services supported in the strategy. Mr Payne confirmed that whilst the strategy put central government under no obligation, it provided a record of Kent's priorities which informed and influenced policy decisions concerning the county.
8. It was noted by a Member that KCC was a partner in the development of West Malling and Kings Hill and that fast rail services to London were key attracting

factors for residents. The current quality of rail services on the Maidstone line was questioned.

9. Mr Payne was asked whether the inclusion of support for faster Thameslink services, which avoided the Catford loop, in the Rail Strategy was possible. He confirmed that an issue faced in the production of the Rail Strategy was the unavailability of the Department for Transport's latest proposals and timelines. It was asserted that an amendment to the Strategy's recommendations was possible.
10. A Member acknowledged that whilst KCC did not have responsibilities for rail services it had a role to play in ensuring that visitors and residents had good quality services. A comparison between different authorities and their rail advocacy campaigns was made, the Member asserted that KCC needed to greater understand commuting patterns.
11. It was commented by a Member that future Thameslink services from Maidstone East needed to be trialled and delivered on an interim basis to permit service evaluation and adaptations if necessary.
12. The impact of new ways of working on future rail service demand and capacity, which included ticketing; service regularity and timetabling were noted by a Member. Rail operators were encouraged to re-engage effectively with passengers following the pandemic.
13. Mr Payne was asked to strengthen the recommendations of the Rail Strategy to include the support of Thameslink services from Maidstone East with connections to Crossrail and the wider underground network. Mr Payne proposed an amendment of the Kent Rail Strategy 2021 to the Committee, the intent to reinforce KCC's commitment to support Thameslink services from Maidstone to the City of London was cited.
14. Mr Farrell exercised his right. He thanked Mr Hotson for providing context from a local perspective and stressed the need to explore commuter services from Maidstone further.
15. Mr Watts informed Members of the Committee's call-in powers, which included the power to express comments to Cabinet or request reconsideration. He confirmed that recommended amendments to the Kent Rail Strategy 2021, following the requisite administrative changes to the Strategy, would return to Cabinet for noting. It was noted that Cabinet next met, Monday 15 March 2021.
16. A Member asked for clarification on the criteria which permitted the attendance of external witnesses at the Committee. Mr Watts stated that an amendment of the Constitution would be required to specify the codified position on the attendance of external witnesses at Scrutiny explicitly. The scope for interpretation of Section 17.63(e) of the Constitution was acknowledged.

17. Mr Bird moved and Mr Farrell seconded that **“The Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Leader of the Council write to the Secretary of State for Transport, requesting that the proposal to introduce the service terminating at Blackfriars be reconsidered, and that priority be given to commencing the previously promised fast Thameslink services from Maidstone as soon as possible.”**

18. Members voted on the motion. The vote was lost.

19. Mr Bird moved and Mr Farrell seconded **“That the Scrutiny Committee should recommend the following amendment to paragraph 4.15 of the Kent Rail Strategy 2021:**

‘This strategy therefore calls again on the Rail Minister to approve the operation of this last leg of the whole Thameslink service programme. At the very least this would be an initial all-day service between the county town and Blackfriars, whilst retaining the ambition and working towards a through service in due course to St Pancras and on to Cambridge allowing full interconnectivity with Crossrail and the wider underground network.

That the section on page 62 of the strategy is further amended as follows:

‘Rail Minister to approve the operation of Maidstone East section of the Thameslink service programme, with an initial all-day service between the county town and Blackfriars, while retaining the ambition of a through service to St Pancras and beyond.’”

20. Members voted on the amendment. The vote was won.

21. The Chairman thanked Mr Payne, Mr Gasche and Mr Watts for their information, advice and attendance.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee should recommend the following amendment to paragraph 4.15 of the Kent Rail Strategy 2021:

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POST MEETING NOTE: The agreed amendments were made to the Kent Rail Strategy 2021, the amended report was placed on the 15 March 2021 Cabinet agenda for noting.