

**NATIONAL BUS STRATEGY  
TRANSPORT ACT 2000  
KENT ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP PLAN  
AND  
SCHEME**

**Version**

- 1. Initial EP Plan and Scheme – adopted April 2022**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In October 2021 as a requirement of the new National Bus Strategy (NBS) agenda, Kent County Council (KCC) submitted its first (pre-funding settlement version) Bus Service Improvement plan to Government. The plan was formed in conjunction with the county's 39 bus operators in order to provide a strategic vision of how Kent's bus offer can be improved in line with the requirements of the National Bus Strategy. The plan sets out the existing bus offer in Kent through consideration of the current regulatory set up, the existing approach and known success stories. It also highlights the barriers and challenges that maybe restricting greater bus use.

To support the formation of the plan we undertook significant data-led analysis of the current network. We also looked at associated measures that have been used to identify areas demanding attention. The plan then uses feedback from bus operators, Kent residents and other key stakeholders to consider potential areas for improvement and future development. These are captured under a set of key principles and more detailed initiatives. While some of these may be delivered within existing budgets, others will require NBS funding to succeed.

### **Delivering on the National Bus Strategy**

To deliver the aims and objectives of the NBS, the Government has set requirements on LTAs and bus operators. These must be adhered to in order to ensure the availability of existing national funding streams as well as a potential new funding allocation through the NBS process. These requirements are as follows:

- To produce and publish the initial version of a BSIP
- To introduce a new statutory path for the regulatory set up of bus services in the county by March 2022, including the use of franchising or Enhanced Partnerships.

### **Enhanced Partnership or franchising?**

In June 2021, following a statutory decision by the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, KCC identified that in line with Government guidance it would be forming an Enhanced Partnership (EP) for Kent from March 2022. The EP model will allow KCC to build on the positive relationships it already has with the county's bus operators, in order to seek to deliver the aspirations of the NBS.

The use of franchising was given due consideration but was not deemed appropriate at this time. Franchising is not automatically available to non-mayoral authorities (instead requiring approval from the Secretary of State) and there are considerable questions over the implications on resourcing and subsequent service levels which could be delivered in the county. KCC also already has strong relationships with its operators which can be the basis for more formal statutory EP Schemes in the future.

Kent has an active bus market with 39 operators currently registered with the Traffic Commissioner to operate services in the county. Close ties already exist between operators and KCC through such initiatives as the Kent Travel Saver, Kent's eight

Quality Bus Partnerships (QBP) and through management of contracted local bus services. It is felt that these existing relationships will form a strong base for establishing an EP model. KCC received no objections from operators to this approach during engagement conducted for the production of the BSIP.

The formation of our three Enhanced Partnership Schemes have therefore been identified as the appropriate mechanism for KCC and its bus operators to meet the requirement of the NBS in introducing '*a new statutory path for the regulatory set up of bus services in the county by March 2022*'.

## **Objectives and Key Principles**

Through a combination of our Bus Service Improvement Plan, our Enhanced Partnership Plan and the three associated schemes, KCC and Kent's Bus Operators intend to meet the requirements of and deliver on the aspirations of the National Bus Strategy.

At a local level, we have worked to ensure that our BSIP and our resulting EPs reflect the aspirations of bus users, potential bus users and stakeholders and have therefore used engagement activity in the form of public consultation and stakeholder workshops to help us understand what is most important to our residents and what they would like to see delivered through our BSIP and EP schemes.

This has enabled us to form a set of Key Principles which have informed the priorities in our BSIP and which will also be used to establish the detail of the first and future generations of our EPs. These principles are:

### **Regulation**

**1** Form Enhanced Partnership Agreements covering all public buses in Kent, setting ambitious targets with respect to punctuality, journey times, vehicle quality and accessibility.

### **Customer**

**2** Put the customer at the heart of everything we do through developing a passenger charter agreed through EPs and by developing the Bus Services Feedback portal.

### **Network developments**

**3** Seek to secure all available funding and prioritise its use to 1) recover from the pandemic and stabilise the current network, and 2) further develop and enhance Kent's public transport through a range of initiatives.

**4** Undertake a countywide and then localised network analysis to help inform the use of existing and new funding, with a view to providing service enhancements for rural communities where levels are currently lacking.

**5** Continue to support the development of the community transport sector in Kent to supplement the core bus network.

## **Innovation and digital accessibility**

**6** Consider and embrace innovative transport solutions such as DRT and MaaS models as possible alternatives to the private car and make use of BRT where appropriate.

## **Fares and ticketing**

**7** Provide flexible and better value ticketing options and use technology to provide cashless and ticketless solutions on all operators' services.

## **Public transport information**

**8** Improve the quality and accessibility of public transport information, including the provision of a one-stop-shop for live bus times and fares information and making greater use of technology e.g. for voice announcements.

## **Accessibility**

**9** Strive to improve the levels of physical and digital accessibility both on buses and through infrastructure to ensure a fully accessible network for disabled passengers.

## **Environment and air quality**

**10** Promote the role of buses in solving air quality issues and work with operators and other stakeholders to improve emissions standards. This would include using funding to support the move from diesel to emission-free vehicles.

## **Infrastructure, network management and new developments**

**11** Put buses at the centre of decision making in respect of new road schemes, planning and developments, and support bus operators and services in KCC's role as the highway authority.

## **COMPETITION TEST**

The Kent County Council has undertaken an assessment of the impacts of the EP Plan and Scheme on competition and believes it will not or is unlikely to have a significantly adverse effect on competition, for the purposes of Part 1 of Schedule 10 of the Transport Act 2000.

Please note that this competition declaration is a separate, standalone document that does not need to go through the EP variation procedures to change it.

## **PART 1 - EP PLAN**

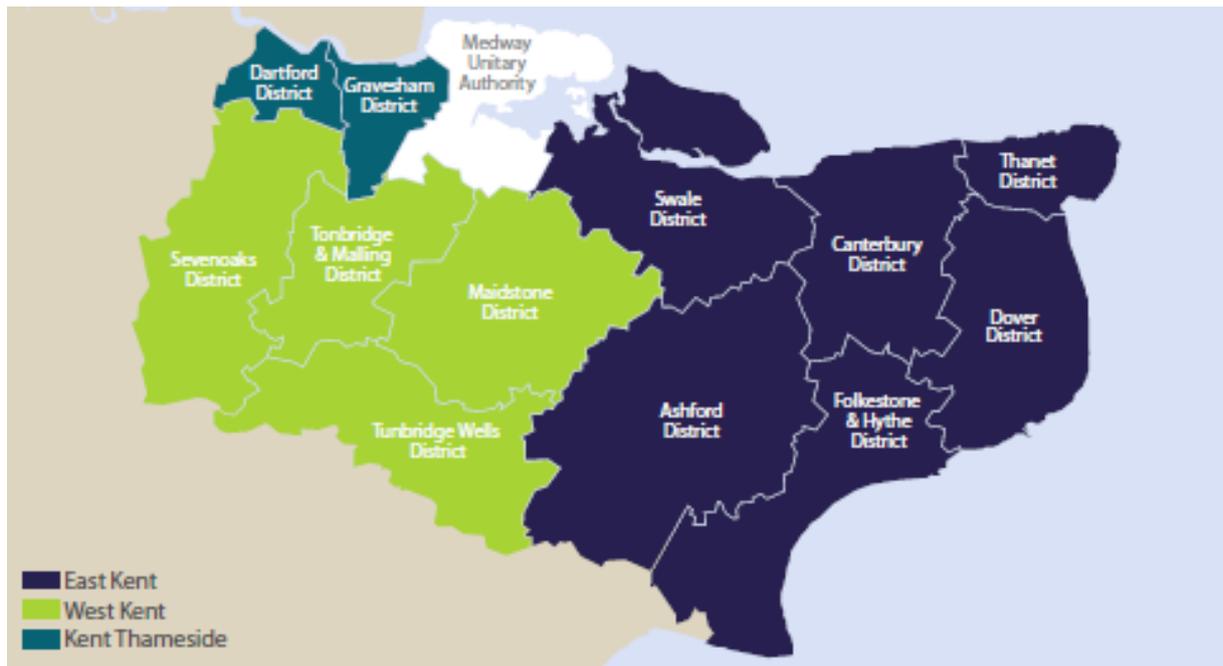
**THE KENT ENHANCED PARTNERSHIP PLAN FOR BUSES IS MADE IN ACCORDANCE WITH SECTION 138G(1) OF THE TRANSPORT ACT 2000 BY: KENT COUNTY COUNCIL.**

### **1. GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE**

Kent is the most heavily populated non-metropolitan authority in the UK. The county is made up of a mixture of larger urban centres such as Canterbury and Maidstone, smaller towns and villages and more rural areas. The county sees unique situations for certain locations with for instance the Gravesham and Dartford areas having close proximity to London and the Dover and Folkestone & Hythe areas being most heavily impacted by cross-channel traffic. It also sees variations across its area in relation to key indices such as employment levels, levels of deprivation and education, and it has 12 borough / district authorities operating in a two-tier administrative set up. There are also variations with respect to bus service provision and which bus operators run services. For example Stagecoach and Arriva are the major national group operators in the east and west of the county respectively.

The above means that the county's geographical make up is not conducive to a single EP arrangement. As a result KCC intends to introduce an EP and related EP Plan covering its entire geographical area but, within it, introduce three EP Schemes. This will allow the overall aims, objectives and targets of Kent's BSIP to be considered and reflected across the county as a whole, but with delivery tailored for different local circumstances, needs and operating territories.

Kent's EP Schemes are intended as follows:



Kent has borders with four other LTAs: East Sussex, London, Medway (Unitary Authority) and Surrey. KCC has held conversations with all four LTAs to discuss the overall approach to BSIPs, common issues between areas and to seek agreement for collaborative working with respect to cross boundary issues. We have and will continue this dialogue with these authorities throughout the EP process.

The differing characteristics and circumstances of each authority means that a joint BSIP was not deemed appropriate. However there is a strong willingness to work together and move forward on key issues such as ticketing and cross boundary implications of passenger charters.

Particular consideration was given to a joint BSIP and EP Plan between Kent and Medway. However this was not pursued for a variety of reasons including:

- In comparison to overall mileage there are only a small number of routes which operate between the two areas
- There is a differing geographical and social-economic make-up between the two areas
- There is a difference in administrative set-up between the two LTAs. Medway is a Unitary Authority holding responsibility over areas such as planning, parking and bus shelters. In Kent these powers are shared with our district partners under a two-tier system.

Medway Council will be an invited attendee at the Enhanced Partnership Board.

Kent's bus operators have indicated support for this approach.

## **2. PLAN PERIOD AND REVIEW**

This first version of the Kent Enhanced Partnership Plan is intended to cover a five year period from April 2022 until end of March 2027. The EP Board may propose variations to the Plan outside of the formal review dates, which if agreed will be subject to the statutory consultation process.

In keeping with Kent's Bus Service Improvement Plan, this first version of the Kent EP Plan therefore remains aspirational assuming either receipt of the full NBS funding ask or that during this initial five-year period, there will be other opportunities to attract alternative funding or deliver initiatives in a different way or using the Council's own resources.

The process to review the EP Plan would commence at the start of the final year of the initial period (from April 2026) leading to adoption of a new plan and associated schemes from April 2027. Review of the Plan, would be conducted using the established meeting and governance structure through EP Schemes Monitoring Groups making recommendations to the EP Board for approval.

Changes to operational and financial circumstances will be reflected in updated versions of the Kent Bus Service Improvement Plan which will be subject to six monthly review and through the obligations and commitments made within our EP schemes which will be subject to a controlled but simple and responsive mechanism for variation.

## **3. POLICY CONTEXT**

KCC has a number of strategic and operational plans in place across its Highways and Transportation division. At the forefront of these is Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4): Delivering Growth without Gridlock 2016-2031. Kent's LTP brings together the authority's transport policies by looking at local schemes and issues as well as those with a countywide or national significance. Within LTP4, KCC has identified bus improvements as a key strategic priority. As the county recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic, travel patterns change and wider factors such as cross-channel traffic variances due to Brexit have an effect on the county's roads, KCC has embarked on a review of LTP4, with the intention to establish a new plan.

In any new LTP, KCC will set out policies and proposals that reflect the BSIP and our EP Plan that further its delivery. Sitting alongside LTP4 are a number of more detailed plans and strategies such as the Highways Asset Management Plan 21/22 – 25/26, Kent's Active Travel Strategy and the Freight Action Plan. It is intended that Kent's EP Plan will sit alongside the LTP and vice versa and will also likely align with a number of district LTPs.

## **4. CURRENT POSITION AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS**

In a large rural county like Kent, the bus network plays a major role in connecting remote, less populated areas with essential services and local centres. For this reason, KCC and Kent's bus operators have fought to protect service levels through a combination of funding and partnership working. However it is acknowledged that

in every area of provision there is more that can be done. Our Bus Service Improvement Plan sets out a range of ambitious initiatives to address identified challenges and shortcomings across all aspects of service provision.

As is the case in most parts of the UK, bus services in Kent operate in a de-regulated market outside the control of KCC. The Department for Transport, not KCC, is responsible for the licensing of operators and services. In this de-regulated environment, operators provide services at their own discretion and set vital features such as routes, timetables, frequencies, and fares. Around 90% of all bus journeys in the county are provided on this commercial basis. They do not attract subsidy from KCC but run only for the revenue generated by passenger usage.

Throughout the pandemic, KCC has worked very closely with all its transport providers to ensure that services continue to operate and are provided in line with emerging guidance. Our relationships with bus operators in particular have strengthened as a result of this. From a financial perspective, KCC supported the network by maintaining payments to operators for contracted bus services, and freezing pre Covid re-imburement levels for concessionary schemes. This, coupled with other support provided by the Government, ensured that buses continued to operate and we avoided a significant reduction to service levels in Kent.

However, it is acknowledged that this challenge remains. Covid restrictions resulted in a fall of 66% of passengers on Kent's bus network in the 2020/21 year. KCC continues to work closely with operators and collectively we are confident that ongoing financial support in the form of the Bus Recovery Grant and concessionary travel payments will sustain the network until April 2022. At this point, exceptional funding from Government is expected to cease, and reimbursement will be based on actual usage. Consideration also needs to be given to the pressure on KCC finances, particularly in discretionary areas and with challenging operating conditions caused by increased congestion and running times, and rises in costs such as fuel, wages and insurance. For these reasons, it has been difficult for the council and Kent's bus operators to be ambitious in recent years.

More recently, the national driver shortage has created a resource barrier to providing bus services in parts of the County and is anticipated to exasperate cost increases in this area leading to further pressure on the sustainability of commercially provided services and the costs for the Council in securing subsidised replacements.

As well as any additional funding that might be forthcoming, the NBS and BSIP represent a positive framework for supporting network recovery. Initiatives in the form of enhancements to public transport information and ticketing will be used to encourage passengers to the network with a view firstly to recover patronage to pre Covid levels and ultimately to exceed them. Patronage targets will be set on an increasing scale through our Enhanced Partnership process.

Taking account of the above, KCC is prioritising initiatives that will maintain commercial and subsidised service levels consistent with or similar to the pre-pandemic network. Having secured this base level of provision, additional funding

will be used to deliver a range of aspirations that will, be prioritised through future stakeholder engagement and taking account of a criteria being developed by the Council that will consider; recovery, sustainability and long term legacy, policy context and value for money.

More generally, whilst KCC and Kent’s bus operators have continued to maintain standards and levels of provision, it is acknowledged that there is scope for significant improvement. In respect of bus information, ticketing, fares, infrastructure, innovation and digital accessibility, KCC has identified specific areas for development. These are outlined in respective sections of the BSIP, along with initiatives for improvement in each area.

## 5. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Engagement and Consultation

Although formal consultation is not required by the BSIP guidance, KCC has wanted to ensure that its plan reflected local need and aspiration. The Council has therefore sought to engage as fully as the timescale allowed, working to a principle of light touch consultation to establish resident’s priorities and then to supplement this feedback with more detailed discussions with stakeholders in order to understand what the feedback means in their area or for their clients. An all-operator forum has met and then been supplemented by ongoing discussions with appointed operator representatives.

An independent Market Research Company have been engaged to analyse and report on feedback and suggestions made through the Public Consultation and the Stakeholder Working Groups.

This process has been used to inform the pre-funding settlement draft of the BSIP. On understanding of the financial settlement, it is intended to more traditionally consult on the updated draft and gain feed-back on proposed priorities to align with the first Enhanced Partnership Schemes in April 2022.

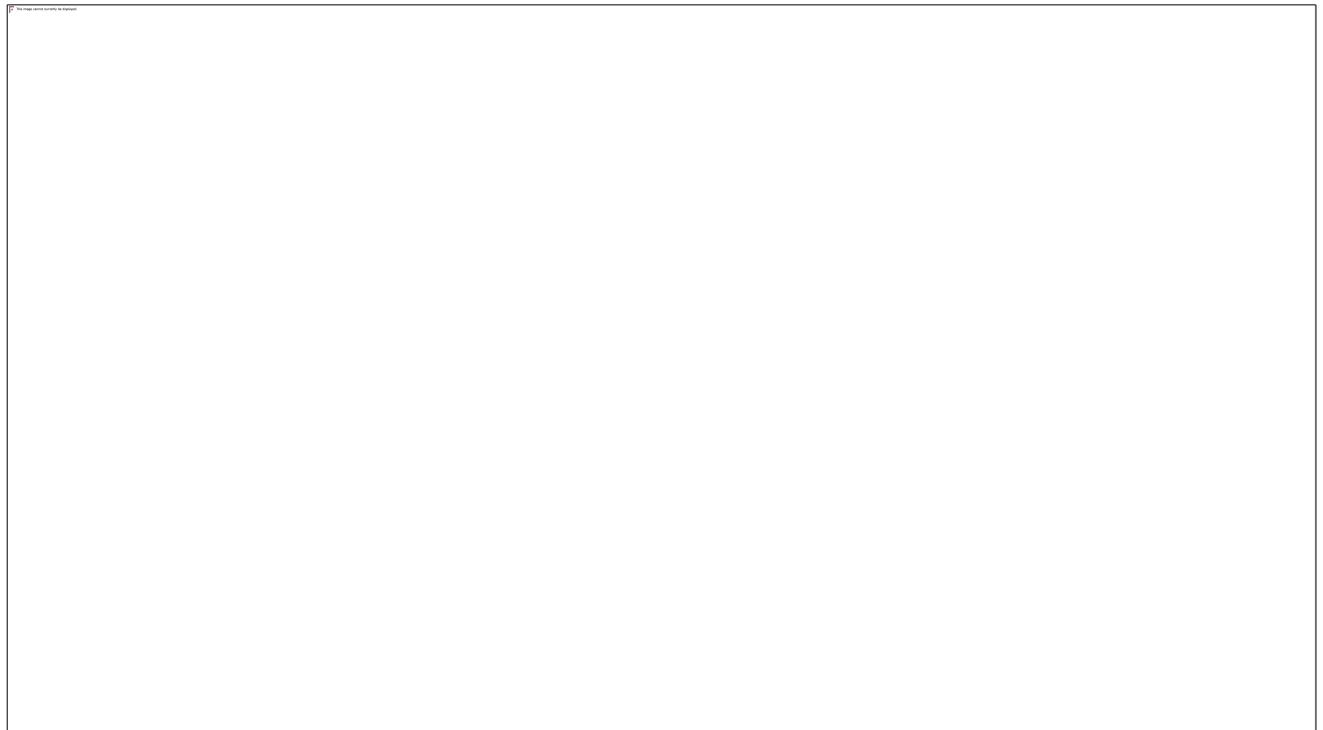
The following formal engagement activities and meetings have been undertaken;

Activity	Consultees / Stakeholders Involved
Engagement with Neighbouring Local Authority	Medway Council, East Sussex County Council, Surrey County Council, Transport for London.
Operator engagement	All Kent Bus Operators, leading to the formation of a working group.
Operator Initiative Survey	All Kent Bus Operators
Operator Data Request Survey	All Kent Bus Operators
Kent BSIP : Stakeholder	Kent District Councils, Medway Council,

Workshop – Kent BSIP Principles	KCC Officers, Passenger Focus, Chamber of Commerce, Youth Council, Disability Groups, other user groups.
Member Briefings	KCC Elected Members
District Council Engagement – Kent BSIP. Local Input to Initiatives	12 Kent District Councils
Transport Focus Engagement and attendance of workshops	Transport Focus
Department for Work and Pensions – Input to BSIP Initiatives	Kent Offices of the Department for Work and Pensions
Public Consultation : to establish priorities for users and provision of service suggestions.	All Kent residents.

### **BSIP Consultation Results**

The following extract from Kent’s BSIP demonstrates the results from the public consultation undertaken for initial BSIP preparation.



**Data**

In order to support the understanding of trends across the network KCC engaged with operators to obtain data relating to range of measurables including; patronage, revenue, mode share, running times and reliability.

With the requirement to deliver the NBS at a fast pace, KCC utilised a variety of datasets already available through our current activity. This was complemented by further research and data from operators, requested during development of the EPs. Moving forward, we are looking to improve our planning resources and tools to support delivery of our EPs.

Data collected from operators pre-Covid demonstrated that buses were operating at 77.7% on time across the network. Such performance highlights the challenge of building a reliable schedule, indicating high variability in traffic congestion in Kent. Statistics collected from operators in June 2021 presented an average of 85% service on time.

OTP results presented earlier clearly highlight the challenges faced by operators when trying to set a workable and reliable timetable. While some counties achieved well over 90% bus on time and the England outside London average reached 83.5% in 2019, Kent's estimated OTP figure was 77.7% on time in November 2019. The main causes of variability include variable volumes of traffic, roadworks, and the impact of the M25.

More detail obtained through ABOD shows the peak hours are even more affected, while performance in off-peak and weekends are better overall.

The analysis of existing schedules demonstrates that the planned commercial speed of services is around 24.7km/h on average in the morning peak for most service types, except for P&R and urban services which reach around 19km/h for the same period.

In some areas the bus network in Kent is significantly affected by traffic congestion. This is visible through our journey time analysis. An analysis of main congestion points extracted from the Kent traffic model clearly highlights locations around the M25 in Dartford, Canterbury, Dover and Tunbridge Wells as being particularly affected. Not surprisingly, these locations almost all coincide with the key bus travel corridors identified in Kent.

### **Mode share**

The KCC traffic and public transport model has estimated a theoretical pre-Covid public transport mode share (bus + rail) for Kent and Medway of around 9.2% between 7am and 7pm. The public transport mode share per district is presented in Figure 16.

Dover, Folkstone & Hythe, Maidstone and Ashford districts present the lowest public transport mode share (below 8%), although it should be noted that figures in Dover and Folkestone & Hythe may be impacted by cross-channel traffic.

Our journey time analysis concentrated on low network coverage for these districts and also highlighted pockets of deprived population which reinforce these results.

## **6. PLAN OBJECTIVES AND INTENDED OUTCOMES**

The overall imperative for KCC and Kent's Bus Operators is to recover from the impacts of the pandemic, sustaining current service levels and offerings and then to aspire to drive genuine improvement across all areas of bus service provision in Kent.

To inform the formation Kent's Bus Service Improvement Plan, in conjunction with Kent's Bus Operators and other stakeholders we developed and agreed **11 Key Principles** to act as the focus for the plan.

### **Key Principles**

#### **Regulation**

**1** Form Enhanced Partnership Agreements covering all public buses in Kent, setting ambitious targets with respect to punctuality, journey times, vehicle quality and accessibility.

#### **Customer**

**2** Put the customer at the heart of everything we do through developing a passenger charter agreed through EPs and by developing the Bus Services Feedback portal.

#### **Network developments**

**3** Seek to secure all available funding and prioritise its use to 1) recover from the pandemic and stabilise the current network, and 2) further develop and enhance Kent's public transport through a range of initiatives.

**4** Undertake a countywide and then localised network analysis to help inform the use of existing and new funding, with a view to providing service enhancements for rural communities where levels are currently lacking.

**5** Continue to support the development of the community transport sector in Kent to supplement the core bus network.

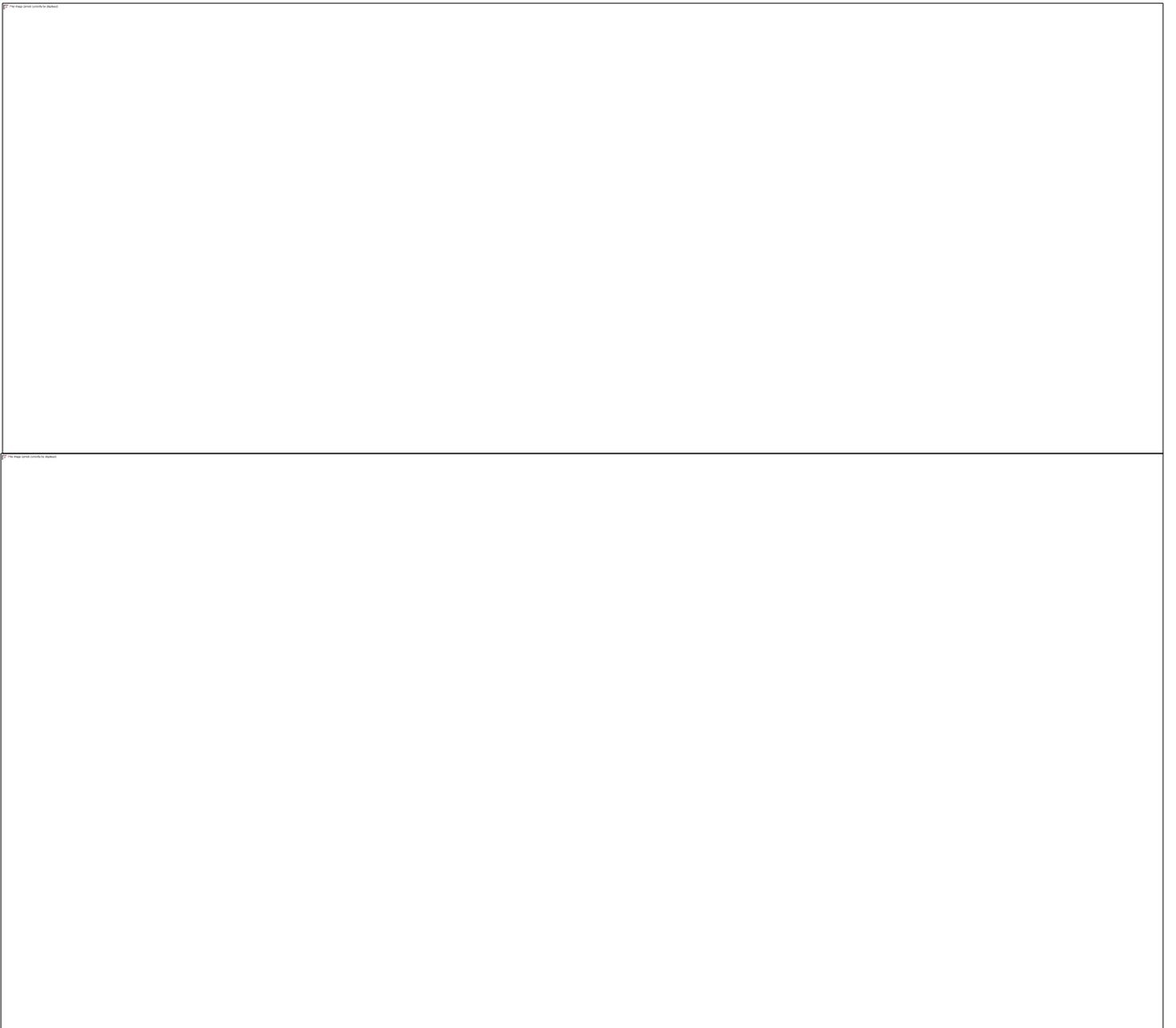
#### **Innovation and digital accessibility**

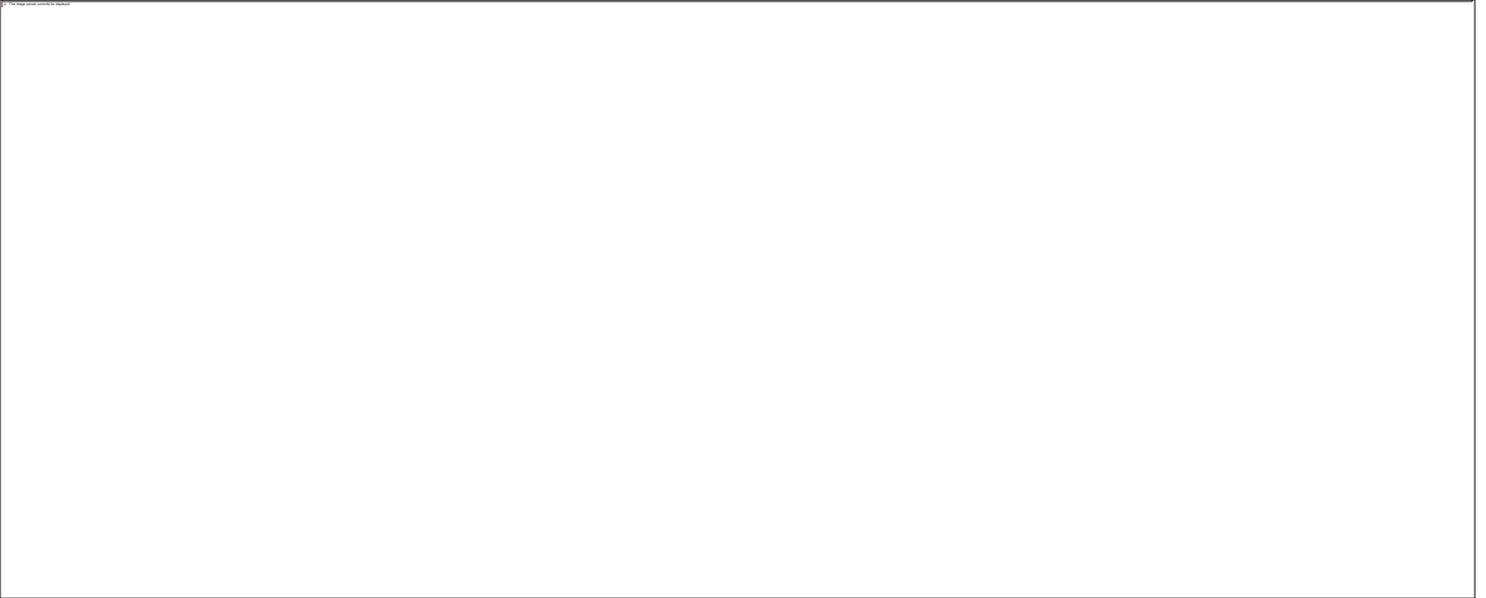
**6** Consider and embrace innovative transport solutions such as DRT and MaaS models as possible alternatives to the private car and make use of BRT where appropriate.

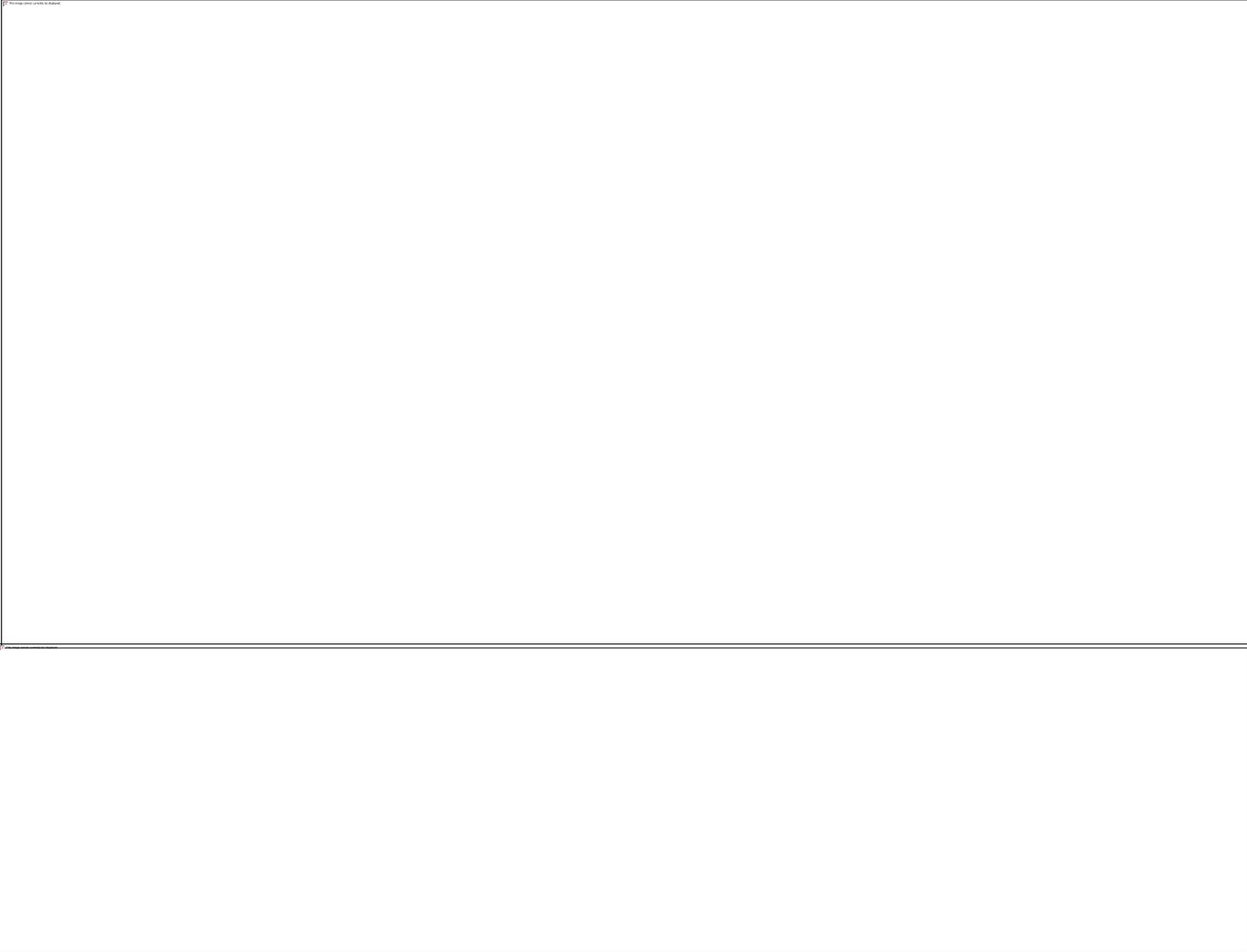
#### **Fares and ticketing**

**7** Provide flexible and better value ticketing options and use technology to provide cashless and ticketless solutions on all operators' services.









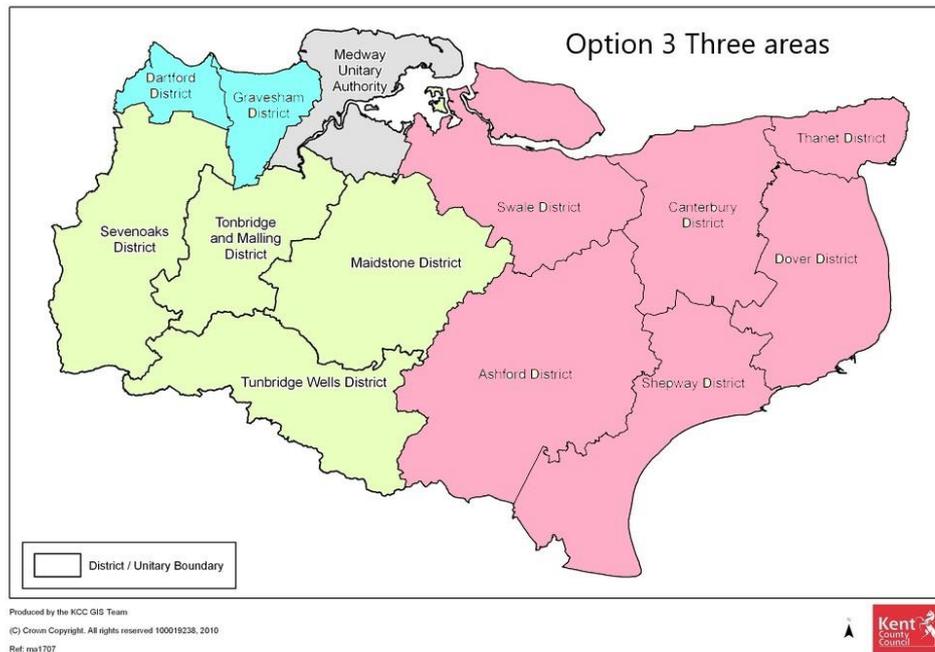
**7. DELIVERY**

As well as any additional funding that might be forthcoming, the EP plan represents a positive framework for supporting network recovery. Although it is not fundamentally changing the deregulated and commercial nature of the bus network, KCC is intent on forming Enhanced Partnership schemes that promote close working relationships with operators and stakeholders and permit more direct influence on standards and outcomes.

These are formal partnerships targeted at improving bus services. Although they are published by the local transport authority, they are close partnerships between bus operators and the local authorities. Other parties will play a part, including district councils, passenger groups and businesses, and there will be consultation, including obtaining public views, on what needs to be improved and what the priorities should be.

We have formed one **Enhanced Partnership Plan** for Kent (this plan), covering all of the county to take effect from April 2022. This will set out a strategic view on how the partners will improve bus services in Kent and will take most of its content from this BSIP. It will be updated every 5 years.

Sitting beneath our Kent Plan will be three **Enhanced Partnership Schemes** as shown in the map below:



The three areas would be:

1. **East Kent** covering Ashford, Canterbury, Dover, Folkestone and Hythe, Swale and Thanet
2. **West Kent** covering Maidstone, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling and Tunbridge Wells Districts.
3. **Kent Thameside** consisting of the Dartford and Gravesham Districts

These schemes provide a more tailored approach for each of these smaller areas setting out more detail of the plans for improvements to be made and taking on board local views. They will set out intentions for the following few years and will be updated from time to time as the degree of success of the early schemes become clear and the demand for bus services changes.

### **Current Quality Bus Partnerships**

In many areas of Kent, voluntary Quality Bus Partnerships (QBP) between the county and district councils and the local bus operators have been in place for a number of years. The Enhanced Partnership schemes will build on and in most cases carry forward the positive work achieved by these arrangements. The

governance proposals are designed to ensure that groups are in place to reflect the legal requirements of the EP (e.g. overall EP Board, EP Scheme Monitoring Groups etc) but that these are complemented by more localised groups reflecting QBPs.

### **Improved bus services**

The agreements with the bus operators will be aimed at bouncing back from the pandemic period, during which far fewer people used buses in Kent. Once pre-Covid levels of passengers have been achieved, the EP will be used to go for growth by increasing the bus share of the transport market and to position the bus as a green form of transport.

A summary of our proposed measures are below Our ability to introduce a number of these will depend on the availability of funding. The highlights are:

- Increased bus services including during the evenings and to out of town employment sites
- Lower fares, including more flexible seasons and better tickets where you need to use more than one operator
- More use of smartcards and mobile phone tickets to make purchases even easier, with rail tickets and even car hire available on the same app
- Better integration with other transport modes
- Innovative ways of retaining rural transport links, such as demand responsive services
- An expanded Fastrack, frequent and high-quality services and consideration of a 'Superbus' network
- Modern and comfortable buses and a move to zero-carbon vehicles
- Traffic management measures to speed up buses on the key radial routes
- Improvements to bus stops and the information shown at them
- Comprehensive bus and train information on a one-stop site
- Introduction of a bus passenger charter, with redress when things go wrong

### **Cross-boundary services**

The extent of cross-boundary working with Kent's neighbouring authorities has been considered, particularly in terms of a potential joint EP Plan. The key neighbour is Medway, which is surrounded on three sides by Kent. As Medway has different priorities and urban geography to Kent, it is not proposed to undertake a joint plan. However, both authorities are working closely to minimise any cross-boundary issues that might arise and are looking at developing joint initiatives where suitable.

We will also liaise closely with East Sussex and Surrey councils and with Transport for London to ensure that cross boundary routes can continue to operate effectively.

## **Governance**

The Enhanced Partnership Plan and schemes will be supported by a governance structure. This will cover:

- An executive board supplying strategic overview and carrying out the key decision-making process, including formal reviews of the contents of the schemes
- Monitoring groups in each of the three scheme areas, and reviewing progress of the local initiatives
- Network and bus punctuality improvement partnerships, concentrating on road network improvements and management
- Passenger charter groups in each scheme area monitoring progress of the charters and feeding back customer views
- Local focus groups in each district and borough, feeding the district views into the process and addressing issues previously covered by Quality Bus Partnerships.

## **Passenger charter**

The EP will include a passenger charter developed initially by the targeted charter groups in each EP scheme area. These will set out the service that passengers can expect, the commitments made by both local authorities and bus operators and how any passenger issues will be addressed. Performance of services against the charter criteria will be monitored and complaints analysed to inform further actions in the EP Schemes.

## **8. ENGAGEMENT AND FUTURE REVIEW**

This first version of the Kent Enhanced Partnership Plan is intended to cover a 5 year period from April 2022 until end of March 2027. The EP Board may propose variations to the Plan outside of the formal review dates, which if agreed will be subject to the statutory consultation process. Statutory consultees will be invited to sit on Kent's Enhanced Partnership scheme monitoring groups and as such have the opportunity to input into the success of the plan and inform any requirements for review or amendment.

In keeping with Kent's Bus Service Improvement Plan, this first version of the Kent EP Plan therefore remains aspirational assuming either receipt of the full NBS funding ask or that during this initial five-year period, there will be other opportunities to attract alternative funding or deliver initiatives in a different way or using the Council's own resources.

The process to review the EP Plan would commence at the start of the final year of the initial period (from April 2026) leading to adoption of a new plan and associated schemes from April 2027. Review of the Plan would be conducted using the established meeting and governance structure through EP Schemes Monitoring

Groups making recommendations to the EP Board for approval. Targets will be reviewed through EP Schemes.

Changes to operational and financial circumstances will be reflected in updated versions of the Kent Bus Service Improvement Plan which will be subject to six monthly review and through the obligations and commitments made within our EP schemes which will be subject to a controlled but simple and responsive mechanism for variation.