

## **Maidstone Borough Council**

### **External Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Tuesday 10 November 2009**

#### **Maidstone Rail Services – Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership**

**Report of:** Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager

### **1. Background**

1.1 At its meeting on 16 June 2009, the External Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to carry out a review of rail services within the Maidstone Borough area. The relevant extract from the minutes of that meeting is as follows:

‘The Committee agreed to carry out a review of rail services to London, noting that these were being cut and residents were being forced to use alternative train stations to access services. Additionally, Maidstone was a Growth Point and appropriate public transport for the growing population was therefore vital. It was agreed that parish councils should be consulted as part of this review.’

1.2 At its meeting on 14 July 2009 the Committee agreed that the review would include all aspects of the rail services, such as the adequacy of station facilities and the provision of services within the rural areas.

1.3 At its meeting on 11 August 2009, the Committee agreed a scoping report for the review of Maidstone Rail Services; this is attached at Appendix A.

### **2. Review to Date**

2.1 At its meeting on 14 July 2009, the Committee interviewed Laura Cloke, the Chair of the Maidstone Area Rail Users Association and Mathew Nash, of Keep Our Trains. The key points arising from this discussion were:

- There were two main services to London via Maidstone – one to west London via London Victoria, and the other to Charing Cross via Cannon Street and London Bridge. The fast service to Cannon Street ran from Maidstone during the off peak and ‘shoulder peak’ times, with the average journey taking 48 minutes. Without this service, a journey to this area would take between 90 minutes and 2 hours. Southeastern Trains was planning to cancel the Cannon Street service.
- The “Keep Our Trains” campaign had been established to try and save the Cannon Street service. A petition had gathered over 1,200 signatures, the Secretary for Transport had been lobbied and meetings had been held with Ann Widdecombe MP and representatives of Southeastern.

- The Department for Transport outlined minimum standards which rail operators were required to meet. The Cannon Street service was not in these minimum standards, nor was the High Speed 1 service.
- Keep Our Trains considered service usage figures produced by Southeastern to be incorrect. There was also the issue of “railheading” whereby people from Maidstone were travelling to stations such as Sevenoaks and Tonbridge to access faster and more frequent services. If services from Maidstone were more efficient, the witnesses believed that this practice would reduce.
- It was possible that the expansion of the rail service to Blackfriars would enable additional services into London via Maidstone, however there was no underground service from Blackfriars.
- The Committee raised concern that there appeared to be a lack of a strategic plan with regard to integrated transport for Maidstone.

2.2 At the Committee’s meeting on 11 August 2009, Members interviewed the Assistant Director of Development and Community Strategy, Mr Brian Morgan, the Public Transport Officer, Clive Cheeseman, and the Council’s Railways Champion, Councillor Malcolm Robertson. The draft minutes of this meeting are attached at Agenda Item 7(a).

2.3 The Committee made a number of recommendations at its meeting on 11 August 2009; the response to most of these recommendations is attached at Appendix B; information on how school pupils get to and from school has been requested from Kent County Council and is currently being collated.

### **3. Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership**

The following information about the Medway Valley Line and Community Rail Partnership is quoted from the following website:

<http://www.ruralkent.org.uk/community-rail/medwayvalley-line.htm>

3.1 “The Medway Valley Line runs from Strood in North Kent down to Paddock Wood in the Weald of Kent. It connects at each end with the main rail network, each junction offering onward journeys to London and the Kent Coast.

Maidstone West sits almost centrally along the line and to the north the line is mainly urban and industrial in nature. To the south it is predominantly rural, closely following the course of the River Medway as far as Yalding.

Off peak, an hourly service operates from Maidstone to Paddock Wood and a half hourly service from Maidstone to Strood. On Sunday an hourly service throughout applies.

The line retains a heritage feel about it, with many of the original station buildings (now listed) remaining in situ, along with traditional signal boxes and manual crossing gates. Apart from Maidstone West, all intermediate stations are currently unstaffed”.

- 3.2 "Since the Medway Valley Line was established in 2005 the Partnership has been succesful in raising the profile of the line, both with the public, but also with the rail industry. Many improvements have been made to stations with new seating, better shelters and improved customer information systems.

Timetables and leaflets are now available from shops, post offices and libraries in communities served by the line. Community noticeboards have been installed at all stations.

Recently the old yard at East Farleigh has been resurfaced and turned into a car park for about 40 vehicles and two large pieces of artwork have been installed at Maidstone West. Designed by students at the Maidstone Campus of the University for the Creative Arts, they really brighten up the booking hall and platforms."

#### **4. Recommendation**

- 4.1 Members are recommended to discuss with Ian Paterson, Community Rail Partnership Project Officer for the Medway Valley Community Rail Partnership, the future of the Medway Valley Line and its services in Maidstone.