

Extract from MINUTES of a meeting of the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee held at Invicta House, County Hall, Maidstone on Tuesday, 20 February 2007.

59. Free Travel for 11-16 Year Olds
(Item C1)

(1) Mr K A Ferrin, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste, and Mr D Hall, County Transportation Manager, Kent Highway Services, attended the meeting to answer Members' questions on this item, which covered the following issues:-

(a) Eligibility for Scheme

In answer to questions from Mr Christie and Mr Lake, Mr Ferrin explained that any child aged 11-16 who lived in Kent and attended any of the schools listed in Appendix 2 to the report to Cabinet was eligible to purchase a pass for £50 which would entitle them to free bus travel anywhere in the pilot areas at any time on any day. There would be no reduction for those children who already received free home to school transport.

In answer to a question from Mr Christie, Mr Ferrin said that it would be for the Children, Families and Education Directorate to decide whether or not to purchase passes for Looked After Children but he hoped that they would.

In answer to a question from Dr Eddy, Mr Ferrin said that the 11-16 age group had been chosen rather than the 13-18 age group because it was the age range for compulsory secondary school attendance. It would obviously be a matter for parents to decide what use of the scheme their children should make.

(b) Charge for Pass

In answer to a question from Mrs Stockell, Mr Ferrin said that the possibility of a means test for the £50 charge, and of offering an instalment payment scheme, had both been considered but had been rejected because they would dramatically increase the administrative cost of the scheme. Mr Ferrin said that he hoped that schools might be willing to assist by, for example, accepting payments in cash from parents who had no bank account.

(c) Choice of Areas to be Included in Pilot Scheme

In answer to questions from Mr Hart and Mr Christie, Mr Ferrin explained that Canterbury had been chosen because much of the work of the Select Committee on Home to School Transport was based on Canterbury. Canterbury was served by Stagecoach and he had been keen to include an area served by the other major Kent bus operator, Arriva. Of the areas served by Arriva, Tonbridge/Tunbridge Wells had been selected because school travel patterns were relatively complex and thus the area was likely to provide useful lessons for the pilot. Mr Ferrin added that the areas had not been chosen because of their relative affluence. It had been necessary to limit the pilot scheme to two areas because of the capacity issue. It was clear that additional bus seats would be needed during the morning peak as a result of increased demand generated by the scheme. Bus operators

would therefore need to bring in additional vehicles, provide garaging facilities for them, and recruit additional drivers. The capacity issue also meant that, if the pilot scheme was successful, any extension to the rest of the County would have to be done in phases.

(d) Costs of Pilot Scheme

In answer to questions from Mrs Dean, Mr Hall said that the number of children eligible for the pilot scheme was 9,000 in Canterbury and 14,000 in Tonbridge/Tunbridge Wells. Mr Ferrin explained that the detailed costings for the pilot scheme were at present subject to commercial confidentiality but agreed to provide them to Members of the Committee in confidence. Mr Ferrin explained that once the scheme was up and running, the agreement with the bus operators involved use of an open-book accounting system so there would be complete transparency. He agreed to provide half-yearly financial reports to Members of the Committee.

Mr Ferrin said that the pilot scheme was not expected to have any impact on KCC's costs in providing free home to school transport, but if the scheme was extended County-wide, the consultants predicted that the scheme would offset the home to school transport budget by some £3m.

Mr Ferrin said that there might also be savings to KCC on supported bus services because the increase in demand generated by the scheme could lead to some supported services becoming commercially viable.

Mr Hall added that the pilot scheme was expected to increase bus operators' profits and the operators had said that they would plough this profit back into improving local bus services.

(e) Length of Pilot Scheme

In answer to a question from Mrs Stockell, Mr Ferrin said that the pilot scheme would run for two years because the bus operators required a commitment that the scheme would run for at least this length of time before they could commit themselves to bringing in the additional buses and drivers needed. However, the success of the scheme should be capable of being judged well within two years and, if it was successful, the scheme could be extended before the two year period expired.

(f) Inclusion of Independent Schools in Pilot Scheme

In answer to a question from Mr Christie, Mr Ferrin explained that parents who lived in Kent and sent their children to independent schools were as entitled to benefit from the scheme as parents who sent their children to publicly-funded schools. Furthermore, one of the main purposes of the scheme was to reduce traffic congestion caused by the school run and parents of independent school pupils contributed to this in just the same way as other parents.

(g) Congestion

In answer to questions from Mrs Dean, Mr Ferrin said that there were a number of different methods of measuring congestion and a method would

need to be selected shortly in order to measure the impact of the pilot scheme on reducing congestion. Mr Hall pointed out that bus journey times were already monitored and these could give an indication of changes in the level of congestion.

(h) Impact on Parents' Choice of Schools

In answer to a question from Mrs Dean, Mr Ferrin emphasised that the bus pass scheme did not involve any changes in the current arrangements relating to eligibility for free home to school transport. Nevertheless, he accepted that the availability for £50 of a pass offering free bus travel might have the effect of increasing parents' choice of schools for their children where this might otherwise be constrained by transport costs. Mr Ferrin said that he had urged headteachers to point out to parents that they should not make their choices of school on the basis of the pilot scheme, because it might not be renewed after the initial two year period.

(2) RESOLVED that:-

- (a) Mr Ferrin and Mr Hall be thanked for attending the meeting and answering Members' questions;
- (b) the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste be recommended to change the title of the scheme to "**Assisted** Travel for 11-16 Year Olds";
- (c) the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste be urged to determine a means of measuring congestion without delay, so that the success or otherwise of the scheme in terms of reducing congestion could be judged;
- (d) the Managing Director, Children, Families and Education be advised of the possible impact of the scheme on secondary school admission applications;
- (e) the Managing Director, Children, Families and Education be recommended to make clear in all information to parents about secondary school admissions for September 2007 and 2008 that, in making their choice of school, parents should not rely on the assisted travel scheme continuing beyond the two-year pilot period;
- (f) the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste's agreement to provide Members of the Committee, in confidence, with detailed costings for the pilot scheme, be welcomed;
- (g) the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste's agreement to provide Members of the Committee with half-yearly reports on costs and take-up of the scheme, be welcomed.