

Sevenoaks District Seniors Action Forum

Working together in the interests of people aged 50 plus

What's happening with our buses?

A discussion document on which we would like answers and comments from the recipients prior to a wider circulation

(August 2022)

*At the Forums AGM last October, we had more questions about bus services than any other topic.
Where are we now?*

1.0 PLEDGES AND PROMISES

1.1 In 2017 KCC made a clear policy statement in its "Growth without Gridlock" memorandum. The aim of this was to promote affordable, acceptable and connected travel for all to jobs, education, health and other services. Just 3 months after this, cuts were made to the Socially Necessary Bus Services (SNBS).

1.2. June to August 2018- The Big Conversation from KCC, which only achieved 200 responses from the SDC area. However, this did help the introduction of the bookable bus services from "GO"

1.3. In Feb 11th 2020 the then Prime Minister pledged £5 billion to improve bus services and cycle routes in England over the next 5 years to include more evening and weekend services

1.4. During 2020 & 21 we had the Covid lockdown, when bus services were curtailed, with a dramatic decline in passenger numbers

1.5. March 2021 The Bus Back Better strategy was announced claiming to provide (now) £3 billion over 5 years for buses in England, excluding London.

1.6. Oct 2021 KCC submitted what is called a pre-funding agreement to the Government Bus Service Improvement Plan(BSIP) seeking £212m, though it appears only £35m was promised.

1.7. During 2021 & 22 much of the pledged funds were re allocated to the bus services support grants and the bus recovery grants. Whilst this is understandable, it should be noted that there was never going to be the funding to meet these very laudable aims of the Bus Back Better strategy

1.8. It would seem that the latest pledges from the Department of Levelling Housing and Communities (DLUHC) in Feb 2022 is to provide some areas with bus services equal to that of London – but there doesn't seem to be any mention of anywhere in Kent

Meanwhile we have: -

2.0 CUTS, VAGUE PROMISES & REDUCTIONS IN FUNDING

Laura Trott (MP for Sevenoaks) in her latest newsletter and at our Zoom meeting says she believes in the importance of local buses and is concerned about forthcoming cuts to services– It would seem that she has had some success in maintaining school buses, but has not made any suggestions for improvements to the other services. This is not entirely surprising given the cuts to bus subsidies that KCC are having to make to keep within their budgets. Nowhere can I see any details of future funding from Central Government unless it's tucked away in a DLUHC White paper! In the short term we know that KCC are having to reduce their funding for school buses and Socially Necessary Bus Services (SNBS). We will leave out much commentary on school bus cuts other than to say that they are far and away the most used bus services and need to be subsidised. However, the concentration on these school bus services is the main contributory reason why we have no early, afternoon or evening bus services from GO and only limited services from Arriva 401/2 and Redroute 306/8

3.0 WHO IS USING BUSES AND CARS

3.1. Bus usage is in decline and fell dramatically during lockdown and has not recovered. Nonetheless 20/25% of adults use a local bus at least once a week, but more than half the population never use a bus. We don't have much data for Sevenoaks but as an educated guess, pre pandemic based on data for Kent, there were about 8,000 bus journeys per day, the majority being school journeys, about 6% of the population.

3.2. 80% of adults live in a household with at least one car including older age groups, and those without a car often get a lift from friends and neighbours. With no scheduled bus routes early, late or at weekends, it is self-evident that a car 24/7 with room for shopping or luggage is going to be the preferred mode of local transport

3.3. Current non users of buses are only likely to use buses if parking becomes difficult or cost prohibitive, this could well become the case with the 23% increase in population forecast for 2020-40, most of which is likely to be in the urban areas. Plans for the necessary infrastructure are not likely to cope unless radically improved

The likelihood is that the majority of development will continue to be in our town centres, this is due to the nature of the district with significant national planning designations including the green belt and areas of outstanding natural beauty. Outside the main towns most development numbers will come from larger scale development sites such as Fort Halstead. The benefits are clear, if most of your needs are provided for within easy reach of your home then the need for the car reduces, if living on a larger scale development the scale allows for transport options to be looked at at the planning stage.

We are already seeing in larger scale town centre developments changes to how the car, in particular car ownership, is viewed, the Tesco site on Sevenoaks High Street will see half the number of parking spaces to the number of flats, but they are instead looking to offer residents access to a vehicle when needed.

We are having early discussions with developers of sites such as Tarmac in Sevenoaks about not only how we make the most of pedestrian routes through the site but also use the public transport network already in place with a railways station at the entrance to the site.

3.4. Can bus services be improved sufficiently to attract new users? On current policies, no -way! I am not sure this is correct, I know a number of retail workers in the town who regularly use Direct Response Transport or 'buses on demand' who see it as a massive improvement from the more traditional, stand a bus stop in the hope that it will turn up, the safety that comes from being able to track your bus so you have to wait the minimum amount of time. Unfortunately, what will be harder is moving this to less densely populated towns and villages, DRT only works if the demand and therefore the buses are there when you need them.

4.0 FOR THE MOMENT LET'S CONCENTRATE ON "GO": -

4.1. KCC have announced that they will probably not continue to subsidise the Edenbridge Town Circular (which was being supported by £7 per journey) and we must presume this will result in closure from September unless funding is available from elsewhere, but is still running at the moment Regarding other routes from the 1st of August:-

4.2. Route 1 Westerham to Sevenoaks was 6 a day, now only 3 to 4 a day 9 Mon-Sat

4.3. Route 6 Kemsing to Sevenoaks still 5 a day, now only 3 to 4 on Sat

4.4. Route 2, Swanley/Sevenoaks two a day. Route 5 Tonbridge/ Sevenoaks 3 a day, now with cuts on Saturdays

4.5. Route 8 the Sevenoaks Town circular was 7 a day, now only 5, with no bus before 10.00 am

4.6. There are virtually no buses after 3.00 buses Mon – Fri and none on Sundays

4.7. Then there's the bookable bus services, which seem to be underutilised, and not capable of handling a volume of passengers - probably running at a loss. Do they get subsidies from any source and if so, for how long will it continue?

5.0 GIVE US THE DATA!

5.1. For us to make an informed comment on our bus services we have requested full data on income and subsidies for all routes Inc. bookable from KCC – this was provided for the "Big Consultation" "However, we have not yet had a reply regarding the up to date data- Can others help us to obtain this?"

6.0 USE IT OR LOSE IT

6.1. Laura Trott (MP for Sevenoaks) says "Use it or lose it", a sentiment that has been expressed by others including KCC and our Forum. It is now a complete Catch 22 situation; the public do not have a service worth speaking about except the bookable bus services and these whilst appreciated by the few, are still misunderstood and mistrusted by the majority. **I still believe that for 'greater Sevenoaks' DRT is the future apart from bus routes where there is significant demand during clearly defined periods (for example school routes)**

7.0 BOOKABLE BUSES: -

7.1. The introduction of these from GO has been an interesting experiment. As we have stated earlier, what we want to know is how they are currently funded and are they operating at a profit? There are problems with these services, many of the public do not understand the booking process, in particular the need to use an app, as telephone booking is not available at many off-peak times. There is uncertainty of when a bus will arrive and how long the journey will take e.g. to meet an appointment time at the hospital or doctors or catch a train. Take for example a trip from the Weald: to arrive on time for employment at Sainsburys in Otford Road this currently has only one or two passengers for the journey. But it could also be required to pick up passengers on route from Ide Hill, Brasted and Riverhead. Therefore, to ensure arriving on time there is a need to plan to get a bus much earlier than ideal. We cannot see how this service can attract the necessary volume to make a profit whilst offering a tangible route to the passenger's eventual destination. We have had 2 instances this week of these bookable buses not being able to get people to work or appointments

7.2. We would respectfully suggest Baroness Vere gets the answer to this before spending £20 million on a roll out to other areas

8.0 COULD WE OPTIMISTICALLY GET IMPROVED BUS SERVICES

8.1. Only if there is a demonstrable need enforced by making people cut back on car usage. Increased services are not likely to be profit making in the short-term. To get anywhere will require more subsidy from either central or local government and in the current economic climate that would require getting more monies from the Council Tax, a surcharge on concessionary bus passes and from retained profits from car parking. None of these are vote winning ideas **There are a number of points wrapped up in this, firstly as I said above larger scale developments and those in principal town centres can and are already making changes to the level of provision of what basically amounts to 'storage' for cars and looking at how in these examples we can bake in change at the planning stage, the bonus of this method is you are not having to change behaviours as the residents of new developments know what they are buying into whether that be discounted public transport or a car club or similar non car scheme. The reality of local government budgets is such that any subsidy would need to come down from general taxation.**

9.0 NEED IS FOR BIG IDEAS-NOT TINKERING ABOUT THE EDGES

9.1. Consider improving and expanding the Number 8 Town Circular route that was set up at the instigation of the Town and District Council, the local Tesco and money from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). What are the current income and outgoings? This service connects the railway stations, bus station, hospital, all 5 supermarkets and most G.P.s It runs hourly from 9.00am -till 3.00pm.- 7 circuits a day. Good as it is, it is not ideal as it only runs in one direction

9.2. From the Bradbourne Riding stables to Sainsburys/Aldi is about 1.5 miles and takes about 5 minutes. However, to get back involves going via the town centre and almost an hours journey The real need is to run this service in both directions and then every quarter of an hour. This would require 4 buses at a total cost of about £1600 a day (I am sure Austin Blackburn will put us right on this) and require an income from fares of approx. £60 per bus on each circuit. Now, before anybody throws their toys out of the pram, there are 28,000 people living in the 5 urban wards of Sevenoaks, and it would require about 800 passenger journeys per day. But it needs to be a viable alternative to the car and that's where draconian methods are needed to make car usage and parking a less favourable option.

9.2. This idea would need to derive an income from fares/subsidies of approx£600,000 p.a. SDC car parks made a retained profit of £2million in their last published results **We don't make a 'profit' the money is either reinvested in transport and highway schemes (on street parking income) or into other council services (off street parking income)**

Some town centre car parks that have seen increases, Buckhurst 1, South Park and Suffolk Way have all had their charges frozen since 2016, the charges for up to one, two, three, and four hours now being £2, £3, £4, and £5 respectively, with season tickets revised accordingly.

The additional £1 levy to be used in part to support the District Council's Net Zero ambitions, the increased costs of CCTV, maintenance, business rates, enforcement etc.

9.3. Longer term, if successful, this could be expanded to cover from 6.00 am until 11.00 pm to get the commuter traffic to use a bus to the station and encourage more night life to the town's pubs and restaurants. But, do our M.P.'s and Councillors have the bottle for a Big idea!

Further to comments above I would suggest that members also look at our recently published Movement Strategy which sets out our wider ambition for movement in and around the district, I have attached a copy to my email and this is the link on our website https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/3358/movement_strategy_2022

We have committed to embed the priorities within the Strategy into plans, decisions and policies including:

Council Plan

Community Plan

Net Zero 2030

Local Plan

Air Quality Action Plan

Low Emission and Electric Vehicle Strategy

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans

Local Transport Plan

Sevenoaks District Council Travel Plan

Working with schools

Working with the business community

Active travel initiatives and innovative schemes

Car clubs and car sharing opportunities

Sustainable tourism initiative

Infrastructure Funding Statement and Community

Infrastructure Levy Funding

10.0 TRANSPORT FOR SHIFT WORKERS

10.1. Sevenoaks has a large number of people working in retail, healthcare and hospitality, many on low or minimum wages, and car ownership is low in these groups. Many of these people work unsociable hours and depend on others - family and friends - for transport to work. The nature of their work is usually such that they can't access a phone to reserve a bookable bus until they end their shift and the pre-bookable services are out of their price reach.

10.2. Supermarkets can deliver goods door to door 24/7 at a low cost. Could they be persuaded or incentivised to enter the public transport market? It could be pilot tested prior to a more national roll out. This could be a challenge to our M.Ps.

11.0 FEEDER BUS/TAXI SERVICES/SHOPPER BUS SPECIALS

11.1. These could feed into an improved Town Circular e.g. A taxi style mini bus running along the Darent Valley terminating at the Riverside Retail Park with similar shorter routes from Westerham, Orpington, The Weald etc.

11.2. GO are currently contemplating introducing shopper specials for outlying areas. This seems like an excellent idea and we await developments from Austin, in particular how it could be funded.

12.0 CAR SHARING

12.1. This could be better promoted by providing car owners with a guide to the do's and don'ts and explaining things like insurance liabilities. Parish and Town councils could and should do more to promote this in their magazine and newsletters.

13.0 DO THE PUBIC WANT / OR USE IMPROVED SERVICES

13.1. Probably only those who don't have access to a car, unless they can't park their cars! And that's the nub of it. Necessity is the mother of all invention.

14.0 WHAT ABOUT SWANLEY, EDENBRIDGE AND WESTERHAM

14.1. 50,000 people live in these areas, including over 300 members of the Forum. Their bus needs extend beyond the SDC area which is why we have focused on Central Sevenoaks. In our last newsletter number 50, we asked all members to let us have their views on increasing parking charges to fund buses in their area.

15.0 PUBLICITY AND P.R.

15.1. decline of local newspapers means that there is a need for other avenues of communication We believe that the District Council should do a lot more to help. They could donate a page to bus news and information in the quarterly "In Shape "print guides to bus services and other means of travel and distribute and display them in supermarkets, pubs, restaurants. Also targeted door to door leaflets. Bigger outlets could have a phone line direct to the bus companies, and increasingly use can be made of on-line communications. The Forum continue to seek for a volunteer to take on P.R

16.0 SOME OTHER PLEDGES AND PROMISES

16.1. SDC plan to be carbon zero in by the year 2030. Cutting car use is a component of this, and add to this the Government are expecting another 5,700 additional new homes in the SDC area 2022-30 Our assessment is that this hasn't got "a cat's chance in hell" of being achieved, based on past and current policies

16.2. The Labour party say that they would aim for all 35,000 buses to be electric by 2030. Where and how would there be enough electricity to achieve this?

17.0 IN SUMMARY

17.1. Pledges and promises have not been met and even though funds were diverted to provide a bus recovery plan there was never going to enough money in the first place. We await details of future funding, but anticipate they will not provide sufficient funding to meet the pledged ideals.

17.2. KCC have announced further cuts and cancellations, that will result in Sevenoaks having no credible scheduled bus services-only bookable services which could never meet the proposed usage.

17.3. It is possible to go some way to meeting these aims by improvements to the Town Circular by increasing the frequency of the service and running it in both directions. The bookable services will need improvements if they are to be capable of increased volume. These would require funding that it looks like KCC are to unable to provide

17.4. The aim to be carbon zero by 2030 and the need to make provision for new housing and increased population will require a reduction in car usage. This is only likely if car parking charges are increased dramatically and profits used to subsidise buses and would be most un popular. More funds could be raised by increases to council tax or surcharges on concessionary bus passes

18.0 WHAT THE FUTURE MIGHT LOOK LIKE

18.1. That's the challenge we are asking you, our councillors and MPs. On current policy we don't expect much other than declining usage and more cuts. Bus usage can only be increased to meet the governments aims and objectives by adopting some big ideas and a new approach to funding, developed in partnership between local and central government.

18.2. We hope that we have demonstrated that by an enhanced Town Circular and an improved bookable bus service it is possible to provide transport for many, but not all, to jobs, education, health and other services. Is it affordable? Not without initial subsidy. Do the public want it? Non car users yes, car users only if forced to do so by un-popular methods

18.3. Please can you help by providing some answers to those items on which we have no, or only limited data.

18.4. We would like your response to our recommendations and suggestions as to how we can progress from here and provide our members with answers to their questions at the next AGM