

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**MINUTES OF THE EXTERNAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 9 FEBRUARY
2010**

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

APOLOGIES: None.

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

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

93. Apologies.

There were no apologies.

94. Notification of Substitute Members.

There were no substitute Members.

95. Notification of Visiting Members.

There were no visiting Members.

96. Disclosures by Members and Officers:

Councillor Yates declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 10, "Draft Mental Health Services Report", as he was on the Board of Age Concern which was referenced in the report.

Councillors Batt, Hinder and Hotson declared that they had been lobbied with regard to Agenda Item 12, "NHS Consultation on Car Parking Charges".

97. 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.

98. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 12 January 2010.

A Councillor referred to Minute № 90 and stated that it had been agreed to include "Holiday Play Schemes" in the future work programme. The Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Louise Smith, highlighted that this

was included as a resolution to Minute № 85; it was agreed that this resolution would be repeated at Minute № 90 for clarity.

With regard to Minute № 85, a Councillor asked whether the figures on the income from Hotfoot had been checked. Miss Smith confirmed that the figures had been changed prior to the Cabinet Member taking the decision on Hotfoot and agreed to forward the e-mail clarifying the figures to the Committee for information. Also with regard to Hotfoot, the Committee requested information on the officer costs for running the scheme.

A Councillor asked for information on why the web-casting had failed and Miss Smith reiterated that she had not pressed the button to commence recording.

Resolved: That

- a) The resolution "that the Committee review the provision of holiday play schemes" be added to Minute № 90;
- b) Revised figures on the income from Hotfoot be forwarded to the Committee;
- c) Information on the officer costs for running Hotfoot be obtained; and
- d) The minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2010 be approved, subject to resolution (a), as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

99. Rail Services in the Borough: Southeastern.

The Chairman welcomed Mike Gibson, Public Affairs Manager for Southeastern, to the meeting and outlined the Committee's interest in rail services in the Borough, including concerns over cuts to services and residents travelling from Maidstone to rural stations to access better services to London.

Mr Gibson explained that the franchise specification from the Department for Transport (DfT) specified those services that Southeastern had to provide. In the early days of privatisation, these specifications had been loosely worded which had not worked in all cases and some franchises had been taken away, for example the Connex franchise. Franchise specifications were now more tightly defined and worked as management contracts. The service specification on which the new timetable (introduced on 13 December 2009) was based was the outcome of a consultation exercise carried out in 2003/04; consultees had included Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) and Kent County Council (KCC). The specification included the withdrawal of the off peak service on the Maidstone East line to Cannon Street and also three 'shoulder-peak' services – two to Cannon Street and one to London Charing Cross. When Southeastern had taken over the franchise from Connex in 2006, a demand validation survey had been undertaken to check whether the specification was correct, for example had passenger numbers been taken into account? The survey had confirmed that there was no commercial

case for continuing the off-peak services, however it was not so clear for the shoulder-peak services. In response to this, increased pressure from stakeholders and a request from the DfT, Southeastern had put together costings to show what funding was required to run the shoulder-peak services. The service was shown to cost £600,000 and Southeastern either needed additional subsidy or to cut other services. The request for additional subsidy was turned down by the DfT. There was a possibility that if there was a new Secretary of State for Transport following the General Election, the specification could be amended to return the services, however there was no guarantee of this. In the longer term, the aim was to improve services between Maidstone and London. The best chance for this was the Thameslink service which would increase services to Blackfriars, giving access to the City. That would form part of the new rail franchise specification which would be consulted on in late 2010 or early 2011. It was important to start lobbying the DfT now for Thameslink services to run to Maidstone.

A Councillor asked whether cutting services other than the shoulder-peak services had been considered. Mr Gibson stated that this had not been considered as all services provided in the new timetable were predicated on commercial demand. Although Southeastern provided a public service, it was a private company that had to show a return to its shareholders. Cutting other services would still impact on residents. In terms of making savings elsewhere, this was difficult as many staff were safety critical, whilst others were required in order to keep ticket offices open, for example. Passenger numbers had decreased as a result of the recession leading to 100 redundancies in January 2009; there was very little room for further cuts.

A Councillor referred to the problems caused by people travelling from the town to rural stations to access better rail services. Mr Gibson stated that Southeastern would look at increasing car parking capacity where necessary and would concentrate on ensuring that the Maidstone East to Victoria service was as attractive as possible. However, improving this service was difficult due to the infrastructure and the pressure to stop at all of the smaller stations along the line.

A Councillor stated that there were problems caused by limited parking at Bearsted Station and commuters were parking in the surrounding roads; there was an old coal yard that residents believed could be used for car parking, however this had not been utilised. Mr Gibson stated that the decision to expand car parking or to build a new car park was a joint one between Southeastern and Network Rail. Network Rail owned the rail infrastructure therefore it would be their responsibility to buy additional land. It was highlighted that if there was free on-street car parking surrounding the station, people would not pay for a car park. Mr Gibson agreed to look into what action had been taken with regard to using the old coal yard for car parking. Southeastern did not make a profit on station car parking; unlike a town centre car park, each space could only be 'sold' once a day and there was limited business during evenings and weekends, therefore the income stream was very small.

A Councillor asked whether Southeastern worked with other forms of public transport to ensure routes were integrated. Mr Gibson confirmed that this was a priority and Southeastern had an excellent relationship with local bus companies. Draft timetables were circulated to all bus companies in Kent, East Sussex and London for their comments in order to ensure coordinated services.

A Member asked if Maidstone's Growth Point Status had been taken into account when the timetables were revised and services cut. Mr Gibson confirmed that it had, however the growth figures supplied by the DfT and local authorities had been different, indicating the difficulties in accurately predicting growth. Growth was also affected by the economic climate. The Committee requested information on the growth figures supplied by the DfT and the local authorities as Growth Point Status required a set number of additional houses to be built, therefore figures should be consistent.

With regard to rolling stock, Mr Gibson informed the Committee that there were two types – Networkers, which were refurbished suburban trains, and Class 395s, which were more modern. Southeastern tried to avoid using Networkers on long distance routes as they were not as comfortable, however they had larger capacity so were often used during peak periods. There were no plans for new rolling stock for the duration of the current franchise, however the current rolling stock would be refurbished.

A Councillor asked how confident Southeastern was in its passenger numbers as some previous witnesses had suggested these were inaccurate. Mr Gibson argued that the figures were very accurate and were based on two methods of calculation; one involved people standing at stations and counting people, whilst the other used software that established the number of passengers on a train at any one time by weighing the total passengers and assuming an average weight per passenger. All Class 395 trains had this software, along with 30% of the Networkers. Ticket sales were not an accurate indication as this did not allow for fare evasion, free passes and so on.

With regard to suggestions in the press about a possible "Maidstone Parkway" station, Mr Gibson explained that this was part of the Kent Rail Utilisation Strategy and the draft Kent Integrated Transport Strategy; if the project did move forward, it was unlikely to be before 2014, when Southeastern's current franchise ended.

The Chairman thanked Mr Gibson for a clear and helpful presentation.

Resolved: That

- a) Information on the growth figures for Maidstone provided to Southeastern by the Department for Transport and local authorities be provided to the Committee; and

- b) Information on the action taken by Southeastern to use the old coal yard for car parking at Bearsted Station be sought.

100. Rail Services in the Borough: Councillor Robertson.

The Council's Member Champion for Railways, Councillor Malcolm Robertson, clarified several issues that had arisen during the earlier discussion:

- The Council had put in place yellow lines on the roads around Bearsted Station to limit on-street parking by commuters, therefore any extra car park spaces would be used; the Council needed to put pressure on Network Rail Properties to allow the use of the old coal yard;
- Networker trains were used for many peak time services due to their higher capacity and most of these did not have the software to weigh passengers, therefore Southeastern's figures on usage of the Cannon Street shoulder-peak services were still questionable;
- There was anecdotal evidence of higher earning residents moving out of the Borough in order to access better rail services from places such as Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells; and
- Whilst consultation had been carried out on the current rail franchise specification, all local authorities in the area had fought for the retention of the Cannon Street shoulder-peak service as part of that consultation and it had still been removed.

Councillor Robertson informed Members that the final Kent Rail Utilisation Strategy (RUS) had now been published and included some positive news for Maidstone. Ashford was still the preferred long-term option for High Speed Rail Services, however this would cost millions of pounds to implement so Maidstone was being considered in the short-term. It was noted, however, that the train would not be able to travel at high speed until it reached Ebbsfleet, so services would still take around an hour whilst costing more as a premium would be paid for the high speed section of the journey. A better solution would be a Parkway station on the high speed line, though it was unclear where this would be situated as it clearly needed to have excellent road links and space for plenty of car parking. The RUS also proposed two trains per hour from Maidstone East to Blackfriars on the Thameslink service; although this was 5 years away, it would be very positive for Maidstone. There was no guarantee that Maidstone would get the Thameslink service so lobbying now and as part of consultation on future franchises was essential. Kent County Council was anticipating the construction of another Thames crossing to combine with the new Thames barrier and there was a possibility that this could also take a rail crossing.

With regard to railheading, Councillor Robertson suggested that this suited the business of Southeastern as it was easier for them to run better services on other lines. The Maidstone East line would never be a fast line due to the topography of the area.

Councillor Robertson also informed Members that the procurement for the Thameslink rolling stock was already underway and the contract would be awarded in Autumn 2010. Approximately 1200 trains would be ordered and would be on the network from late 2013.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Robertson for his ongoing assistance with the review.

Resolved: That the information received be noted as part of the Committee's review into rail services in the Borough.

101. Draft Mental Health Services Report.

Councillor Mrs Paterson, a member of the Mental Health Services Working Group, emphasised the importance of the Mental Health Services Report being widely circulated as most people's knowledge of mental health issues was limited.

Councillor Marchant, another member of the working group, requested that the working group's thanks for the support officers for the review, Louise Smith and Kat Hicks, be minuted. He also highlighted several key issues to the Committee, including the difficulties experienced in mapping service provision, the lack of coordination between some service providers, and the need for a leaflet rather than just a website outlining available services, as people suffering from mental ill health were more likely to pick up a leaflet than spend time searching for a website. A holistic approach to tackling mental health issues was vital as mental health problems could be caused by a wide range of other issues.

The Committee requested three amendments to the report:

- The definition of "recovery" as used by the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programme be clarified as it appeared to be different to that outlined elsewhere in the report;
- At paragraph 6.2.9, bullet point 2, the words "during their most recent stay" be added to the end of the sentence; and
- At paragraph 6.3.4, the phrase "life chances of those with severe mental illness" be replaced with "opportunities available to those with severe mental illness to improve their lives".

The Committee agreed it was important for all councillors to receive a copy of the final report.

Resolved: That

- a) The Mental Health Services Report be agreed subject to the following amendments:
 - a. The definition of "recovery" as used by the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programme be clarified;

- b. At paragraph 6.2.9, bullet point 2, the words "during their most recent stay" be added to the end of the sentence; and
 - c. At paragraph 6.3.4, the phrase "life chances of those with severe mental illness" be replaced with "opportunities available to those with severe mental illness to improve their lives".
- and
- b) A copy of the final report be sent to all Councillors.

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

A Councillor raised concern over the Forward Plan, highlighting that many decisions appeared on it late. Another Councillor agreed that as most Council planning was on a three yearly basis, it was not unfeasible for officers and the Cabinet to identify forthcoming issues. The Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer confirmed that this issue would be covered in the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee's review of the Overview and Scrutiny Function.

With regard to the review of Holiday Play Schemes scheduled for the Committee's March meeting, it was agreed that Councillor Batt would contact the Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer to outline potential witnesses and desired outcomes for the review.

Resolved: That the Future Work Programme be noted.

103. URGENT ITEM: NHS Consultation on Car Parking Charges

The Chairman read out an email from a resident with regard to the NHS consultation on car parking charges and emphasised the importance of the issue to residents. Councillors then raised several concerns with regard to the consultation, including:

- The consultation had been published on 29 December 2009 but had only been sent to local authorities very recently, limiting the opportunity for response;
- The overall time period for consultation was very short; and
- The target audience for the consultation did not include local authorities or the public.

A Councillor also highlighted that the potential cost of the preferred option for NHS car parking, as outlined in the Impact Assessment, could be up to £142.2 million, which was cause for concern.

Another Councillor suggested that issues to consider included the number of inpatients that would travel to hospital by car, and staff parking charges.

The Committee agreed to write to the NHS outlining its concerns about the consultation and requesting an extension to the deadline for response. It was agreed that the letter should be copied to parish councils and the

press. The consultation would be considered formally at the Committee's meeting on 9 March 2010.

Resolved: That

- a) A letter be sent on behalf of the Committee to the NHS outlining Members' concerns about the consultation and requesting an extension to the deadline;
- b) The Committee's letter to the NHS be copied to parish councils and the press; and
- c) The NHS Car Parking Consultation be considered at the Committee's meeting on 9 March 2010.

104. Duration of the Meeting.

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