Priority Vehicle Lanes for HGV's, Buses & other vehicles

A report by the County Transportation Manager to the Highway Advisory Board on 10th July 2007

Introduction

1. At the meeting of this Board in May 2007, Members requested a report on the feasibility of bus lanes in Tunbridge Wells operating at peak times only and allowing HGV's access. As there are bus lanes elsewhere in Kent, consideration of the issue should be on a countywide basis.

2. This report outlines options under consideration both nationally and locally for the use of bus lanes by other vehicles and on a part-time basis.

Options for providing "priority vehicle lanes"

3. A priority vehicle lane is an area of carriageway reserved, using a Traffic Regulation Order, for the use of buses, bicycles, goods vehicles and taxis.

4. In addition to conventional bus lanes, a number of other models of priority vehicle lanes have been trialled in the UK and this report identifies the benefits of each approach.

5. The Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 allows local authorities to introduce experimental Traffic Regulation Orders (TRO's) without public consultation.

Conventional bus lanes

6. A bus lane is an area of carriageway reserved, using a Traffic Regulation Order primarily for use by buses and coaches during the advertised hours of operation. Unless the bus lane has a 24 hour restriction, outside of these hours, all traffic are permitted to use bus lanes. In Kent bicycles and Hackney carriages are also permitted to use these lanes but not Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGV's) or Light Goods Vehicles (LGV's). Private Hire taxis are also excluded from using bus lanes.

7. The concept of using designated lanes for buses is well understood and widely used by highway authorities in urban areas where bus services are adversely affected by traffic congestion.

8. The introduction of priority measures in Kent (for example bus lanes) has played a significant role in generating the 17% increase in bus usage achieved during Kent's first Local Transport Plan (LTP), through increasing the profile of services as well as improving reliability.

9. Bus priority measures are designed and introduced to help achieve easier and more consistent journey times through congested areas, particularly in towns and cities. Reliability is also very important in assisting operators to meet the standards set down by the industry regulator, the Traffic Commissioner. The challenge of operating 95% of all services within a "window" of 1 minute early and 5 minutes late is becoming increasingly difficult as traffic conditions worsen and congestion increases. Without assistance from the Highways Authority, the costs of catering for congestion will lead to a reduction in more marginal routes which are currently operated without financial support.

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10. Reliable bus services are also important to passengers. In almost every survey about bus services, reliability is one of the most important issues for bus users. Unreliable bus services lead to declining bus patronage, increasing congestion on already busy roads.

11. Providing bus priority measures such as bus lanes are also important in generating operator investment in new buses through Quality Bus Partnership agreements. In Canterbury, Stagecoach introduced 18 new low floor double-decker buses following the provision of bus lanes on the outskirts of the city centre.

Peak or off-peak operation

12. The hours of operation of any bus lane will need to consider:

- the hours of bus service operation and frequency
- the extent and timing of traffic congestion and its impact on bus reliability
- the method for enforcing bus lanes

13. Bus lanes generally operate for one of the following periods:

- 24 hours
- 12 hour period (usually 7am – 7pm)
- peak hours only (usually 7-10am and 4-7pm)

14. Some local authorities outside London do use 24 hour operation of bus lanes. However as most bus services do not operate between the hours of 12pm and 6am such a restriction is excessive and many such authorities are reverting to a 12 hour period.

15. Although bus services derive most benefit from bus lanes at peak periods, such peak periods are spreading (for example in Canterbury) and traffic patterns are becoming less predictable due to changing employment patterns (e.g. shift work and call centres). With this in mind, many local authorities have reverted from a peak-hour operation to a 12 hour period of operation (i.e. 7am – 7pm).

16. Many local authorities have found that the most appropriate hours of bus lane operation to include in Traffic Regulation Orders is 7am – 7pm. This makes such measures self-enforcing and reduces the need for camera enforcement and the issuing of Penalty Charge Notices. The majority of bus lanes in Kent operate between these hours and experience relatively low levels of abuse by other traffic despite the absence of camera enforcement.

17. Within Tunbridge Wells, there is little potential benefit to motorists from entering bus lanes during the off-peak period. The cost of changing the signage is £10,000 and this could provide better value for money spent on other appropriate schemes.

Conventional bus lanes (including HGV use)

18. A Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) is defined as a vehicle with a maximum gross weight in excess of 7.5 tonnes and are identified through yellow and orange striped rear marking plates. At present the DfT have not produced any specific guidance on the use of bus lanes by HGV's.

19. There are concerns amongst bus operators about the use of bus lanes by HGV's. It is not clear whether HGV use encourages other vehicles such as Light Goods Vehicles, for example white vans and delivery vehicles, or other traffic to use bus lanes which could undermine bus reliability. There is also concern about HGV's, particularly non-UK lorries, parking or waiting in bus lanes and causing an obstruction or making slow turning movements into side streets, further delaying bus movements. It is recommended that more work is undertaken in consultation with the DfT before making a decision on this in Kent.

Conventional bus lanes (including use by motorcycles)

20. DfT note 2/07 provides guidance on the use of bus lanes by motorcycles. A number of experimental Traffic Regulation Orders have been made permanent allowing motorcyclists to use bus lanes. Research conclusions suggest both potential benefits and drawbacks.

21. The main drawback of such an approach is the potential conflict between motorcyclists and other users, such as pedal cycles and pedestrians. Motorcycles tend to travel at faster speeds than buses, cycles and HGV's and this could have safety implications. DfT guidance suggests consultation with other road user groups before making a permanent TRO. In London, cycling groups strongly opposed the introduction of motorcycles into bus/cycle lanes as part of a pilot scheme, citing an increase in road accidents. Motorcycles have been permitted to use bus lanes in Northern Ireland since 2004.

22. Motorcycles are easily distinguishable from other vehicle types using existing detection techniques so technical issues with enforcement are unlikely.

High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes

23. A High Occupancy Vehicle lane is an area of carriageway restricted under a Traffic Regulation Order to allow cars with multiple occupants to use it.

24. HOV lanes have been backed in Traffic Advisory Leaflet 3/06 from the Department for Transport. It states that "HOV lanes are a method of utilising spare capacity in existing bus lanes". Car sharing organisations such as Liftshare support the extension of bus lanes to HOV status.

25. One of the few trials of HOV lanes has taken place on Stanningley Road in Leeds which was introduced in 1998. These lanes are available to buses, coaches, other vehicles carrying two or more people, motorcycles and pedal cycles. HGV's over 7.5 tonnes are not permitted to use them. The HOV lanes operate in the morning and evening peak periods (07:00 – 10:00, 16:00 – 19:00 on Mondays to Fridays).

26. Monitoring data has shown increases in average car occupancy and bus patronage as well as big improvements in journey time reliability for people using both modes.

27. The application of an HOV lane is most suited to heavily trafficked corridors, particularly during peak times, where a Local Authority wants to encourage car sharing and discourage single occupancy car traffic. There are at present no HOV lanes in Kent and with no means of camera enforcement at present it would be difficult to ensure that such lanes were not being abused.

Conclusions

28. There are a range of priority vehicle lanes that have been piloted across the UK with varying degrees of success. Any measure needs to be appropriate to the local conditions but clearly understood by motorists and other road users.

29. The vast majority of the travelling public understand which vehicles are permitted to use conventional bus lanes, without referring to each individual sign or marking. Bus lanes provide priority through congested urban areas which helps to ensure bus reliability.

Recommendations

30. Subject to the views of this Board, it is proposed to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste that
    (i) bus lanes in Kent continue to be operational between the hours of 7am and 7pm;
    (ii) further investigations are undertaken to establish the benefits and disbenefits of HGV's using bus lanes.

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Background Documents

Report to HAB "Use of Bus Lanes by Licensed Hackney Carriages (Taxis)" Sep 2006
Report to HAB "Bus Lane Enforcement – DfT Guidance" Jan 2006

DfT Traffic Advisory Leaflet 3/06 "High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes" December 2006
DfT Traffic Advisory Leaflet 2/07 "The Use of Bus Lanes by Motorcycles" February 2007