

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE EXTERNAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 10 NOVEMBER
2009**

PRESENT: Councillor Hotson (Chairman)
Councillors Batt, Mrs Gibson, Marchant, Sherreard,
Yates and Warner

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence was received from Councillors

65. The Committee to consider whether all items on the agenda should be web-cast.

Resolved: That all items on the agenda be web-cast.

66. Apologies.

Apologies were received from Councillor Mrs Paterson.

67. Notification of Substitute Members.

It was noted that Councillor Warner was substituting for Councillor Mrs Paterson.

68. Notification of Visiting Members.

It was noted that Councillor FitzGerald was a visiting Member with an interest in Agenda Items 8 and 9, "Maidstone Rail Services", as he was the Chairman of the Kent Community Rail Partnership.

69. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

There were no disclosures.

70. To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information.

Resolved: That all items be taken in public as proposed.

71. Minutes of the Meetings Held on 11 August, 7 September and 13 October 2009.

With regard to the meeting held on 7 September 2009 to scrutinise the Safer Maidstone Partnership (SMP), the Chairman informed the Committee that he had received a letter from the Chairman of the Kent Police Authority congratulating the Committee on a productive and positive meeting. The Chairman had also met with the co-chairmen of the SMP to

develop protocols for scrutiny of the SMP, and these would be brought to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration and approval.

Further to the Councillor Call for Action (CCfA) considered on 13 October 2009, the Chairman informed Members that the Council's representative on the Kent County Council Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) would be raising the issues from the CCfA at the HOSC meeting on 27 November 2009 when the redesign of hospital services in Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells was being debated. Permission would also be requested at this meeting to refer the matter to the Secretary of State for Health. The Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager confirmed that no response to the recommendations made to NHS West Kent and the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust had been received.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meetings held on 11 August, 7 September and 13 October 2009 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

72. Maidstone Rail Services - Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership.

The Chairman introduced the Committee's review of rail services in the Borough to the witnesses and members of the public, highlighting that it was led by a concern over future services. The aim of the review was to identify whether existing services were sufficient, what improvements were already underway and what improvements were needed for the future.

Ian Paterson, Community Rail Partnership Project Officer, informed Members that he was a part-time project officer for the Medway Valley Line (MVL). The Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership had been set up in 2005 and there were over 50 similar partnerships in the country. Partners included local authorities, rail companies and the communities along the MVL, and the partnership met approximately 5 times per year. Funding came from Kent County Council, Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council, rail service providers and some parish councils. The partnership was hosted by Action with Communities in Rural Kent which was a registered charity.

Mr Paterson highlighted that the partnership was not a lobbying or commuter group; rather it existed to promote awareness and usage of the line and improve facilities. It also responded to consultations where appropriate. The partnership looked to engage the community, bring them back to the railway and reduce traffic congestion. The partnership distributed newsletters and timetables to over 40 outlets along the MVL and had installed notice boards at each station. Bespoke station guides were produced for some stations highlighting information on station facilities and onward travel arrangements. The partnership also worked with Network Rail and Southeastern who had repainted and refurbished stations along the entire line in 2009, including installation of new seats, customer information screens, CCTV and shelters. The canopy at Maidstone West had also been replaced.

Passenger figures had increased by 5-6% over the last year, which was better than comparable lines without a community rail partnership. A survey carried out in 2008 had highlighted concerns over the quality of the rolling stock, a lack of communication with passengers, vandalism and people not paying fares; these issues had now been addressed, which may have contributed to the rise in passenger numbers.

The partnership had campaigned for a larger car park at East Farleigh station, resulting in an expansion from 6 spaces to 40. A campaign to have rail replacement buses call at East Farleigh, rather than stopping almost a mile away, had also been successful. The MVL had joined the Kent-wide penalty fare scheme in October 2009 to reduce incidences of people using the line without paying. Rolling stock on the line had been improved; previously there had been 3-car trains without toilets but these had been replaced by 2-coach trains with toilets. Work had been undertaken with the University College for the Creative Arts to produce murals for display in the ticket hall and platform at Maidstone West station. Special events on the line, for example "music trains" and commentated journeys, were arranged to increase the profile of the service. Improvements had also been made to connections and service times, for example extending some journeys to Tonbridge rather than finishing in Paddock Wood.

The Chairman asked what problems Mr Paterson anticipated in the medium term, and what the bigger picture was for the MVL. Mr Paterson stated that the biggest problem medium term was that funding for the partnership was on a year-on-year basis so medium to long-term planning could not take place. With regard to the bigger picture, Mr Paterson hoped that the high speed trains to London would go from Maidstone West station, which would involve using the MVL, and he looked for support from the Committee for this. Mr Paterson also hoped that peak, as well as off-peak, services could be extended to Tonbridge, though there were issues with capacity at Tonbridge Station. There had been support for extending some services to Redhill or Gatwick, however the Department for Transport (DfT) had felt that there was not enough of a cost benefit to this. Southeastern saw the most potential on the northern side of the line in view of its potential link with high speed services. There was some capacity on services, particularly off-peak, therefore work was being carried out to increase off-peak usage.

In response to a question, Mr Paterson confirmed that the 74 car parking spaces currently available at Maidstone West station were sufficient; however there was no potential for future additional spaces.

With regard to passenger figures, Mr Paterson explained that Southeastern monitored passenger figures and as this information was commercially sensitive, it could not be made publicly available. There was a mix of passengers on the MVL, including shoppers, school pupils and commuters, so the line did not rely on any one passenger group.

A Councillor asked whether unmanned level crossings were monitored by CCTV. Mr Paterson stated that CCTV had been installed at the Wateringbury level crossing as part of a Network Rail awareness event, but this was the only crossing with CCTV.

A Member asked about support for projects. Mr Paterson stated that funding could be obtained from a variety of small project funds, for example at Medway Council, the DfT and the Association of Community Rail Partnerships. Southeastern contributed £10,000 per year for small projects, and the partnership's link to Action with Communities in Rural Kent allowed it access to some charity funding. The main problem was in terms of officer time, rather than funding.

Councillor FitzGerald addressed the Committee in his capacity as Chairman of the Kent Community Rail Partnership and stated that the aim for the MVL was to increase usage and have more trains per hour. It would also be beneficial to be able to plan three years ahead, rather than one. Councillor FitzGerald argued that community rail lines like the MVL only survived with the support of a vibrant group so DfT funding for the Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership was vital. Councillor FitzGerald reiterated Mr Paterson's request for the Committee's support for high speed services coming to Maidstone rather than Ashford.

The Chairman thanked Mr Paterson for an informative presentation.

Resolved: That the information provided be noted as part of the ongoing review of rail services in the Borough.

73. Maidstone Rail Services - Network Rail.

The Chairman welcomed Richard Howkins, South East Route Planner, and Murray Motley, Senior Commercial Schemes Sponsor – Kent, from Network Rail and invited them to outline Network Rail's work in Maidstone.

Mr Howkins informed Members that he dealt with strategic planning issues and worked with the Department for Transport (DfT) and rail service providers. Mr Motley explained that his role was to write plans and business cases for projects and take them to the Network Rail investment panel. He guided projects through Network Rail's Guide to Railway Investment Projects (GRIP) process, from planning and designing through to funding and construction.

Mr Howkins stated that the Kent Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) had been published in April and all Local Authorities in Kent had been consulted on this. The RUS had identified all options that could be delivered within 30 years and had made recommendations on these. Consultation responses were currently being analysed and a strategy would be developed in light of these; it was expected that the strategy would be published early in 2010, and this would identify the medium-term plan for the Kent rail network.

Mr Howkins and Mr Motley outlined several issues of particular significance to Maidstone:

- Thameslink: Mr Howkins stated that Thameslink was a major investment programme for rolling stock and improvements to Blackfriars and London Bridge stations. Construction would begin after the London 2012 Olympics and be completed in 2015/16. The Kent RUS proposed Maidstone East being on the Thameslink Network, which would connect Maidstone East to the City of London from 2015/16.
- High speed services: Mr Howkins explained that from December 2009, there was scope to lengthen the high speed trains to 12 cars and run those services currently beginning or ending in Ebbsfleet further into Kent to increase use. One option was to route trains via Strood to Maidstone West on the Medway Valley Line, whilst the other was to use the existing high speed line to Ashford. Ashford offered significant benefits, including reducing overcrowding on services from Ashford currently running through Headcorn and Staplehurst, however the services would need to use the international platform and building work would need to be carried out, making it a very expensive option. Running high speed services to Maidstone offered fewer overall benefits than Ashford, however it was a much cheaper option. It was highlighted that because the Strood-Maidstone section of the journey would need to be at normal speed, the overall journey time to London on the high speed service was unlikely to be significantly faster than the Thameslink service, taking approximately one hour to reach London. The DfT would make the final decision, and this was unlikely to be in time for the publication of the final Kent RUS. Mr Motley informed Members that the Maidstone West option would need to be investigated further to check, for example, the condition of traffic signalling, the height and width of bridges and tunnels. Careful consideration would need to be given to which stops the high speed service would make, as it could not stop many times in order to maintain journey times. In response to a question, Mr Motley explained that from 14 December 2009, residents could catch a train from Maidstone East to Strood and catch the high speed train from there to London; if high speed trains were routed through Maidstone West in future, this transfer would not be necessary.
- Network Rail was looking to improve journey times on the Maidstone East line by reconsidering line speeds and speed restrictions. Mr Motley worked in the Kent Route Enhancement Team which was looking to improve the Maidstone East line; however it could cost millions of pounds to reduce a journey by one minute. The Maidstone East line had been built cheaply in the 1860s and it was prohibitively expensive to remove all of the bends in the track, however speed limits were being reviewed as some were historical and could no longer be necessary. A compromise had to be reached between offering faster journey times that were unreliable and frequently late, or slower journeys that arrived on time and were dependable. Focus had been given nationally to

improving reliability rather than speed so that an unprecedented 93% of trains now arrived on time.

- Some consideration was being given to lengthening trains on the Maidstone East line to improve capacity. Trains were generally 6-cars, with some 8-car trains at peak times. These were 'Networker' trains which did not have the Selective Door Opening (SDO) facility, therefore the trains could not be longer than the platforms. Whilst it could be worth extending platforms at some busier stations, for others it was cheaper to use SDO to prevent train doors opening where there was no platform. The high speed train service could free up some rolling stock with the SDO facility.

The Chairman stated that the six year gap between the cancellation of the Maidstone East to Cannon Street service and the introduction of the Thameslink service was too long to wait. Mr Howkins informed Members that the DfT and Southeastern would be making a decision on this issue within the next few weeks. Network Rail did not have any influence over services currently available, as the RUS would inform the next franchise specification rather than the current one. A Councillor asked for further clarification regarding responsibility for rail services. Mr Howkins explained that the specification for the December 2009 timetable had been agreed by the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) which had now disbanded. The franchising element of the SRA had been taken on by the DfT, which now specified minimum services. Network Rail now had more input into services than when the SRA existed, however the current specification had been agreed prior to this. Due to pressure from commuter groups and local politicians, Southeastern was revisiting the issue of the Cannon Street service; the service had been withdrawn as Southeastern did not consider it value for money, therefore Southeastern was requesting funds from the DfT to subsidise the service. Network Rail's key responsibility with regard to timetables was to say whether a service could have a pathway and run safely on the network.

Councillors queried the length of time required to introduce the Thameslink service. Mr Motley explained that this service would be enabled by improving the track between London St Pancras and London Bridge. Just beyond London Bridge, Borough Market Junction connected Kent and most of East Sussex to the rest of the country and was consequently exceptionally busy, slowing journey times. The location of this junction also made it difficult to widen. In order to improve journey times, significant work was required on Borough Market Junction. Blackfriars station needed expanding and London Bridge station needed to be remodelled, all whilst maintaining services. Building would commence after the London 2012 Olympics and would take 2-3 years. The project was costing £4-5 million.

With regard to concerns over Maidstone residents travelling to other stations such as Headcorn and Staplehurst to catch more efficient trains ('railheading'), Mr Howkins explained that it was the rail industry's obligation to persuade people to use the nearest station to their homes by making services more attractive. This would not happen overnight, particularly as the high speed services, which served few stations, were

proving so successful, however work was being carried out to improve journey times and services.

A Councillor asked whether Network Rail had been involved in Maidstone's bid for Growth Point status. Mr Howkins stated that it had not, however Growth Point status would be referred to in the final RUS. Demand forecasts used the South East Plan as a data source, so population and housing growth information captured in that would be reflected in growth forecasts. The RUS predicted passenger growth of 32% by 2022, mostly around the Thameslink and Ashford areas, and in the Growth Point areas of Maidstone and Dover.

With regard to passenger data, Mr Howkins explained that station-by-station data was not very specific and required interpretation to obtain meaningful information from it. Smart ticketing, such as Oyster cards, would improve passenger data. Information on footfall at stations was published by Network Rail. Mr Motley highlighted that ticketing was extremely complicated, with over 125 million possible fares in the UK. Calculating passenger numbers from ticket sales was difficult because a ticket to London could go to any station in the city, for example. In order to establish the proportion of a ticket sale that went to each relevant operator, train companies relied on some passengers keeping travel diaries. Southeastern had carried out a passenger survey approximately 4 years ago, however the information was commercially sensitive and not even shared with Network Rail. When closures had been proposed on the Maidstone-Ashford route 3-4 years ago, Kent County Council had disputed the Southeastern figures and carried out its own survey, which produced different results to those obtained by Southeastern, indicating the difficulties with establishing accurate passenger figures.

A Councillor asked whether freight was considered when planning services. Mr Howkins confirmed that this was the case. The Maidstone East line was the main freight route for the Channel Tunnel, and there were opportunities for overnight freight on the high speed line. Additional freight would not affect passenger trains as there was room to accommodate growth.

In response to a question regarding the best ways to campaign for improved services, Mr Motley emphasised the importance of developing a strong, robust business case that was clear and concise. The arguments needed to be viable and realistic.

A Councillor requested an update on the redevelopment of Maidstone East station. Mr Motley explained that the problem was the funding for this. It would cost a significant amount of money to extend the platform at Maidstone East to 12 cars as this would need to go over the river bridge, and consequently require a new bridge. Network Rail had a statutory obligation to get a good return on its investment, so the best option was to redevelop the whole station area. New proposals for the station redevelopment were due to be put on the market in December 2009, and it was expected that stakeholders would be contacted around the same time.

The Chairman requested further information on the advantages and disadvantages of both Maidstone and Ashford for the high speed line, though noted the issue with regard to similar journey times on the high speed service and Thameslink services, and thanked the witnesses for their contribution. Mr Motley emphasised that Network Rail was keen to continue working with the Council in the future.

Members then considered the desktop research that had been carried out by the Overview and Scrutiny Team and noted that the Kent County Council policy on free transport to school did not apply to grammar schools where a comprehensive school was closer to the pupil's home. Councillors requested that the KCC Cabinet Member be contacted to identify whether this policy was likely to be reviewed in the near future.

Resolved: That

- a) A letter be sent to the Kent County Council Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education asking whether the policy on free transport to school was likely to be reviewed in the near future;
- b) Further information be requested on the advantages and disadvantages of both Maidstone and Ashford in relation to high speed rail services; and
- c) The evidence gathered be noted as part of the ongoing review into rail services in the Borough.

74. Future Work Programme and Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

The Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager informed the Committee that a representative of Southeastern had been invited to the Committee's December meeting as part of the rail services review, though no response had yet been received.

A Councillor noted that the rail services review would continue into 2010 and asked what impact this would have on the review of holiday play schemes. The Chairman explained that the holiday play schemes review would either be carried out in one meeting, or could begin in January as planned alongside further work on the rail services review.

With regard to future scrutiny of the Safer Maidstone Partnership, a Councillor highlighted that there were currently no plans for the March 2010 meeting and so this date could be used. The Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager stated that it had been agreed to hold one SMP Scrutiny meeting during working hours, though this date would still be considered.

Resolved: That the Future Work Programme be noted.

75. Duration of the Meeting.

6:30 p.m. to 8:45 p.m.