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To: Environment, Highways & Waste – Policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 25 March 2010
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Summary: This annual report informs members of the principal developments, funding arrangements and initiatives undertaken in the provision of public transport in Kent during 2009/10 and planned for implementation during 2010/11. This year's report also provides a summary of the principal legislative changes following the Local Transport Act 2008, and the bearing they are having on the delivery of public transport.

1. Introduction

- (1) Public Transport continues to go from strength to strength in Kent. The County Council has been at the forefront of developing and implementing new initiatives, with new Quality Bus Partnerships (QBPs) signed in Ashford and Dover and similar partnerships planned for Sevenoaks, Shepway and Swale. Passenger numbers have continued to increase year on year. In 2005/06 there were 45.7 million journeys by bus; in 2006/07 48.6 million; in 2007/08 51.7 million; and in 2008/09 55.2 million.
- (2) During 2009/10 a number of key initiatives such as Kent County Council (KCC) Kickstart funding have delivered new vehicles and service uplifts for the Ashford A-Line operated by Stagecoach and for some of KCC's supported bus routes. Further improvements are planned for 2010/11, and this report updates Members on progress.

2. Principal Developments

- (1) Quality Bus Partnerships

The Transport Act 2000 and the Local Transport Act 2008 provided for the establishment of Voluntary Partnership Agreements between bus operators, district councils and county councils (see section 4 – Legislation). These are generally known as Quality Bus Partnerships (QBPs), and by the end of 2009 half the districts in Kent had QBPs – Ashford, Canterbury, Dover, Maidstone, Thanet and Tunbridge Wells.

The new QBPs in Ashford and Dover were signed during 2009, each with the district council and Stagecoach in East Kent and the former including Ashford's Future Partnership Board. It is now intended to develop a Quality Network Partnership with bus and rail operators in Sevenoaks; a QBP in Shepway; and potentially a multi-operator QBP in Swale.

QBPs establish close working relationships between the parties to each agreement, and aim to improve the quality and reliability of bus services through the attainment of targets for punctuality, reliability, bus stop access and other improvements. Kent has been particularly successful at establishing QBPs and encouraging investment in Kent which has brought significant improvements in local bus services.

(2) Bus Stop Improvements

Kent Highway Services, in partnership with Arriva Southern Counties and Stagecoach in East Kent, has continued to implement a programme of improvements to bus stops throughout the county. This will eventually result in every urban bus stop being provided with a 24/7 bus stop clearway (to prevent unlawful parking), a raised boarder (wherever possible) to assist the mobility impaired, a clearly branded bus stop flag, and clear tailored timetable information for the routes serving the stop. It is planned to enter into a new Roadside Infrastructure Unit (RIU) contract to upgrade and maintain timetable information during 2010.

(3) Kent Freedom Pass

The Kent Freedom Pass scheme was rolled out countywide during 2009, and now provides free travel on most bus routes for all young people living in Kent and schooled in Kent in academic years 7-11 for an annual fee of £50. This innovative approach has seen a significant increase in bus passenger journeys by young people. There are currently over 21,000 passes issued and on average some 600,000 trips are made per school term month. It is intended to extend the scheme to pupils resident in Kent but schooled outside the county from April 2010.

(4) KCC Kickstart

The principle of pump-priming existing bus services to improve the quality of service has been adopted by KCC, with over £1.6m of capital funding for the provision of new vehicles in 2009/10. These were provided for the Ashford A-Line operated by Stagecoach, and for some of KCC's supported bus routes operated by Eastonways Coaches in Thanet, by Kent Coach Tours in Ashford, and on the new E-line route in Ashford.

(5) DfT Kickstart

The Department for Transport (DfT) invited bids from local transport authorities for its new Kickstart funding scheme early in 2009. KCC submitted two bids: one in partnership with Arriva Southern Counties and Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust for West Kent, and one in partnership with Stagecoach for East Kent. The County Council was promised that the result of the submissions would be notified by September 2009, but despite numerous requests no information has been forthcoming. While KCC welcomed the opportunity to bid for Kickstart funding from the Government for significant improvements to inter-urban bus routes in West and East Kent, the delay – and possible cancellation – of this funding by the DfT are regarded as completely unacceptable.

(6) Smartcards and Real Time Information (RTI)

KCC is working in partnership with the Kent bus operators to roll out new Electronic Ticket Machines (ETMs) with Smartcard readers and GPS/GPRS transmitters on all service vehicles. This project will generate significant benefits to passengers and bus operators, including reduced bus stop dwell times, more effective delivery and administration of concessionary travel schemes including those for senior citizens and Freedom Pass holders, and enhanced information on patronage, network performance and the identification of incidents and congestion.

It is hoped that a pilot scheme will be launched in partnership with Stagecoach in 2010 for Freedom Pass holders, subject to roll out of the new ticket machines by operators. An improved system of RTI is replacing existing displays in those parts of the county which have RTI installed at present, and it is planned to expand the RTI coverage as and when resources allow.

(7) The Kent & Medway Concessionary Travel Scheme

KCC has continued to provide additional funding to sustain the Kent & Medway Concessionary Travel scheme for over 60 year olds, as well as for disabled people and their companions. This has enabled pass holders to travel from 9.00 am instead of from 9.30am, on which time the Government's funding is based. KCC is preparing to take over responsibility for the administration of the scheme from the district councils in Kent with effect from April 2011 following an announcement by Government in December 2009.

(8) Rail Services

Southeastern launched the full timetable for its new High Speed services linking Thant/Canterbury and Dover/Folkestone with Ashford, Ebbsfleet, Stratford and London St Pancras on 13 December 2009. The new High Speed services have been generally well received, with little evidence of resistance to the premium fare and significant loadings on both peak and off-peak services.

In response to the introduction of High Speed services, KCC developed, in partnership with Southeastern and other stakeholders, a Station Travel Plan (STP) for Ashford. This forms part of a National Rail Station Travel Plan Pilot, sponsored by the DfT and ATOC (Association of Train Operating Companies) where Kent were successful in bidding for Ashford to participate as one of 31 stations from across England and Wales. The Travel Plan was launched during summer 2009, and has been held up as a model for promoting sustainable travel to other stations in Kent. KCC received an award for the Ashford STP at the Annual Rail Business Awards ceremony in London as an example of excellence in encouraging modal shift from car to bus and cycle for journeys to and from Ashford station.

In order to improve bus/rail interchange, KCC, in partnership with Southeastern, is delivering bus information display boards at most of the High Speed rail stations in East Kent. These will provide essential information on local bus routes, and direct passengers to the nearest bus stops where bus timetable information will be available.

However, the introduction of High Speed rail services has been very costly in terms of its detrimental effect on the residual timetable for the Mainline services to and from London Charing Cross and Cannon Street. KCC has received many concerns from MPs, Members, passenger groups and individuals, and these will be raised with Southeastern at their forthcoming stakeholder meeting in March 2010.

The following table lists the principal issues on each rail route and the date on which they were raised:

ROUTE	ISSUE	DATE
Ashford-London CX	Reduction of frequency from 4 tph to 2 tph and slower service as now stops all stations Ashford-Tonbridge	13.12.09
Tonbridge-Ashford	Gap in service between 1551 and 1621 resulting in long wait for children returning from Tonbridge schools	06.01.10
Sandwich/Deal/Walmer to Dover/Canterbury	Reduction in CX trains between East Kent stations and Dover and need for easier access to Canterbury	12.01.10
Ashford-Maidstone East	Loss of fast peak-hour trains between Ashford and Bearsted results in missed connections at Ashford and lengthy journey times	05.02.10
Maidstone East and West Malling-London	Withdrawal of shoulder-peak Cannon Street service results in lengthy journeys to Victoria and inadequate service to Blackfriars	05.02.10
Medway-London Victoria	Reduction of off-peak service to 1 tph at Sole Street	22.02.10
Ashford-Thamet	Journey speeds on the Ashford - Thanet route, including Manston Parkway Station (KCC working with Network Rail to improve timings)	22.02.10

KCC continues to support two Community Rail Partnerships (CRP) which cover rail routes in the county: the Kent CRP which covers the Medway Valley Line between Strood and Paddock Wood and SwaleRail between Sittingbourne and Sheerness; and the Sussex CRP which covers the Marshlink Line between Ashford and Hastings and the Uckfield Line between Uckfield and Oxted. Officers in the Sustainable Transport team attend CRP meetings, and the County Council provides financial support for each partnership.

3. Sustaining Kent's Tendered Network

- (1) KCC has a clearly established member approved policy to determine the provision of financial support for socially necessary public transport services. This states that the cost of any such service should not exceed £3 per passenger journey, and that the journey should provide access to one of the following services which could not otherwise be attained: education, employment, health care, or essential food shopping.
- (2) About 20% of the scheduled bus routes in the county are provided with revenue support. Tenders for these services are awarded in accordance with Best Value principles. In 2009/10 the revenue support for these services has been provided by a combination of KCC funding (£5.3 million) and the DfT's Rural Bus Subsidy Grant (RBSG) (£2.2 million), with an estimated 4.9 million passenger journeys being made in the current year. During 2010/11 it is anticipated that the supported bus network will be sustained at the present level. The Competition Commission is currently carrying out an investigation into the local bus industry. In the provisional work of the Office of Fair Trading (OFT), KCC came out very well indeed, with a high level of bids per tender, a very low number of commercial services withdrawn which then required subsidy, and a very low number of tenders with only one bid.
- (3) KCC also supports nine Kent Karrier services, which provide a combination of dial-a-ride and fixed routes for disabled people and for those living in rural areas away from bus routes. One of these, operating in North-West Kent, incurred a very high level of subsidy, and from 2010/11 will have its level of service reduced so that it is comparable with the other Kent Karrier services.

4. Legislation

- (1) This year's report provides a summary of the principal legislative changes following the Local Transport Act 2008 and the bearing they are having on the delivery of public transport. This new legislation has developed the original powers contained in the Transport Act 2000, and provides three distinct levels of agreement to facilitate partnership between bus operators, district councils and local transport authorities (LTA) as set out below.

Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPA)

- removes OFT power to impose fines on bus operators
- encourages agreements with more than one operator (e.g. Swale)
- can now include LTA setting of maximum fares

Quality Partnership Schemes (QPS)

- can now include, in addition to VPAs, LTA setting of frequency, timetable and maximum fares
- determines LTA obligations (e.g. bus stop clearways)

Quality Contracts (QC)

- individual quality contract board determines operator, route, timetable and fares: removal of competition

- (2) At present KCC has six Quality Bus Partnerships (QBP) and all of them are VPAs. Details of these, and of plans for new partnerships, are set

out in section 2 above. The most likely beneficiaries of the new legislation will be the existing Fastrack service in Dartford and Gravesham; the emerging Smartlink bus service in Ashford; and the proposed Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) scheme in Dover. All of these schemes could potentially benefit from a Quality Partnership Scheme (QPS), which would enable KCC, the district council(s) and the chosen bus operator to enter into such a statutory partnership.

- (3) A QPS would give KCC the power to set the frequency, route, timetable and maximum fares for the service(s) included in the QPS, although the guidance from the DfT suggests a partnership approach with the chosen bus operator rather than unilateral determination of these by the LTA. KCC would also have statutory obligations, such as the provision of clearly defined infrastructure works such as bus shelters, bus stops, clearways and raised boarders. Each individual QPS could be tailored to the particular needs of each scheme, with for example a requirement for KCC to provide RTI at all bus stops serving the route(s) concerned.
- (4) There are no plans to develop Quality Contracts (QC) in Kent, the concept for which is based on the non-competitive regulated bus network in the capital that is determined by Transport for London.

5. Conclusion

- (1) KCC has continued to make significant investment, through both funding and personnel, in the creation of good quality public transport services throughout the county. The County Council is committed to attaining modal shift from car to public transport, by enhancing the provision of bus services and by improving access for all. Wherever possible KCC will make use of the new powers contained in the Local Transport Act 2008 to enhance the quality of the partnerships between the County Council and its stakeholders.
- (2) Recent initiatives such as the development of Quality Bus Partnerships, the countywide roll-out of the Freedom Pass and the planned introduction of Smartcard will continue to deliver sustainable transport options throughout the county, thus improving the quality of life and ensuring a first-class public transport service for the residents of, and visitors to, Kent.

6. Recommendation

Members are requested to note the report.


Background Documents: The following background documents have been used in the preparation of this report:

Kickstart Bus Funding Competition 2009 – Guidance on the application process (Department for Transport, January 2009)

Local Transport Act 2008 - Improving local bus services: Guidance on Voluntary Partnership Agreements (Department for Transport, February 2009)

Local Transport Act 2008 - Quality Partnership Schemes: Statutory guidance to English local transport authorities and metropolitan district councils (Department for Transport, March 2009)

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