KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 11 June 2026.

PRESENT: Mr R G Streatfeild, MBE (Chair), Mr J Defriend, Ms S Emberson (Substitute for Mr T L Shonk), Mr J Finch (Substitute for Mr J Eustace), Mr M A J Hood, Mrs S Hudson, Mr T Mole, Miss D Morton (Substitute for Mr W Chapman), Mr T Prater (Substitute for Mr A J Hook), Dr G Sturley, Mr P Thomas and Mr D Truder

ALSO PRESENT: Mr S Dixon, Mr P Osborne and Mr R Yates

IN ATTENDANCE: Miss M Bundy (Democratic Services Officer), Mr S Bushell (Head of Public Transport), Mr S Jones (Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport), Mr S Pay (Public Transport Planning and Operations Manager) and Mrs A Taylor (Assistant Democratic Services Manager (Scrutiny))

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

Chair's Introduction

The Chair set out the reasons for the Scrutiny meeting, which had been convened at shorter notice than 5 clear working days. These were to ensure that, whatever the outcome of the Committee's discussion, the Kent Travel Saver scheme could progress to allow passes to be issued to pupils in time for the new school year in September.

52. Apologies and Substitutes
(Item A1)

Apologies were received from Mr Chapman, for whom Miss Morton was substituting, Mr Eustace, for whom Mr Finch was substituting, Mr Shonk, for whom Mrs Emberson was substituting, Mr Hook, for whom Mr Prater was substituting and Mr Brady.

53. Declarations of Interests by Members in items on the Agenda for this Meeting
(Item A2)

Mr Defriend declared that his children benefitted from the Kent Travel Saver (KTS) Scheme.

Mr Prater declared that a member of his household was a recipient of the Kent Travel Pass.

54. Call-in of Decision 26/00020- Kent Travel Saver - Price Increase
(Item B1)

1. The Chair set out the format of the meeting and invited Rob Yates, one of the call-in Members to provide reasons for the call-in. Mr Yates raised concerns about the

fairness of the proposed bus fare increases, particularly the higher percentage increase for low- income families compared to full fee payers. He questioned the lack of clear justification for a flat rate approach and highlighted that a proportionate model could achieve the same revenue more equitably. Mr Yates emphasised the importance of fairness and encouraged the Committee to vote that the decision be reconsidered by the Cabinet Member.

2. Mark Hood, another call-in Member, highlighted that the proposed flat increase would place a disproportionate burden on lower- income families and questioned why a tiered approach had not been pursued.

3. Another call-in Member, Tim Prater, drew attention to the disproportionate impact of the proposals on those eligible for free school meals. He also questioned the overall level of the increase, pointing out that the additional costs to parents appeared to exceed the identified rise in scheme costs and that the papers did not clearly justify this difference.

4. Paul Thomas, another call-in Member, questioned whether the Cabinet Member's decision had been based on sufficient information and explanation, raising concerns about gaps in the supporting evidence. These included the absence of clearly referenced budget considerations, impact assessments across income groups, and projected pupil numbers in the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP). He also raised concerns about the lack of detailed justification for additional costs and the limited consideration of meaningful alternative options, particularly proportionate models. It was added that, while concerns remained, it was positive that the scheme would continue to provide a level of service.

5. Peter Osborne, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, confirmed that he had been satisfied with the information presented when making the decision. He stated that the scheme remained comparatively inexpensive and that the increase equated to approximately 18p per school day.

6. The Chair invited questions and comments from Members, and the subsequent discussion covered the following:

    a) Shane Bushell, Head of Public Transport, explained that the Council had no statutory duty to provide concessionary travel, but that the Travel Saver scheme supported parental choice by offering subsidised travel. He stated that, despite recent increases, the scheme continued to provide significant financial benefit compared to commercial fares, particularly for low- income families and those in care, who received greater levels of subsidy or full support.

    b) Mr Bushell detailed that increases reflected rising costs, demographic pressures and a growing number of low- income and free- pass users, alongside a decline in full- fare payers. He also provided an overview on how in recent years, full- fare payers had experienced substantially higher increases than low- income families, and that the current proposals sought to address this imbalance.

c) Mr Osborne reiterated that he was content with the information provided when he made his decision and highlighted that a further officer explanation had also been given during the meeting.

d) The clerk clarified the relevant constitutional procedures, including the Chair's authority and the application of the call- in procedures.

e) Mr Osborne indicated that it was inequitable for a larger number of families to subsidise a smaller group. Spencer Dixon, Deputy Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, added that applying similar increases across categories would maintain the gap and that the approach had been calculated to be fair and sustainable.

f) Steve Pay, Public Transport Planning and Operations Manager, advised that cost projections for the KTS scheme were based on a snapshot in time, with usage and passholder numbers subject to change. He explained that the apparent surplus was theoretical, as updated projections indicated increased operating costs, and pricing decisions were based on best estimates to maintain alignment between income and scheme costs.

g) Mr Bushell advised that, while detailed breakdowns were not included, the introductory section of the Cabinet Committee report did outline that increases were driven by inflationary pressures and a rise in the number of users within low- income and free pass categories.

h) Mr Bushell clarified that the level of detail requested had not been included in previous Cabinet Committee reports on this subject and therefore the reports provided were consistent with prior reporting practice.

i) Mr Bushell explained that current data had only recently been received and still required analysis and reconciliation. He highlighted that insufficient time had been available to validate the information and it would not be appropriate to present unconfirmed figures to the Committee.

j) Mr Osborne confirmed that the option of a percentage-based increase had been considered but would have maintained the existing gap between charges. Mr Bushell added that multiple options had been explored and presented to Cabinet Members before a final decision was taken.

k) Mr Pay advised that the KTS scheme would need to continue in the short term, but without the price increase there would be a financial shortfall. He explained that this pressure would need to be met from elsewhere within the Council's budgets, potentially impacting other services.

l) Mr Bushell explained that projections for the KTS scheme were reviewed and updated as part of the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) review process. This work was currently ongoing and would inform future cost projections and the sustainability of the scheme.

m) It was advised that the scheme's sustainability was reviewed annually as part of the Council's budget-setting process and that decisions on pricing were ultimately a matter of political decision- making, with the level of detail provided in reports subject to ongoing consideration.

n) It was explained that, while a proportional increase could achieve the same overall income, it would widen the gap between full- fee and low- income charges, resulting in a greater subsidy from full- fee payers. Mr Dixon added that fairness needed to be considered across the scheme as a whole, rather than just from a single perspective.

o) Mr Pay clarified that the scheme, under its various names, had been in place for approximately 20 years and was subject to annual review, typically resulting in proposed price increases. It was also confirmed that a related decision had previously been called in to Scrutiny.

7. Following the questions, the Chair welcomed comments and views from the Committee about the call-in. These included:

   a) A Member argued that the report lacked sufficient information to enable proper scrutiny and suggested that Cabinet Members had access to more comprehensive information than presented. They highlighted an alternative proposal to apply a percentage increase rather than a fixed charge and stressed the importance of the scrutiny process. They concluded by emphasising the need to justify the proposed increase to residents, raising potential concerns about fairness.

   b) It was acknowledged that there may be a reducing disparity between charges for low-income and full-fee payers, but this rationale was not clearly set out in the report.

   c) A Member questioned why the level of detail was being challenged, stating that the approach appeared consistent with previous years, and highlighted that the scheme had been in place since 2017 with incremental increases.

   d) Guidance on the call-in process was provided by the Chair including the distinct role of the Scrutiny Committee in independently assessing the merits of call- ins.

   e) A Member reiterated opposition to the fixed £35 increase, highlighting that alternative options and funding sources could have been explored, and argued that greater transparency on these options would have avoided the call-in while raising concerns about the potential disproportionate impact on less affluent families.

   f) A Member highlighted the importance of efficient decision- making and urged the Committee to proceed to a decision in order to provide clarity to residents ahead of application deadlines.

   g) A Member stated that the call-in was justified due to insufficient evidence that the decision was sustainable and deliverable, raising concerns about the lack of clarity on how the chosen option was reached and whether alternative options had been adequately considered. They also emphasised that clearer information at the Cabinet Committee stage could have avoided the need for scrutiny.

8. The Chair called on the call-in Members and the Cabinet Member to present their final comments in response to the debate. These included the following:

    a) Mr Yates highlighted the relevance of the call-in in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, emphasising the impact on low- income families and advocating for a lower percentage increase as a fairer option.

    b) Mr Hood urged the Committee to support recommending that the Cabinet Member reconsider the decision, arguing that a percentage increase would be fairer than a flat £35 increase and expressing concern about the impact on residents during the cost-of-living crisis.

    c) Mr Prater expressed his disagreement with the Cabinet Member's decision and stated that the report and decision were deficient due to the failure to clearly set out and assess alternative options. Therefore, he urged the Committee to recommend that the Cabinet Member reconsider the decision on the basis of all the available options.

    d) Mr Thomas stated that the call- in sought greater clarity and evidence on the financial assumptions underpinning the decision, expressing concern that insufficient information had been provided to assess its sustainability and therefore he supported the recommendation for reconsideration to obtain a more robust evidence base.

    e) Mr Osborne concluded by stating that he believed the decision was fair and appropriate and offered the best approach for all clients.

9. The Chair summarised the debate and outlined that, while additional information provided at the meeting would help to reassure Members and residents, its absence from the original report justified the call-in. He highlighted the difficulty in setting scheme prices due to the reliance on previous year information, referencing the £96,000 discrepancy. He stated that efforts should be made to close the gap between available information and decision-making, and that this information should be shared with Members outside of Committee. The Chair acknowledged the value of previous informal Member engagement and concluded that, while concerns should be taken into account to improve transparency, the matter did not meet the threshold for escalation to Full Council.

10. Following the concluding remarks, the Chair welcomed proposals from the Committee:

    a) The Committee was informed that if option (c) or (d) in the report were agreed, this would require further consideration by Cabinet, with subsequent steps depending on the response from Cabinet.

    b) Mr Hood proposed and Mr Prater seconded option (c) in the report to 'require implementation of the decision to be postponed pending reconsideration of the matter by the decision-maker in light of the Committee's comments'.

c) Members voted on the motion. The motion failed.

d) Mr Thomas proposed and Mr Prater seconded option (b) in the report to ‘express comments but not require reconsideration of the decision’. The Committee’s comments were reflected in the Chair’s summary of the debate.

e) Members voted on the motion. The motion failed.

f) Ms Emberson proposed and Dr Sturley seconded option (a) in the report to ‘make no comments’.

g) Members voted on the motion. The motion passed by majority vote.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee make no comments.