

BUS CONSULTATION - A CASE AGAINST THE PROPOSALS AS STATED

Let me start with the inadequacies of the consultation process itself, it was overly long and complicated, scant regard was given to equalities, or to the media used for its transmission. Many elderly people, who by and large are the most disadvantaged by these proposals, do not have access to the internet, and for many that do, the medium is indistinguishable from "smoke and mirrors" and they are not comfortable with the technology. Those who only had access to the mobile library service were very often disappointed by the lack of the consultation document, it being unavailable in this form of library, despite published claims to the contrary. It begs the question why the document could not have been made available on every bus that traversed the affected routes, probably the most obvious and focussed method of communication for this consultation. All of the above, and several other points, were made by myself at the cabinet meeting that preceded the start of the consultation period. I append below a transcript of my request to the cabinet which met with nothing but derision and rudeness from those across the chamber, but was met with total agreement by an electorate spread across some twenty public meetings held almost exclusively in rural locations outside of Hastings.

"What is relevant are the true numbers of those who are affected by the cumulative effect of all of the proposed cuts. For the purpose of my argument I will restrict it to Hastings and the immediate areas that are dependent upon the Hastings offer, and are also dependent upon a Hastings based work force for their existence. To create a better understanding of the magnitude of the consequences of these proposals it is necessary to accept that every bus stop along the affected routes can equally be a point of embarkation, or a destination. It is then necessary to understand the true catchment area served by each of those stops, broken down by source of employment, critical service, or other facility for which there is no alternative, and served by that particular stop. Only when that information has been extrapolated from the combination of bus timetables and local maps can the true assessment be made of the impact of the proposed cuts on the population, and the businesses and services that they are associated with. For those businesses and services that will be affected by changes to

the current services, whether it is Sundays, evenings, or loss of frequency, they need to plan for their future, they may need to seek alternatives, but with some certainty all of those affected will take a hit in their bottom line."

The lack of information can equally well be applied to those who depend upon a bus service for reasons other than business. The times of a bus arriving at a point of embarkation can very often be uncoordinated with the time of arrival of another bus from the network of routes that comprise the service. Foremost amongst this group are those requiring hospital appointments, or merely visiting. The changes to the frequency, and scheduled delays, can impact on both a patient's availability for an appointment, and consequentially this compresses the working day for those professionals employed in the NHS. This can impact any number of different journeys for different purposes, including the inevitable lack of synchronisation with the rail companies. None of these consequences were considered or commented upon in the consultation document, but merely dismissed as a "domesday scenario" that has now found massive support across the electorate of East Sussex. A further impediment to a smooth consultation process occurred on September 12th. when a full page coloured statement from the Conservative Party appeared in the local paper informing the public that the only way to have your voice heard in the local consultation was to complete the official document, and you could find it on "the website or call 01273 481503 for a paper copy". Having previously checked this point with the Asst Director, who kindly indicated to me via email that any reasonable medium of communication was acceptable, letter, email etc, whilst of course the official consultation was the preferred option. I shared this information with the Conservative Party, but to no avail as a second advertisement appeared on September 19th bearing an identically erroneous message. On this occasion I challenged the newspaper on the basis of accepting for publication such a blatantly wrong statement. This action has flawed the consultation process, and prevented many who found the official document beyond their capabilities, from expressing their views via a conventional letter, or on the back of a simple postcard. It breaches any form of equality that was offered as part of the process.

Moving on from the consultation process the number of stories, based upon the disadvantages that this proposal would inflict upon many of the local population, is legion. By far the biggest concern was attending their doctors and the Conquest Hospital. The variation in frequency of the bus service, the loss of evening and Sunday services, now squeezes the window of opportunity for many of these people to attend hospital, and conversely puts tremendous pressure on the NHS to accommodate them in a foreshortened day. For those living in some parts of Bexhill a round trip to the Conquest Hospital by taxi has been quoted at £38, whilst one mother from Eastbourne claimed a one way journey time of over three hours to visit the maternity unit at the same hospital. These proposals disproportionately affect the elderly, the frail and the disabled who have a total dependence on public transport to facilitate their everyday life. Many of this group have come to this part of East Sussex to retire, they have dispensed with the responsibilities of motor car ownership, and in doing so have created that part of the community with the lowest private possession of motor vehicles. These represent the bus companies captive audience, most of the group is on a fixed income, susceptible to inflation and price rises, and unable to understand how they will exist under these proposed draconian cuts, accompanied by a potential 30% rise in their cost of travel. Within this group the majority seeks nothing more than the ability to visit their town centre to shop and to attend to their affairs in one direction, and to have unfettered access at all reasonable times of the day to their local hospital and doctors in the other direction. For others a simple plea to be able to attend the church of their choice on a Sunday morning, as in a Town like Hastings the hills make pedestrian travel impossible for the elderly and the frail. Is this asking too much of a bus service ?, I think not. The fears of being unable to visit their own families in the evenings and on Sundays, the loss of the facilities offered by the community centres, these changes are designed to hold many of the most vulnerable prisoners in their own homes, this is unacceptable to the rest of any caring society. I listened to deeply concerned parents whose children even before these proposed cuts are forced to walk home along busy roads in the dark through lack of a bus service. I could fill pages with similar concerns, all expressed by your electorate in both town and countryside alike. Human misery, especially borne in later life, is almost impossible to quantify as a component of this philosophy of austerity that you

plan to wreak on an unreceptive society, and who by and large, are unable to defend themselves against the worst of its inevitable consequences.

I would like to touch upon the most far reaching effects of these proposals upon an East Sussex economy that can best be described as in a state of convalescence, and still in need of help to recover, not a body blow to knock it backwards. Many small businesses have started to grow not only in the urban areas of East Sussex, but out in the villages of this beautiful county of ours. They have been encouraged to take this step, and to invest their hard earned capital in improving the economic development of East Sussex, through the assurances offered by the Department of Transport's "Door to Door Strategy", by ESCC's own "Economic Development strategy", and ultimately through the local plans of the boroughs and districts, all unequivocally stating an absolute commitment to the perpetuation of public transport. To be able to secure a local labour force, and to have that complement of trained and skilled artisans available through an extended working week is paramount to the location of a business. Affordable premises, pleasant working conditions, equitable pay and benefits are all of no avail if there are no means available for your staff to attend their place of work. This is a 24/7 world that we all operate in, a small business needs that optimum flexibility that an evening shift and weekend working opportunities can offer in not only meeting orders on time but also to have the maximum window in which to recover the capital investment made in plant and machinery, and to amortise their overhead recovery over the maximum usage of their assets. Without the support of an evening and Sunday bus service this is not possible, and the overhead and investment costs will only be recovered by becoming uncompetitive through ever increasing prices. How can a council ever hope to attract even more businesses, especially in the rural areas, if the facilitation of public transport support is withdrawn. Only this month we debated the Hastings Area Walking and Cycling Strategy, with its clear statement that this is specifically in support of public transport. I fear that the gap that these proposals would create in our public transport network would now be too wide to be bridged by walking and cycling. Such activities would be reduced to the level of healthy exercise, but play no part in a sustainable transport strategy. Leaving aside conventional industry, the traditional rural industries during the picking season very often call upon a travelling but temporary work force to complete a harvest within a

fixed time frame. These are not the sort of people who can chose to get to work by taxi, very often the taxi fare would exceed the evening's pay. Take the case of housebound mothers, carers, and the variety of people who cannot work during the day, why should they be denied the opportunity to support the household income by the absence of a bus service to get them to a place of work. Why should those who would wish to improve their educational abilities by attending evening school be denied those opportunities by the lack of a bus service. What about those who currently work in the 24/7 services, nurses and care workers, those who support the supermarkets overnight, and the mass of other workers who support our modern but extended lifestyles, what now is their choice of transport. If we are to "sweat the assets" of life in the most effective way that will bring us out of recessionary pressures, then we as a responsible council must ensure that every facility, including public transport, is in place to support that absolute need. In the company of others I continually work to attract the inward investment into East Sussex that will assure its future as a place to do business. But to attract that investment, whether it is through physically joining us, taking up equity, or simply providing the loans to support new business or allowing a mature business to expand, there is always a list of precursors to taking that step. Many are self evident, from a marketplace for the product, through to good homes, schools, and a life/ work balance for the family. Others are perhaps less obvious in a region not blessed with the optimum in physical communications and a supporting infrastructure, but certainly the ability of your work force to have affordable, flexible, and a readily available system of public transport between their homes and their place of work is paramount in the decision of any business to relocate to East Sussex. Without a tick in that box no responsible company would consider such a relocation. The impact of the current proposals on this aspect of business can be quantified, and I would ask that every company affected by these proposed cuts is interviewed, and an assessment made on the deleterious effects to their ability to do business, to expand, or in the case of new businesses to consider relocation. I have attempted to research the location of all businesses that could be affected in the Hastings and Rother areas of East Sussex , and I append the web address of the most useful document that I have discovered in achieving those ends.

http://www.hastings.gov.uk/environment_planning/planning/localplan/evidence_base/#employment

As you all well know cash flow problems are one of the major causes of a small or a new business going down, in a similar way time flow, or the inability to support an order book through the unavailability of staff is also a major contributor to the loss of confidence in a company. As a responsible council, with declared aims to grow the economy of this county, we cannot always legislate for poor cash flow profiles, but we certainly can support the need to provide the public transport that will ensure a readily available work force.

East Sussex can also boast an industry that supports tourism and holiday destinations that appeal to both those looking for cultural relaxation, and also to the traditionalists who still pursue the "bucket and spade" destinations. Many who come to this area, especially for the traditional seaside holiday do so by public transport, and travel by public transport from their selected base which is very often in a holiday camp at Camber, or a caravan park at Winchelsea Beach or Combe Haven. The change in frequency of the buses that serve these camps will not only affect the holiday makers but also those who work there, and let us not forget that these establishments are very often the major employers in these areas. In a similar vein a new visitor interpretation centre is being planned for Hastings Country Park, offering many new facilities, not only for visitors but for local school children. By far the busiest day at the centre will be Sunday, where the proposal is to abolish the service, whilst throughout the week the frequency of the service is now reduced. What incentive is there for the local council to invest in such a facility, when for its busiest periods it will be cut off from the centres of population by the lack of public transport. If this county is to ever deliver its own economic strategy for growth, then the proposed lack of public transport will be a major factor in its failure. I could cite many other examples of the impact of these proposals on the business community, but I believe that the message that has come back to me from this group is now self evident.

I have not touched upon the impacts of these proposals upon our own commitments to providing a green economy, and a reduction in carbon emissions. How can we stand by and commit to the drastic reductions in public transport that are our surest way of reducing carbon emissions from the

internal combustion engine, yet plan to force an inevitable increase in the private motor car and the taxi. How can we in an area as sensitive as The Ridge in Hastings (location of the Conquest Hospital), where local residents live in trepidation of the potential increase in traffic using that road as an exit from, and feeder to the new BHLR, encourage the introduction of yet more private traffic as a result of these proposed cuts. Hardly an example of the joined up governance that our residents have a right to expect. Within a few hundred yards of this huge hospital lies Ashdown House, one of the major employers in East Sussex, and yes once again the frequency of the bus service supporting what is a shift working facility is reduced, whilst one service is abolished altogether. The examples that have cited are many and various and will affect a broad spectrum of the community, there are many more including those who need a bus service synchronised with the service provided by the rail companies. We spend much time and effort in courting the providers of our rail services, arguing vehemently and quite rightly for significant improvements in the journey times to and from London. Yet upon arrival in a Town such as Hastings it might be quicker to complete the journey home by horse and cart, when faced with the unsynchronised wait of up to two hours for the next bus, if there is one at all. It is hardly surprising that the effects of this proposal are so far reaching in this part of East Sussex when 60% of the significantly affected services support and facilitate the travelling public of the Hastings area. With one of the lowest populations of motor car ownership, and the highest populations of "have nots" this is disproportionate and discriminatory.

Finally I would like to raise the question of another way. There is nothing wrong in saving money, the principle is to be applauded, but not when it is at the cost of jobs in the private sector, disadvantaging the travelling public, creating misery and discontent for the most vulnerable in society, preventing those who need the evenings and weekends for educational and recreational purposes, and quite simply holding those hostage in their homes whose lives revolve around their community hubs and their church. Yes I am the first to admit that the deregulation of bus services back in the 1980s has done little to deal local councils a strong hand to play when dealing with rapacious bus companies. But other local authorities have looked to forming Quality Contract Schemes under the provisions of the Local Transport Act 2008, I append some further information :-

The functions of Quality Contract Scheme where a council can regulate all bus service in an area through contracts which require wider service provision is outlined here: <http://assets.dft.gov.uk/publications/pgr-regional-localtransportbill-qcsstatutoryguidance-doc/guidance.doc>

ESCC is the LTA and therefore could assign East Sussex as an LTA requiring profitable route to either pay a premium or that they are bundled together with less profitable route. It doesn't remove subsidy but also allows all services to be included in a standard system (like London Buses who operate many companies, but with all one ticket and one "brand") we could do the same.

It was introduced in the transport act 2000 (which allows LTA to bring some bus services in house) and updated in the Local Transport Act 2008 (which allows whole scale regulation of buses in a particular authority).

It's Tyne and Wear which are implanting this with some County Durham and Northumberland routes also included.

(<http://www.nexus.org.uk/sites/default/files/Cross-boundary%20QCS%20Flyer%20%5BOnline%20Version%5D.pdf>)

I do not pretend that this is a silver bullet, or indeed the only option within the scope of negotiations towards a solution that could deliver a sharing of the burden currently borne exclusively by the public purse. But before any recommendation is made to cabinet to implement these draconian cuts we have a duty, in keeping with many other local authorities, to negotiate and explore every other available avenue of opportunity that might retain, and improve upon the levels of public transport that much of this county has come to depend upon. We should not neglect the monies available within parking surplus generated within the boroughs and districts, and indeed the portion retained by the county itself. Even pensioners have offered to pay a supplement on their concessionary passes in order to secure an evening or Sunday service. Every aspect of the costs of travel should be thoroughly explored, and every possible way, through available legislation, of sharing the burden on the public purse should be investigated. It cannot be right to effect a saving of £1.79m in the public sector by passing on those costs, not to the profitable transport providers, but to an inconvenienced and disadvantaged public and a business community still struggling under the weight of austerity and driven by market forces that continue to demand every financial advantage that can be wrung from them.

All of the above comments have come from the general public, many in meetings with myself and my colleagues, and below I append a list of the organisations, village communities, and forums that I have met with in discussion, communicated with, or addressed in public meetings.

Hastings Area Chamber of Commerce
East Sussex Area Federation of Small Businesses
Hastings and Rother Advanced Manufacturing Group
Hastings Evening Economy Partnership
Tec66 High Vac and Advanced Technology Group
The Senior's Forum
The Disabled Forum
Brighton University
SCCH
The Interfaith Forum
The Voluntary Sector
Westfield Village Community
Brede Village Community
Broad Oak Village Community
Pett Village Community
Fairlight Village Community
Winchelsea Beach Village Community
Bexhill Community
St.Helens Residents Association
Blacklands Area Community
Baird Area Community

Colleagues have spoken to the following with similar comments coming back.

Ore Village Community
Hollington and Wishing Tree Community
Castle Ward Forum.

Cllr John Hodges
St.Helens and Silverhill Division