

## Buses in Kent with particular reference to the Sevenoaks area

There are several matters to consider.

The Covid pandemic has had a devastating effect on the commercial bus industry. Passenger numbers fell to 10% of what had been normal and even now they have increased only to 70% to 80% of that figure. The Department for Transport provided what they called Bus Recovery Grant to the operators to help the industry to survive, but this was due to finish in September 2022. Operators, anticipating even greater financial difficulties, started to give notice on services that would not be sustainable without grant, and KCC were advised of 86 services across Kent that would cease to operate by the end of the year.

The Department of Transport had in 2021 announced its National Bus Strategy or “Bus Back Better”. This involved Public Transport Authorities creating Enhanced Partnerships with its local operators and submitting a Bus Service Improvement Plan for improved services going forward. Basically the DfT wanted a brave new world of faster, cheaper services between significant centres of population and it was made very clear that funding was not going to be available to sustain existing services that could not exist without subsidy.

The DfT had said that £3bn was going to be available over 3 years, but it transpired that this amount was going to be reduced by the amount it had spent on Bus Recovery Grant. KCC prepared an ambitious bid of £212m and was allocated £35.1m, of which two-thirds was capital to be spent on bus priority highway measures and the remaining third on revenue projects. As I’ve said, there was to be no support for the bus services the operators had abandoned as unprofitable.

Locally, Go Coach, who provided most of the bus services in the Sevenoaks area, while suffering the same difficulties as other operators (loss of government grant, escalating fuel prices and a shortage of drivers), also lost their hub in Otford and had to relocate to Swanley. They say that the overall situation made it necessary to withdraw a number of services, largely those that took children from the villages to school in Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells. KCC has intervened and negotiated with Go Coach and another local operator, Autocar, to provide some services to get children to school, but at the time of writing there are gaps that have not been able to be filled and capacity issues on several services that can only be partially resolved.

Government, seeing the possibility of the bus industry in the UK collapsing, has extended Bus Recovery Grant by £130m over six months, but no further.

The BSIP allocation of £35.1m for Kent has not yet been granted and it is clear that the DfT will monitor its spend very carefully.

Like most local authorities, KCC has suffered from austerity in government funding for many years and has sustained a 40% loss of its income in the last ten years. At the same time, demand for its statutory services has increased enormously. EHCPs and Adult Social Care are typical examples. To balance the Council's budget for 2022/2023 discretionary services budgets had to yield savings; the Supported Bus budget had to contribute £2.2m. Supported Buses are services that are "handed back" by their operators because they are unprofitable but are sustained by the County Council because they are considered to be socially necessary. Some of these are very expensive to maintain, especially the Kent Karrier dial-a-ride service, used by the elderly and the disabled. The County Council proposed to withdraw support for 45 services from its portfolio of 137 services, all services with very light passenger loads, but after consultation it was decided to maintain the Kent Karrier services and now the proposal is to withdraw funding support for 37 services.

The state of the unregulated bus market and the operator withdrawals are not closely connected to the County Council's decision to withdraw subsidy from a number of its supported buses, but unsurprisingly the public tends to see it that way.

Presently the bus industry is not in good health, especially for rural services. Otherwise both operators and KCC, the public transport authority, are desperately short of money and unlikely to make major investments unless government funds them. We don't yet know what the BSIP funding will provide, but hope that it will enable services to expand and become more usable.