

Smarter Choices – 2008 Progress Report

A report by the Head of Transport and Development to the Highways Advisory Board on 8th July 2008

Introduction

1. Smarter Choices is about improving sustainable travel options and encouraging people to use alternatives to the car to help tackle congestion and reduce pollution. Initiatives include travel planning with schools and businesses, improving public transport, marketing, car sharing, car clubs and tele/flexible working.
2. Research has shown Smarter Choices contribute cost effectively to national and local priorities improving accessibility and social inclusion, encouraging regeneration, reducing pollution and carbon emissions and increasing levels of physical activity. For Kent this initiative is a key part of delivering statutory duties and policies in Travelling to School; Choosing Health, Every Child Matters, the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and our Local Transport Plan (LTP2).
3. This report provides an update on the initiatives reported to this Board on 1 May 2007 and seeks continued member support for their implementation. With the recent substantial increases in fuel prices, this report is especially timely.

Kent's Sustainable Travel to School Strategy

4. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 places a duty on local authorities to promote the use of sustainable travel and transport on the journey to school. Kent's Sustainable Travel to School Strategy was duly published as a consultation draft on 31st August 2007 and is due to be published in its final form on 31st August 2008.
5. Good progress is being made on the delivery of the Strategy and its development has led to improved joined-up working between directorates involved in co-ordinating travel to school, including KHS, CFHE and Commercial Services.
6. As part of its Area Based Grant, Kent receives £112,865 per annum (5 years from 2007/08) from Government to support the delivery of this strategy. Core work areas currently include:
 - An infrastructure audit, highlighting sustainable transport provision at all Kent schools
 - A Sustrans Bike IT officer promoting cycling to schools in Ashford
 - Partnership funding for the Kent and Medway Walking Bus Group Charity
 - Improving web based travel information for schools, pupils and parents
 - Additional project staff to support the promotion of sustainable travel to schools

School Travel Plans

7. 2007/08 has been another very successful year for improving travel to school, with a further 87 schools developing travel plans. This brings the total to 413, and equates to approximately 68% of all Kent schools. We are on target to achieve 100% of Kent schools by 2010. School Travel Plans have now secured over £2.5 million of additional capital grants for Kent schools to spend on infrastructure in the school grounds.

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8. This year Government funding is being supplemented by funding through the Local Transport Plan with schools invited to bid for additional grants on the basis of their delivery against Travel Plan objectives and targets.
9. Kent's School Travel Plan initiative is funded by Government through to March 2010 as part of its "Travelling to School Initiative" and from 2008/09 this funding will form part of the Kent Agreement 2 and contribute to delivering against National Indicator NI 198: "Children travelling to school – mode of transport usually used."
10. All Kent schools are now required to complete information relating to mode-share on the journey to school as part of their annual census returns. Data from 2006/07 provided evidence of a 5% increase in walking to school at primary schools for the first time in several decades.

Bike IT

11. As part of funding secured to support statutory duties in the Education and Inspections Act, a Bike IT officer has been appointed in a match funding arrangement with the sustainable engineering charity Sustrans. Bike IT officers work with schools to encourage cycling through training, teaching basic cycle maintenance skills and projects to enthuse children about cycling.
12. The emphasis is on safety, but there are plenty of fun activities to get the message across that cycling has both health and environmental benefits. Bike It, has seen a ten-fold increase in cycling levels in participating schools in other UK towns and cities – bucking the trend in declining numbers of children cycling to school. Early indications are that similar results are starting to be achieved in Ashford. A bid has been made to Sustrans for a second officer covering schools in Kent Thameside.

Walk to School Initiatives

13. KCC's partnership with the Kent and Medway Walking Bus Group Charity (including Medway Council) continues to deliver outstanding results on walking to school. Kent has some 50 buses, the most walking buses of any local authority in the UK. A new risk assessment procedure and the appointment of a part-time co-ordinator has helped to ensure that these buses, which rely on parent volunteers, continue to be properly managed and monitored.
14. The partnership has also delivered two new Walk to School initiatives as part of the KM Green Footsteps Challenge, namely the Walking Bug and Walk on Wednesday (WOW). Over 140 schools across Kent and Medway have taken part in WOW and The Walking Bug during 2007/08. This has involved some 35,000 pupils and their parents. It's estimated that between October 2007 and May 2008, the schemes have taken over 110,000 school-run journeys off Kent roads.
15. In 2006 Government announced a £15 million fund to provide grants of £1,000 to state funded infant/primary schools wishing to establish or expand a walking bus scheme. Grants are available for 3 years, subject to an annual review of progress. As a result over 131 schools were supported with successful applications, leveraging in a further £95,500 for Kent schools to spend on supporting walk to school activities. Approximately two thirds of these schools have met the obligations of their funding and retained funding for the second year of funding in 2008/09.

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Workplace and Residential Travel Planning

16. National, regional and local planning policy requires that assessment is made of the impact of new development on the highway network, that consideration is given to the accessibility by all transport modes and that Travel Plans are produced for developments that generate significant demand for travel.
17. The number of Travel Plans secured through the planning process has increased substantially in recent years leading to a requirement for improved tracking, monitoring and enforcement. Unlike the preparation of a Transport Assessment, developing a Travel Plan is not a one off exercise which can be carried out to secure planning consent and then 'shelved'. Commitment is required on an ongoing basis to deliver against the targets within it.
18. Guidance on Transport Assessments and Travel Plans has been developed and we are working with the Kent District Councils to improve practice and support the emerging Kent Regeneration Strategy.

Car Club

19. In January 2007 the Maidstone Car Club was launched in partnership with Streetcar, the largest operator of car clubs in the UK. The scheme currently operates with two VW Polo Blue Motions in designated bays outside Sessions House and utilises web-based and Smartcard technology to book and use the cars. The key objective is to provide County Hall employees and Members requiring adhoc use of cars during the working day, with an alternative to driving to work at congested peak times, thus helping to alleviate congestion and parking pressures at and around County Hall as well as for nearby residents and businesses.
20. The scheme has been very successful as a pool car initiative for KCC employees and excellent feedback has been received concerning the quality and cleanliness of the vehicles and the reliability of the service. The scheme effectively now pays for itself, albeit with usage of the vehicles recharged to the relevant business unit.
21. In recent months, the concept of the pay-as-you-go car has gradually gained credence among local residents and businesses, leading to a marked increase in use by nearby residents. A major promotional push in April 2008, culminated in the potential for a third car to be located centrally to support the Travel Plan for the new Maidstone Borough Council offices. Discussions are also taking place with other districts regarding the possible expansion of the scheme to other parts of the County.

Kentcarshare

22. Kentcarshare is KCC's web-based journey matching facility, developed in partnership with Liftshare. It continues to be a flag-ship initiative for sustainable transport in Kent and has expanded rapidly since its launch in September 2005.
23. Kentcarshare is a free, secure, internet-based service that's easy-to-use. The service allows you to register your journeys, and find passengers or drivers to share regular or one-off journeys. With rising fuel prices, the potential cost savings of sharing a journey just once or twice a week are substantial, not to mention the benefits for rush hour congestion.
24. To date, it's estimated that the scheme has saved over 1.5 million miles and 481 tonnes of CO₂, the equivalent that would be absorbed by 160 000 trees.

Promoting Sustainable Travel

25. KHS are supporting a number of national and local events during the summer highlighting sustainable travel and transport and the wider 'green agenda. These include:

National Liftshare Day – 9th June

Promotion of Kentcarshare to all KCC employees and a competition to win tickets for the Hop Farm Music Festival.

National Green Transport Week – 16th to 22nd June

This week involved the promotion of sustainable transport to all KCC employees as part of the development of a KCC wide travel plan. Communication via the Directorate Team Briefings encouraged managers and their teams to discuss ways to improve efficiency and reduce the environmental impact of their business travel. This included the publication of a manager's checklist and a number of green travel tips. Free breakfast vouchers for cyclists at a number of KCC offices were also very popular.

Maidstone Goes Green Week – 23rd to 30th June

The development of an exciting new partnership between KCC, Maidstone Borough Council, The Maidstone Town Centre Management Group and Maidstone's three main shopping centres (The Mall, Fremlins Walk and Royal Star Arcade) led to opportunities to promote sustainable transport in the town under the umbrella of 'Maidstone Goes Green'. Free space was made available in all three of the shopping centres to promote KCC led 'green' initiatives and it's hoped that this activity will prelude a major event on 'In Town Without My Car Day' on the 22nd September. This is traditionally the culmination of European Mobility Week (13th-21st September).

European Mobility Week – 16th to 21st September

Plans are currently being developed to build on 'Maidstone Goes Green', leading to activities promoting sustainable transport and travel, culminating in a fun family oriented event to celebrate 'In Town Without My Car Day' on 22nd September.

Conclusion & Recommendation

26. The success of Smarter Choices relies on developing partnerships with people and organisations across Kent. A fundamental principal of Smarter Choices is to develop and deliver highway schemes and services, which are aligned with people's travel needs. This can be achieved by continuing to engage with the public and other stakeholders to raise awareness and ownership, leading to the development of effective schemes that deliver real behavioural change.
27. Smarter Choices gives Kent an opportunity to make good progress towards improving access, tackling congestion and delivering sustainable development as defined in the LTP2. The plan builds on good practice and is achievable and cost effective. Members are asked to note the good progress being made and continue to support the delivery of the programme.