
From: Peter Osborne, Cabinet Member for Highways & Transport

Simon Jones, Corporate Director for Growth Environment and Transport

To: Growth, Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee - 13 January 2026

Subject: Gravesend to Tilbury Ferry service update report

Decision no: N/A

Classification: *Unrestricted*

Past Pathway of report: *Not applicable.*

Future Pathway of report: N/A

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

Summary: The Gravesend to Tilbury Ferry services ceased to operate in April 2024 as a result of Thurrock Council withdrawing their proportion of funding for the service.

Subsequently, KCC received a petition to reintroduce the service. As the signatories to the petition exceeded 1,000, in accordance with established process a response and update to the Environment and Transport Council Committee is required.

The paper outlines the history of the service and the factors that led to its cessation. It also covers the study work being led by the Thames Estuary Growth Board to consider whether it is viable to reinstate the service.

Recommendation(s):

Members are asked to note Kent's ongoing support and engagement with the Thames Estuary Growth Board (lead organisation on study on future funding options).

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) to enable the service to operate. 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. Subsequently the matter has been taken 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'.
- 1.5 The board consists of various partners; KCC, Thurrock Council, Gravesham Council, the Port of London Authority, the Port of Tilbury and prospective Ferry operators.
- 1.6 Kent has since engaged with the newly devised board 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 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.
- 2.6 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.

- 2.7 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.
- 2.8 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
- 2.9 The Ferry Service is a non-statutory service and as such KCC could not be expected to fund the service in full. Following the withdrawal of Thurrock's funding, the contract for the service expired in March 2024 following a public consultation, informing an Equalities Impact Assessment and having provided more reasonable notice to passengers.
- 2.10 The cessation of the service was not due to any decision made by KCC and at the time we remained committed to the service and had match funding in place. However, as the holder of the contract and the remaining sole funder of the service in the final months of operation, it was incorrectly viewed by many that KCC were solely responsible for its demise and its subsequent reintroduction.
- 2.11 Consistent with this, it is accepted that reinstatement of the service is not a KCC only consideration and that KCC alone cannot reintroduce the service. This is reflected in the ongoing approach in that we are one of a number of stakeholders on a working group being led by the Thames Estuary Growth Board but also consisting of Thurrock Council, Gravesham Council, The Port of London Authority, The Port of Tilbury and prospective ferry operators

3. Options considered and dismissed, and associated risk

- 3.1 The options for the Ferry service continue to be explored through the study work being commissioned by the Thames Estuary Growth Board.
- 3.2 It has been dismissed that KCC is able to bear full level of subsidy for the sole reintroduction of the Ferry Service and does not currently have budget assigned for this operation.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1 The cost to reintroduce the Ferry service is currently unknown and work continues via the Thames estuary Growth board 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 Currently there is no budget assigned to support the Ferry service; any subsequent agreement to contribute to the service, should it not be commercially viable, would require additional funding from other sources.

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 ferry service when operating was supported financially by both Thurrock and KCC with KCC holding the contract with the operator.

7.2 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.

7.3 The Ferry service is a non-statutory service, and it should not be for KCC only to fund or manage a contract.

7.4 Negotiations, via the Thames Estuary Growth Board are continuing with all interested parties to seek a potential solution to re-introduce the service.

8. Recommendation(s):

8.1 Members are asked to note Kent's ongoing support and engagement with the Thames Estuary Growth Board (lead organisation on study on future funding options).

9. Contact details

Report Author: Shane Bushell Job title: Head of Public Transport (Interim) Telephone number: 03000 413552 Email address: Shane.Bushell@kent.gov.uk	Director: Andrew Loosemore Job title: Interim Director of Highways & Transportation Telephone number: 03000 411652 Email address: Andrew.Loosemore@kent.gov.uk
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