

## **Call in Request for Executive Decision 26/00020**

### **Kent Travel Saver (KTS) - Price Increase**

**Call-in request submitted by:** Mr Rob Yates, Mr Antony Hook, Mr Paul Thomas & Mr Mark Hood

#### **Reasons for calling in the decision:**

**The decision was not taken in accordance with the principles of decision-making set out in the following:**

#### **Reason One: 8.5 (a) action proportionate to the desired outcome**

The decision raises the question as to whether the proposed increases are proportionate to the intended outcome. The Kent Travel Saver scheme is intended to support affordable access to transport to enable pupils to attend school, aiming to ease the financial pressure of transport costs, which is particularly important for families who rely on the scheme.

As a concessionary scheme designed to support affordability, the application of a higher percentage increase to lower income households raises questions as to whether the decision aligns with this purpose.

The increase applied to lower income households is approximately 26%, compared to an increase of around 6% for other users, representing a significantly different level of impact across user groups. When considered over a two year period, the cumulative increase for lower income households is estimated to be in the region of 41%. As a result, households with limited financial flexibility are subject to the largest relative increase.

This differential impact raises concerns as to whether the decision is proportionate, particularly given the reduced ability of lower income households to absorb additional costs. This indicates a disparity in how the financial burden of the decision is distributed across families.

#### **Reason Two: 8.5 (b) Due Consultation and the taking of professional advice from Officers.**

The report and background documentation does not clearly demonstrate this process has been carried out to support the decision taken.

**Reason Three: 8.5 (d) A presumption in favour of openness.**

The decision and supporting reports do not afford clarity for comparison to demonstrate transparency of the decision. Furthermore, the options considered and discarded does not satisfactorily include options detailing different impacts on levels of income.

The report does not compare current costs and revenues with proposed or estimated future users. This in itself does not therefore provide transparency and openness.

**Reason Four: 8.5 (e) clarity of aims and desired outcomes.**

The reason for the decision is oversimplified so provides no clarity in order to consider and then demonstrate transparent determination of the outcomes.

The decision identifies that there is a need to balance the affordability of the Kent Travel Saver scheme with its financial sustainability; however, it is not clearly set out how this balance has been determined in practice. The report refers to maintaining the scheme at a “broadly affordable level for the majority of families”, but does not explain what is meant by this, how that assessment has been reached or the financial implications to KCC of it being unaffordable for the minority of families.

In addition, there is no clear explanation of the extent to which affordability has been prioritised alongside financial sustainability in arriving at the decision. As a result, it is unclear how the stated aims of the scheme have been applied in reaching the outcome, and how the approach taken is intended to achieve those aims in practice.

**Reason Five: 8.5 (f) explanation of the options considered and giving reasons for decisions.**

The report sets out a number of alternative options which were considered and rejected. However, the explanation provided focuses primarily on variations of increasing charges and does not demonstrate that a wider range of potential approaches has been explored

In particular, there is limited explanation of whether alternative pricing structures were considered, beyond the application of a flat increase. This could include, for example, proportionate or percentage-based increases, or other ways in which the cost of the scheme is applied across users. The reasoning for rejecting the options that are listed is also set out only briefly, without clearly explaining how those options were assessed against the stated objectives.

As a result, it is not clear that all reasonable alternatives have been fully considered, or that the decision has been reached following a sufficiently detailed evaluation of available options.

**Reason six: The decision is not in line with the Council's Policy Framework – (Reforming Kent 2025-2028) - Supporting residents that need help**

Kent County Council's Strategic Statement's third aim is "Supporting residents that need help".

Objective 1 of this, is to embed a greater focus on prevention and early intervention and empowering people to take personal responsibility. A priority for Objective 1 is to "put in place practical measures that improve people's lives, intervening early to support people to help themselves and make sensible life choices without a nanny state attitude."

The decision taken disproportionately disadvantages residents with low incomes, who are by definition, residents who need help above residents with much higher incomes. On objective 1, a flat £35 increase, rather than a percentage increase is not meeting this objective because:

- The proposal is not a measure that improves people's lives
- Does not intervene early to support low-income families to help themselves make sensible life choices.

The decision taken does not take account of families with multiple users and demonstrate how to overcome the cumulative impact.

**Reason seven: The decision is not in line with the Council's policy framework (Strategic Statement 2025-2028) - Tackle inequality blighting many of our coastal communities**

The Strategic statement makes it clear that the increasing inequality and social deprivation between some of Kent's coastal communities and the rest of the country, has grown to unacceptable levels. The report furthermore says, "in too many coastal communities' employment, health and housing outcomes are considerably poorer."

As part of dealing with health inequality in Kent, KCC has kickstarted the major public health programme on Kent's east coast – UK's first Marmot region. This region consists of Swale, Folkestone & Hythe, and includes Canterbury, Thanet, Dover, and Ashford.

The data provided by KCC shows that over 59% of the low-income bus users come from the Marmot region, which is an area KCC are directly trying to address with the Marmot project.

A breakdown of the data shows that Canterbury (13.1%) and Thanet (11%) account for the largest proportions of low-income bus users within the Marmot region. The remaining proportion is distributed across Swale (10%), Folkestone and Hythe (9.6%), Ashford (8.3%), and Dover (7.5%), demonstrating that use of the scheme is spread across Marmot priority areas.

Therefore, there is a real risk that rather than reduce coastal inequality in Kent in districts such as Thanet, Canterbury and Dover, this scheme could exacerbate coastal inequality that this administration admits "blights" our coastal communities.

**Reason eight: The decision is not in line with the Council's Policy Framework – Reforming Kent.**

The Council's Strategic Statement identifies the delivery of best value for residents as a core priority, including securing sustainable outcomes and minimising long-term risk to the public purse.

The report acknowledges "The proposal keeps the passes at a broadly affordable level for the majority of families", thereby acknowledging that the increase in cost may be unaffordable for a number of families.

Forcing low-income families to find a further 26% increase in one year, 41% increase in two years, does not justify the resulting impact of such a disproportionate increase to this income group. Nor does it demonstrate this has been adequately considered.

There has been no acknowledgement in this report, into the disproportionate or justified differing levels of increase or impact on varying income groups. The Strategic Statement's commitment to securing best value for residents does not appear to have been considered as to the likely impact of this decision.

**Reason nine: 17.66 (c) The decision is not in accordance with the Council's budget.**

The report does not satisfactorily provide sound evidence to demonstrate a clear MTFP for this and future costs and receipts. Therefore, the justification that the decision does in fact collect sufficient receipts to cover projected costs whilst any surplus or deficit is accounted for.