

**Matters Arising**

**Proposed reduction of bus services in the Swale Western Area**

**Response from Kent County Council**

Dear Cllr Corrie Woodford

Thank you for your letter dated 1 November 2022, regarding the withdrawal of subsidy for bus service 8 and, which to date has been subsidised by KCC. I am sorry that the need to reduce our bus subsidy has implications for you and will comment on the position below.

This Council has fought hard to protect its budget in this area whilst other authorities have reduced their support or stopped spending money on bus services altogether. However, as the pressure on our finances has increased, the Council has needed to make tough decisions in order to guarantee that statutory services for our most vulnerable residents can continue. The impact of this does unfortunately mean that, as a Council, we are having to consider savings measures across a whole range of services.

In the previous financial year, KCC continued to spend over £6m per year on supporting bus services which are not commercially viable to bus operators owing to the limited use that is made of them. It is understood that these services are valued by those that use them, but as the costs of providing them are increasing and their use has fallen since the pandemic, this has become an area where we can no longer sustain funding at current levels. Ultimately this is a discretionary area of spend and in order to meet our legal duty to set a balanced budget we have therefore had to reduce our financial commitment by £2.2m when setting the budget for the 2022/23 financial year.

To retain spend in this area and for the Council overall within the budget available we identified contracts for possible withdrawal using the Council's criteria for the prioritisation of services. These take account of the nature of the service, the availability of alternative services and value for money measured on a subsidy per journey basis. The approach we took and the services identified for potential withdrawal were then subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment informed and updated by a full public consultation that ran from February to April of this year.

Following consideration of the outcomes of the consultation and the updated Equalities Impact Assessments we decided to protect the funding for some services, notably the Kent Karrier Dial-a-Ride services. These services are used by some of our most vulnerable residents who through either age, disability or location are unable to use other public transport, and protecting these services meant that they can be accessed by existing users as well as those affected by other changes to bus services.

We will continue to spend £4m per year on supporting bus services, which is more than many other authorities, and we are also making funding available to support

Parish Councils and other Community groups if they want to find local solutions to transport needs in their area.

Unfortunately, whilst the Council would like to be able to protect all of the services it currently supports and indeed have additional monies that we could use to retain other buses being withdrawn by bus operators, this is simply impossible within the funding that we have available. Therefore, following extended consideration of the matter by our Environment and Transport Committee and then by Full Council, we have regrettably had to make the decision to withdraw the funding for 38 service contracts which we expect to stop operating from Sunday 12th February.

With regard to your particular comments about the provision of services carrying school children, whilst understanding the particular issues that this will create for some families, the provision of these services does, I'm afraid, fall into the same category as journeys made by other users. The need for the Council to arrange transport for school children is governed by national legislation which identifies which children are entitled to free transport to school, and if there are children with this entitlement using services being withdrawn then alternative arrangements will be made. Whilst the Council tries to support sustainable access to education through sustainable means, outside of those children with a legal entitlement this is also a discretionary activity and the Council simply cannot guarantee buses or other transport for all children in the County.

I note your comments about the use of other forms of funding in the form of money from the National Bus Strategy and other Covid support grants that have been provided by Government. Unfortunately at the time of writing the National Bus Strategy funding is yet to be secured and the rules around the use of this and Covid funding is clear that it should not be used to replace existing services except where short term support may enable services to continue on a without subsidy basis in the longer term, which would not be the case for services which have always relied upon ongoing levels of subsidy.

I am sorry that I can only explain why we have had to arrive at such a regrettable decision rather than provide hope of a different outcome.

Yours sincerely

David Brazier  
County Member, Sevenoaks Rural North East Division  
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport  
Kent County Council