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To: Environment and Regeneration Policy Overview Committee – 20
November 2007

Subject: Bus Policy

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: To set out the County Council's approach to buses set within a broad policy context.

Recommendation

Members are asked note the content of this report

Bus Policy

1 Introduction

1.1 Kent County Council is aware of the importance of bus services to lives of many Kent residents and visitors. Bus services can be a life line for rural dwellers and do provide an important alternative to car travel in more urban areas. This key point is reflected in the Vision for Kent. The traditional image of the bus being for those without access to a car is slowly changing. This report sets out the County Council's approach to buses set within a broad policy context.

2 National Context

2.1 Bus services were de-regulated in 1986 under the terms of the Transport Act (1985). This act gives powers for Local Authorities to provide financial support for bus services which it deems socially necessary. The Transport Act (2000) retained deregulation but allows Transport Authorities to enter into more 'regulated' arrangements called Statutory Quality Partnerships and Statutory Quality Contracts.

2.2 Local Transport Plans require Transport Authorities to set out their bus policies in a Bus Strategy. Kent County Council's Bus Strategy is on display at this meeting.

2.3 Government has introduced a statutory right of those aged 60 and over to have Countywide free bus travel from 1 April 2008. This currently applies within District boundaries. Kent County Council currently brokers Countywide arrangements for District Councils.

3 Kent Context

Introduction

- 3.1 Within Kent, over 80% of bus services operate commercially without any financial support from the County Council. The remaining part of the bus network receives funding from the County Council as socially necessary services for which it currently provides £7 million per annum.
- 3.2 The County Council does have significant influence over bus services which it does not support financially. It assists bus operators through improving journey times and congestion management. Infrastructure improvements have been delivered through Quality Bus Partnerships and the recent introduction of free travel for 11 – 16 year olds in two pilot areas is already reducing congestion in the pilot areas.

County Council Influence

- 3.3 New development can have a major influence on bus services. This is the case in Kent Thameside and Ashford where bus based schemes such as Fastrack and Smartlink will be crucial in influencing the modal shift required to manage congestion. The County Council will continue to work closely with Developers using the Kent Design Guide to ensure that new developments make adequate provision for good quality bus links and associated infrastructure.
- 3.4 The County Council has influenced the introduction of over 300 school travel plans. This work has led to increased use of public transport together with other initiatives such as walking buses. The introduction of free travel for all 11 – 16 year olds in Canterbury, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells will be introduced to the rest of Kent by 2009. This policy is already demonstrating a reduction in car trips to school.
- 3.5 The regeneration of urban areas is a key driver for the County Council. There is strong evidence to demonstrate that bus services can play a major role in the regeneration process. For example, in Thanet, the Thanet Loop which was created through a Government / Local Authority / Stagecoach funded partnership, is providing important links between the Thanet towns and to the QEQM hospital. This service is important in the provision of transport links to employment, health care and leisure facilities. The Council Council's Supporting Independence Programme was a key driver in the creation of this service.
- 3.6 A key target within the County Council's Towards 2010 agenda is 'Keeping Kent Moving'. A variety of initiatives are designed to manage congestion and provide better information for road users. Bus priority measures are important in this context as modal shift in urban areas is an important element in the reduction of private car journeys.
- 3.7 Quality Bus Partnerships are an important tool in the improvement and vitality of local bus services. Bus service patronage increased by 15% between 2001 – 06 against a trend of negative growth in the UK

generally. Partnerships exist in Maidstone, Dover, Canterbury and Thanet and work is progressing for a similar arrangement in Ashford. Major investment in new vehicles has been secured by the Arriva and Stagecoach group with a step change in the accessibility of bus services for people with mobility impairments. Improvements to the safety and security of bus passengers have been secured through the introduction of CCTV in many buses throughout Kent. Better integration with trains has been achieved with the launch of the Plus-bus through ticket arrangements in early 2007. These improvements are the bedrock for Kent County Council being awarded Transport Authority of the Year in November 2007.

4 Funding of Bus Services

4.1 Although over 80% of bus routes operate without direct financial support, the public transport network in Kent does receive over £60 million per annum through the purchase of socially necessary services, home to school transport and services that are funded through Section 106 Developer contributions.

4.2 The County Council provided £5 million per annum to support bus routes which are socially necessary but not commercially viable. Government provides a further £2 million as grant for the provision of rural bus services. The County Council receives many requests to support local bus services so it has developed criteria to ensure that the services it does support provide good value and meet the key travel requirements of a local community. A service that is not commercially viable will receive priority for support where it meets one or more of the following access criterion;

- Health
- Learning
- Food shopping
- Employment

In addition to the above criterion, services, which operate on Sundays, and evenings are deemed to have the lowest priority. A limit of £3 per passenger subsidy is in place but Members recognise that rural services cannot be measured by cost alone so some flexibility on this level is provided.

4.3 Routes supported through the socially necessary budget to provide key links to local services, particularly school and employment. Through the fully accessible Kent Karrier dial-a-ride network, a lifeline is provided for disabled people to go to services and facilities which would otherwise be unavailable. Such routes are very expensive to provide and typically cost more than £10 per passenger to support. However, the social interaction provided for people with disabilities is so important that the Kent Karrier network cannot be judged on cost alone.

4.4 The home to school transport budget is in excess of £40 million per annum including the new Kent Freedom scheme for 11-16 year olds. This funding is targeted in a number of ways. The highest single element

is funding for school transport for those with special educational needs. Local taxi companies provide much of this transport. There is a major overlap between the mainstream school transport and the local bus network. School services are either bought as a contracted service, not generally open to the public, or via the existing public service through the purchase of seats for students. This is often a mutually beneficial way in cost terms of providing school transport. Nevertheless, the County Council is always looking at ways of better integrating school transport and this is a key role of the Transport Integration Unit under Commercial Services.

- 4.5 There is significant new development planned for or already taking place in Kent. Substantial planning applications such as Eastern Quarry in Kent Thameside provide significant funding for bus services in order to ensure that issues of traffic congestion are addressed. The Fastrack service in Kent Thameside and Smartlink in Ashford will be heavily reliant on developer funding for a number of years until full viability is attained. High quality bus services are essential to ensure that planned modal shift is actually achieved.
- 4.6 Each year, the County Council receives a capital funding allocation from Government for a Transport and Safety Package Programme. The level of funding is partly dependent upon the progress a Transport Authority makes against key Local Transport Plan targets. This year, Kent County Council received £9.5 million including reward grant of over £ 2 million for an excellent delivery report. Key targets in this context include increasing bus patronage, improving access to services and improving road safety.
- 4.7 Free travel on bus services is now available to people aged 60 and over. From April 2008, this scheme will provide a national facility. The introduction of free travel has been difficult. Many District Councils across the UK believe that the scheme has not received sufficient funding and in some cases, have been required to make up the difference from their own resources. Even though a national scheme is only four months away, we are still awaiting details from DfT which is concerning bus operators and local authorities alike. It is a shame that poor planning and implementation have overshadowed a sound concept.
- 4.8 Kent County Council launched its Freedom scheme for 11-16 year olds in June 2007 giving free travel on all Kent local bus services. This will be expanded in 2008 with a planned full rollout in June 2009. Major benefits on reducing car trips and access to leisure and facilities and after school clubs have already been demonstrated.

4.8 Conclusion

The Bus Strategy for Kent sets out the County Council's aspiration to improve the Kent bus network. The County Council works very closely with public transport operators in order to achieve maximum benefits from the comprehensive mix of bus and train services that exist in Kent. It is important that the County Council takes key role in the building of

partnerships to ensure that a vital bus network can operate with minimal direct public funding. This is achieved through enabling buses to operate effectively and efficiently in urban areas without getting caught up in congestion which leads to unreliability and loss of confidence. Quality Bus Partnerships are hugely important in this regard and will enable the County Council to influence the transfer of some trips from car to bus particularly in urban areas. The County Council will continue to provide financial support to provide access for disabled people and those without access to a car. It will continue to support concessionary travel schemes for students and Senior Citizens.

4.9 Recommendation

Members are asked to note the content of this report.