

# Quality bus services in Tunbridge Wells

A report by the Mid Kent Divisional Manager to the Highways Advisory Board on 6 March 2007

---

## Introduction

1. At the April 2006 meeting of the Tunbridge Wells Joint Transportation Board, Members recommended the removal of two lengths of bus lane; in St John's Road (A26) on the northbound approach to the traffic signals at Speldhurst Road and southbound on St John's Road (A26) between Woodbury Park Road and Grosvenor Road.
2. A report was presented to the January 2007 Joint Board by the Mid Kent Divisional Manager entitled, 'The need to assist the provision of quality bus services in Tunbridge Wells'. This recommended the need to maintain all existing lengths of bus lane, including the sections near Speldhurst Road and between Woodbury Park Road and Grosvenor Road, as described above, and provide further lengths of bus lane as part of a raft of measures to improve the quality of local bus services.
3. This was rejected and Members recommended that the original recommendation made at the April 2006 Joint Board be upheld.
4. It is important to mention that the existing section of bus lane between Woodbury Park Road and Grosvenor Road is shortly to become part of a much longer length of bus lane, to provide a continuous length between Grosvenor Road and Queens Road. This scheme is, in the main, developer funded and was reported to, and approved by Members at the April 2006 meeting of the Joint Board as part of the 2007/08 Integrated Transport scheme programme.
5. The decision will work against the spirit of the free travel pilot for 11-16 year olds due to be launched in June of this year.

## Background

6. The County Council's Local Transport Plan clearly sets out the need to reduce the number of journeys by car and to increase the proportion made by walking, cycling and public transport. Improving all these modes will widen choice for Kent residents and reduce social exclusion for those who do not have access to a car. KCC's policy is to work with partners to improve the reliability and quality of local bus services.
7. Better public transport is absolutely essential to tackling 3 of the 4 shared priorities – **accessibility, congestion and pollution**. The County Council's overarching objective for local bus services is to increase patronage levels through encouraging modal shift, through a programme of investment and partnership working with operators and others, to improve the quality and reliability of bus services. Increased bus patronage contributes to the County Council's CPA rating and has been a significant factor in the excellent rating of our Local Transport Plan delivery report.
8. Approximately 80% of bus services across Kent are provided on a commercial basis without financial support from the County Council, although the County Council spends over £7 million on supporting socially necessary services.

## Quality bus services in Tunbridge Wells

---

9. In partnership with operators and local District Councils, Quality Bus Partnerships (QBP) have been developed across Kent in Ashford, Canterbury, Maidstone and Thanet. QBPs have provided a structured approach which has enabled all organisations to work together successfully towards the objective of increasing bus patronage and reliability. This has resulted in significant investment in Real Time Information, bus priority measures, improved bus stop facilities and enabled operators to fund new vehicles with improved accessibility, eg, the Stagecoach 'Thanet Loop' service which has benefited from this approach has achieved a 20% increase in patronage during its first 12 months of operation.
10. The County Council will also explore opportunities to secure funding from wider sources such as the successful 'Kickstart' bids which have improved the quality and frequency of bus services in the Dover, Gravesend, Swale and Thanet areas. The Kent Bus System has been introduced through the QBPs and provides priority for buses at traffic signals, Real Time Passenger Information displays for passengers and the facility for operators to monitor the performance of their services more effectively to improve reliability. It is the County Council's policy, as set out in the Bus Strategy, that bus lanes should be provided wherever bus frequency totals 6 or more journeys per hour. These bus lanes meet this criteria. The attached letter from Arriva Southern Counties in Appendix 1 sets out this company's concerns.
11. The 5 Year Integrated Programme in Tunbridge Wells and across Kent includes a number of schemes to support bus services through additional bus lanes, new shelters and revised infra-structure for low floor vehicles. In recent years KCC has also funded the purchase of low floor buses on supported services which has significantly improved the quality of the service and provided higher levels of accessibility.
12. Similar investment is planned over future years through the LTP which has been developed following discussions with operators and includes further improvements designed to assist the movement of buses on the highway. Investment in better vehicles and higher frequencies is planned by Arriva but this could be jeopardised by a removal of important bus priority facilities.
13. Alongside the Transport Strategy, the Tunbridge Wells Borough Community Plan (adopted in 2004), following an extensive consultation exercise, showed that the transport issues of greatest concern to residents include congestion, public transport, poor roads and parking problems. The Community Plan outlines key actions including promoting and improving sustainable transport modes, including public transport.
14. The proposal to remove the bus lanes as described is contrary to County Council Policy as follows;
  - the bus lanes in question have 6 or more buses per hour and fully meet the County Council's criteria
  - bus priority is essential if we are to make buses more reliable and therefore more attractive and so encourage increased usage and reduce congestion
  - their removal would also result in increased operating costs as operators would have to provide additional vehicles in order to maintain the same level of service, resulting in poorer quality, older vehicles and declining revenue
  - contrary to the objectives of 'Towards 2010', particularly in terms of free travel for young people up to the age of 16. Indeed poor bus service punctuality could adversely impact upon the forthcoming pilot scheme in Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells.

## Quality bus services in Tunbridge Wells

---

### **Conclusion**

15. It is recommended that Members overturn the recommendation of the January meeting of the Tunbridge Wells Joint Transportation Board and support the retention of the bus lanes at these locations for the reasons stated.

---

**Contact Officer:** David Bond 01622 798339

**Appendix 1:** letter from Malcolm Spalding, Commercial Manager, Arriva Southern Counties

**Appendix 2:** letter from Kevin Hawkins, Commercial Director, Arriva Southern Counties