



HELEN WHATELY MP
Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent

HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Dear David Brazier

SUPPORTED BUS SERVICES – CONSULTATION RESPONSE

I am writing in response to Kent County Council's (KCC) consultation on county-wide proposals to reduce the number of subsidised bus services.

Over the past few weeks, I have been approached by constituents who are understandably concerned by the proposals. I have also reached out to all the parish councils within Faversham and Mid Kent whose communities would be affected by reductions in, or termination of, their local bus services. The helpful feedback from my constituents and parish councils has informed this response.

As you will be aware, on 4 April the Government announced that, as part of its long-term National Bus Strategy 'Bus Back Better', thirty-one counties, city regions and unitary authorities were to receive funding to help level up local bus services. Kent received £35million from this fund which is welcome news. I know that this funding is in addition to the Government's extra financial support for local bus operators to help them through the pandemic and recover from the sharp fall in bus usage.

Even with this additional funding, I recognise that KCC is facing significant financial pressures at the moment, and I understand that funding from the National Bus Strategy cannot be used to subsidise existing services. That said, it's crucial that any reduction in bus services is kept to an absolute minimum – paying particular attention to people and places that most rely on subsidised services. This includes making sure that whole communities are not left without a bus service and minimising disruption to elderly residents and school children.

As your consultation points out, one of the criteria for subsidising a bus route is that it "...provides transport links to key services that could not otherwise be accessed", with these services defined as those for work, learning, healthcare and food shopping. The services KCC subsidise predominantly cover rural communities. As an MP representing a largely rural constituency, I am concerned about the effect of these proposals on the lives of people without cars who are reliant on these bus services for getting to the doctor or dentist, travelling to school and back, or doing essential shopping.

As one of my constituents says:

"If we lose the Arriva service myself and others in the village who catch the bus will have no way of getting to work, school, college or even a NHS appointment such as the dentist, doctors, opticians etc. The only form of transport we'd have left would be taxi but the downside of this is that not all of us can afford to get taxis every day."

Impact on Rural Communities

Parish councils are particularly concerned about the proposed reductions in services that could leave residents in villages cut off from the facilities available in larger towns. Local bus services are critical for some village residents, enabling them to access a wide range of amenities, including the key services identified in your consultation paper.

Impact on the Elderly

Whilst buses are used by all age groups, one group particularly dependent upon public transport is the elderly. For example, the Kent Karrier is said to provide a lifeline to those who are aged over 80. For some elderly residents, it is their only means of getting to the shops, bank and doctors. The driver may be the only person they see during the week. If they were to order a taxi the cost of travel would rise, leaving some isolated at home without any alternative affordable travel options. This would inevitably have an adverse impact on their physical and mental health.

There are fewer village shops now where residents can purchase food and other basic essentials such as newspapers and toiletries. Not all residents are able to, or wish to, order their food online. There is still a fairly high proportion of people who are not internet users, particularly those aged over 75. It is not clear how we will ensure these residents will be able to shop for essentials.

KCC will be aware of the impact bus reductions are likely to have on older residents, and that this may place greater demands upon KCC social services. It would be reassuring to know KCC has assessed the likely increase in demand for support from social services and that this additional cost has been accounted for when calculating the financial benefits of reducing supported services.

Impact on School Children

Another group likely to be disproportionately affected by cuts in supported bus services are school children and their families who do not drive. One very specific concern raised with me is the 332 bus service. I am told 16 secondary pupils from the parish of Stockbury use the service. These children would need to have transport arranged for them if there was no bus service available. This would be an additional cost for KCC and again I would seek reassurances that any additional costings for other KCC departments will be factored in when determining which services will be cut and which will stay.

Scope for merging routes to make them more cost efficient

Some of the routes flagged up for possible closure overlap with other routes. It has been suggested there should be discussions on whether routes might be merged so as to provide villages with a service that is more cost-effective: Perhaps this is a suggestion that KCC could investigate further?

Consulting with Parish Councils

When considering the consultation response, I would ask that you discuss with Parish Councils whether there is any scope for local solutions to help those residents who are dependent upon public transport to get out of the village for shopping, socialising and accessing healthcare. I am aware of the Go2 Direct service currently running in Sevenoaks. I would be keen to know, for example, whether it would be possible to introduce similar services across rural Kent with subsidised journeys available for some passengers. This might be more cost-effective than subsidised taxi journeys, might mitigate the impact of any changes to services, and could offer others a reliable bus service as well.

I hope that the Council will look carefully at the bus services that are regularly used in Faversham and Mid Kent, and work with local communities to identify alternative solutions which might mitigate the impact of any potential reduction in services, particularly on vulnerable residents.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Helen Whately', with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

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HW/RA/45954

You can read Helen's privacy notice here: www.helenwhately.org.uk/privacy

If you would like to find out more about what Helen is doing in Faversham and Mid Kent, you can sign up to her newsletter here: <https://www.helenwhately.org.uk/newsletters>. You can also see what Helen is doing in Westminster and the constituency by following her on Twitter here and liking here on Facebook here.