



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

14 April 2022

Cllr David Brazier
Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport
Kent County Council
Sessions House
County Hall
Maidstone
Kent
ME14 1XQ

Dear David

Please take this letter as my response to the Bus Funding Reduction consultation, currently being run by Kent County Council (KCC).

In recent weeks I have been contacted by many people highlighting their concerns about the proposals and I am sure that you have also had a significant response to the consultation. I hope you will listen to passengers who understand first-hand how important these services are. Buses, especially in rural areas, are a lifeline to communities and I am deeply concerned about public transport provision in these areas should the proposals be implemented in full.

I shall limit my comments to those specific routes which serve within Tonbridge and Malling parliamentary constituency. Like many other areas across Kent we have seen significant housing growth in recent years, none more so than the expanding and successful community on Kings Hill. One of the things that makes Kings Hill great is its travel connections, and central to this is the X1 and X2 bus. This was subsidised by the developer when more homes were built, and KCC has always been aware that there would be a moment after 5 years that further funding would be required to keep this service running. It is disappointing that this crucial service is not being prioritised given it provides that direct link between Kings Hill and West Malling station. Indeed, the renaming of the station to 'West Malling for Kings Hill' as a means of attracting people to the area is undermined by the failure of the X1 and X2 services to continue.

Furthermore, I note that the 88 service between Maidstone and Kings Hill is also marked to have its funding reduced. This will result in one fewer bus heading to Kings Hill in the morning, and then into Maidstone in the evening. Given the growth of both residential and business accommodation here in recent years, there is a clear travel to work pattern in both directions and a need to make sure this is accommodated through bus provision. This will most likely add greater traffic on to the A26, especially through the Wateringbury crossroads which already suffers from poor Air Quality. Given KCC's very own Green Action Initiative states that you will "work to reduce...traffic congestion and improve air quality", the proposal to reduce this service is in direct competition to this initiative.

I am further concerned by additional reductions in and around the villages near West Malling, beyond Kings Hill. The 58, in particular, is a regular service which connects Wrotham Heath, Addington, Trottscliffe, Ryarsh, Birling, Leybourne, West Malling and East Malling with nearby services. This route is the lifeline that residents need to get to services they rely on when many of these villages no longer have local shops and facilities of their own. On weekdays there are 6 buses a day in each direction and I have severe concerns about the impact on local people. I would be grateful for a commitment from KCC about how it intends to reduce social isolation in these communities, referencing work it is specifically carrying out to overcome these issues. This is compounded by the loss of services 70 and 502 between Borough Green and Larkfield, serving Offham, West Malling, and Leybourne too.

Likewise the 222 service connects the villages of Shipbourne, Plaxtol, Ightham, Wrotham and Borough Green with towns holding larger facilities and is an important and well used school route for students. Without any other realistic travel options the decision by KCC to

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reduce funding for these services will have a direct impact on the ability of students to get to school safely and on time. Having worked successfully to help deliver improved bus services on this part of the network, I am deeply concerned about what provision will look like in the future, and again require significant reassurance around this specific point.

On this point I should also note that it is clear from the consultation that KCC does not have any intention of protecting and prioritising bus travel to school for students, given the loss of HC3 on schooldays only to Hugh Christie in North Tonbridge.

Tonbridge will also be impacted by the proposed changes to the 208 service, which also serves the town from East Peckham and finally heads towards Pembury. This service is relied upon by residents across the town and especially in the south east corner, where it is the only service operating here which is not aimed towards school children. South East Tonbridge is a community which is far from the main services in Tonbridge Town Centre and relies upon support from to continue, however given the conflicts with other services it performs an important role in the community. If this service is taken away, I would be keen to know what service will run on this route instead?

Likewise East Peckham has suffered from a significant loss of services in recent years, including its Doctors Surgery, which has required residents to look further afield too. Given potential reductions on the 6A towards Paddock Wood and the increased range of services available in Tonbridge, I am concerned that the village could be left isolated without further and additional support. Local County Councillor, Sarah Hudson, has set up a petition for residents in the area which I know is well supported and I would urge KCC to take this into account as part of their decision.

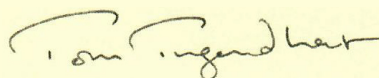
Finally, the E1 serving Edenbridge is a new service operated by Go-Coach but one which was strongly welcomed in the town when it was introduced. As the town had grown in recent years it has seen more business, which is welcome. This has resulted in a growth of residential development around the historic High Street and more services being moved to the historic industrial heart of the town, especially since Lidl and Home Bargains opened near Edenbridge Top Station. Therefore the necessity for strong public transport connections is key, especially given the distance between both stations in town. The E1 provides this and also links together all of the different communities which make up the town, some of which are very isolated from each other. The historic nature of development along the linear High Street and B2026 has meant Marlpit Hill and Mill Hill representing different community interests and needs, and the E1 helps bring people together through providing this connection.

At present the service runs half hourly through the day and this is of grave concern to me if it is to be abandoned just a couple of years in. We have already seen the impact on local villages such as Cowden which are now left without the bus, and elderly residents unable to leave the village as a result. I am deeply concerned this will now happen in Edenbridge, and would welcome an early and detailed conversation with you about your plans to overcome this.

I am very aware of the challenges that KCC face but these decisions will impact the livelihoods of many across our communities and it is important that you have a real understanding of how decisions will affect residents. I must stress how important these bus routes are to the residents of Tonbridge and Malling and how, if KCC go ahead with the plans, this will cause deep frustration amongst many in this community.

I look forward to hearing back from you.

Best wishes,



TOM TUGENDHAT