

From: Peter Osborne, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport
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To: Environment and Communities Cabinet Committee – 17 July 2025

Subject: Petition scheme debate - Bring back the essential Gravesend-Tilbury Ferry service

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: Position statement responding to the petition on Gravesend to Tilbury Ferry. The petition wording is “We the undersigned petition the council to bring back the essential Gravesend-Tilbury Ferry service

Position Statement

1. Introduction

- 1.1 KCC recognises and appreciates the impact caused to communities from the cessation of the ferry service.
- 1.2 This statement outlines the history of the service, the factors that led to its ceasing to operate and the current status of work being led by the Thames Estuary Growth Board to reinstate it.

2. Background

- 2.1 There is a history of a passenger ferry service operating on the River Thames between Gravesend and Tilbury dating back hundreds of years. Until 2000 the service had operated without any public funding or local authority involvement.
- 2.2 Following the collapse of the then operator in 2000, the Gravesend to Tilbury passenger ferry has required subsidy to support its operation as the value of the passenger fares alone were not sufficient to cover the costs of operation.
- 2.3 Since 2000, the subsidy required to support the service was met jointly by KCC and Thurrock Council who shared the subsidy cost on a 50/50 basis. KCC held and managed the contract on behalf of both authorities.
- 2.4 Before the service ceased, it operated every 30 minutes on Mondays to Saturdays between 0540 and 1900 providing a regular 5-minute crossing for passengers offering a quicker, cheaper, and more reliable alternative to travelling by other modes including private car journeys using the Dartford crossing. Historic data suggests that around 60% of passengers originated on the Thurrock side and travelled to Kent for education, employment and for shopping opportunities. Kent use related to employment and use for onward connections.

- 2.5 In the last full year of operation, 113,000 journeys were made on the service. At the point of cessation, the cost of providing the ferry was forecast as being £440k of which £230k was expected to be met by passenger fares, leaving a subsidy requirement of £210k.

3. Cessation

- 3.1 The previous contract for the ferry service was due to expire in October 2023. To secure the long-term future of the service negotiations were held with the operator around a short-term extension to the contract until March 2024, allowing for a tender to be issued with a view to securing a new long-term contract from April 2024.
- 3.2 During negotiations around the short-term extension, Thurrock Council advised KCC that it was no longer in a position to fund the service and effectively withdrew its funding.
- 3.3 Confronted with a position where the service could cease at little notice to passengers, KCC continued to negotiate a contract extension with the operator and ultimately met the cost of the service in full (i.e. without Thurrock's funding) for the period between October 2023 and March 2024 to allow for a managed exit, reasonable notice for passengers and exploration of alternative solutions.
- 3.4 KCC could not be expected to fund the service in full and so in the absence of Thurrock's funding, the contract for the service expired in March 2024 following a public consultation, informing an Equality Impact Assessment, and having provided more reasonable notice to passengers.
- 3.5 The cessation of the service was not owing to any decision made by KCC who remained committed to the service and had funding in place. It was triggered by Thurrock's withdrawal of funding. However, as the holder of the contract and the sole funder of the service in the final months of operation, KCC have been held accountable for its demise and its reintroduction.

4. Current status

- 4.1 The service has not operated since March 2024 but significant local and political interest in seeing it reinstated remains owing to the impacts on previous users and the local areas.
- 4.2 As a result, the matter has been picked up by the Thames Estuary Growth Board who are a government appointed body engaged with the aim of *'working as a single voice to accelerate fair growth across the Thames Estuary'*.
- 4.3 The Growth Board has convened a working group consisting of KCC, Thurrock Council, Gravesham Council, the Port of London Authority, the Port of Tilbury and prospective ferry operators to explore the opportunities to reinstate the service either through a different commercial and contractual model that would not require subsidy or through the identification of other funding partners.

- 4.4 In 2024, the working group commissioned an external consultant to explore these opportunities, and this work concluded with a report provided which was accepted by the partners earlier in 2025. KCC has supported this process fully, contributed towards the cost of the study work and remains positively engaged with the working group.
- 4.5 This study concluded that when accounting for updated operating costs, even when factoring in potential passenger and revenue growth linked to development in the area and if increasing passenger fares significantly that a significant subsidy requirement would remain. It is not immediately obvious where this subsidy may come from, and this matter is being taken up by the Growth Board who we believe to be engaged with multiple agencies including central Government.