

By: Nick Chard, Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways & Waste  
To: Cabinet – 11 January 2010  
Subject: Kent Freedom Pass – Progress Update  
Classification: **UNRESTRICTED**

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Summary: From June 2009 the Kent Freedom Pass has been available to young people across the county. Uptake has been very high, with over 21,000 passes now on issue. Around 600,000 journeys are made each month with *Freedom* Passes. The original objectives: to help reduce peak traffic congestion, remove travel costs as a perceived barrier to school choice, to improve social inclusion and encourage use of public transport are, to a large extent, being met. Feedback from young people and parents has been very positive. Data collected from applicants suggests 30% previously travelled to school by car. *Freedom*, however, is being run at a significant cost to the County Council. For every £50 pass issued in 2008/09 the cost to the Council was £390. Amongst a number of pressures, the Council is being pressed to make the scheme available to young people attending out-of-county schools and to extend *Freedom* beyond academic year 11. This report recommends that the scheme be extended to young people attending out-of-county schools from September 2010. A limited increase in the cost of the pass should also be considered from September 2010.

## **FOR DECISION**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 *Freedom* provides free bus travel at the point of use to young people living in Kent and attending Kent secondary schools in academic years 7-11, which broadly equates to 11 to 16 year olds. For £50 per year a photo pass card allows free travel on almost all local bus services across the county.

1.2 The *Freedom* Pass was launched as a pilot in June 2007 at schools in Canterbury, Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells and its Countywide roll out was completed in June 2009 as the scheme was extended to schools in Dartford, Gravesend, Sevenoaks and Ashford. During this period, *Freedom* has started to make a real difference to young people in the County - encouraging them to use the bus, improving access and tackling the school run.

1.3 This paper is to update Members on the scheme, to summarise its impact, benefits and costs and to explore options for its future development.

### **2. BACKGROUND**

2.1 Kent has a large number of young people attending schools and a relatively complex secondary educational system which contributes to travel demand across the county. Every day over 215,000 children and young people attend maintained schools and colleges across Kent. Of these some 83,000 are at secondary schools.

2.2 The school run represents a significant number of the journeys on Kent's transport network and, with 33% of journeys to school undertaken by car, a major cause of congestion in the morning peak. At secondary schools 39% of young people travel by bus and 22% by car. (2009 National Pupil Census).

2.3 Nationally there has been an increase in obesity levels amongst young people alongside a rise in the proportion of children being driven to school reflecting increasing car ownership and parents concerns over safety. The cost of public transport, the lack of local activities and lack of bus services in some areas have been highlighted in national studies and backed up by Kent research as key issues.

2.4 In September 2006, Kent County Council published "*Towards 2010*" with target 30 stating that "KCC will work towards introducing a Kent Youth travel card entitling 11-16 year olds to free public transport ..." Studies were undertaken to investigate costs, capacity and take up comparing different charging scenarios, and the scheme was piloted at schools in Tonbridge town and Tunbridge Wells and Canterbury district areas. It was considered that a successful introduction of *Freedom* in these complex and congested school transport areas would provide good evidence as to whether the scheme could be successfully operated countywide. The pilot launched in June 2007 and it proved to be highly successful. The results were reported to Cabinet in December 2007 and it was agreed to roll the scheme, as piloted, out across the county. The roll out was to be completed by June 2009 and it was agreed to review the scheme again from the start of the new school term in September 2009.

### **3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE FREEDOM SCHEME TO DATE**

3.1 *Freedom* has been developed through a wide ranging consultation process involving young people, parents, schools and public transport operators. The scheme has evolved and been adapted as a consequence of this consultation which has included questionnaire surveys of young people pre and post launch, schools and public transport operator seminars and presentations to Local Boards.

3.2 In June 2008 the entitlement conditions were expanded to include Home Educated Children, Young People in Care aged 16-18 and Care Leavers (young people who have left school, but are still the responsibility of the Council) aged 18-20 and, for Young People in Care, the pass fee is now funded by the Council direct or through the foster carer. To date some 80 passes have been issued to Care Leavers and 4 passes are held by home educated children. The additional entitlement for Young People in Care and Care Leavers is only available to those registered through the County Council's Catch 22 scheme (formerly Rainer) where applications are validated. It does not include young people fostered from outside of Kent or young asylum seekers fostered in Kent. Several representations have been received for these groups to be included.

3.3 *Freedom* covers those registered bus services that are available to the general public. As of June 2009, following pressure from some Members, it was agreed that a new category of Special Schools Service would be created. This enables parties to what tend to be privately arranged schools services to apply for them to be included within the scheme. Generally, these types of bespoke schools services operate at a much higher cost than standard public bus services. Parents or schools are typically paying upwards of £800 per annum per child. Provision for special services was

introduced following a pilot scheme at Hugh Christie Technology College on a service to Edenbridge. Parents at Hugh Christie now pay £250 per year to secure a place on this service; prior to the *Freedom* scheme they paid £800. The County Council is paying the difference through its standard reimbursement mechanism. In addition to Hugh Christie, special *Freedom* schools services now operate at Homewood Grammar School, Tenterden with pass holders paying a top up fare of £10 per week.

3.4 It was recognised at the launch of the scheme that the introduction of smart cards would enable greater accuracy in the recording of trips made and would assist efforts to counter fraud. Ultimately, such cards could also be used for a range of other purposes such as libraries and school meals as well as supporting concessionary travel for other groups. In 2009/10 the Council introduced a £1m capital grant scheme, through the Local Transport Plan, to contribute up to half the cost of equipping the 800 public buses in Kent with new smart card compatible ticket machines. A back office data hub has been set up and, subject to bus operators procurement programmes, it is hoped to pilot the scheme for Freedom Pass holders during 2010. A new on-line application process is also being developed to assist applicants and to reduce administration costs.

3.5 The involvement of the Youth County Council throughout the introduction of *Freedom* has been particularly helpful. Students have participated in promotional activities and have been instrumental in undertaking surveys on usage, to determine the benefits and to help identify barriers to take up. We have a number of ongoing projects with students expanding work on personal safety, addressing poor behaviour (although this hasn't been an issue linked to *Freedom*), travel training for those with special educational needs as well as a Young Travel Co-ordinator scheme, linking with the Council's School Travel Planning work, to support students with advice about how and where to take public transport and using Freedom passes.

#### **4. IMPACT OF FREEDOM - RESULTS & OUTCOMES**

4.1 *Freedom* has generated a good deal of positive publicity for the County Council. It has been promoted through numerous launch events and 'milestone' press releases, in *Around Kent* and at the County Show, via the web site at [www.kent.gov.uk/kentfreedompass](http://www.kent.gov.uk/kentfreedompass) and through Kent TV and there are now 3 *Freedom* liveried buses operating on schools services.

4.2 As of early December 2009 over 21,000 passes have now been issued. About 10% of these are already entitled to free school transport and have 'traded up' to a *Freedom* pass.

4.3 There has been a big difference in take up between schools reflecting catchment, travel provision and the enthusiasm of the school to promote the scheme. The highest take up to date has been at Homewood School in Tenterden where 824 passes have been issued. Homewood has recently overtaken Chaucer School in Canterbury where 650 passes have been issued; this equates to 60% of the total school roll of 1071 in years 7-11 at Chaucer School. Now Freedom is countywide, work is in hand through the Council's School Travel Plan initiative to target support and publicity at schools which have good public transport links, but a low pass take up.

4.4 As the scheme has been rolled out, a study has been undertaken using the Council's Mosaic database to consider take up by different social groups. There had been some concern that the £50 pass cost would limit take up by less well off households. Overall, although many recipients have praised the scheme's good value for money, it does appear that there is evidence of lower take up in post code areas which correspond with some social groupings where household income is also low.

4.5 The total number of journeys made with *Freedom* passes is now running at around 600,000 trips per average school month. Roughly 76% of these are peak home to school journeys and 24% are for leisure or other trips. The decision to provide additional capacity on existing bus routes via the incumbent operators has proved successful. Extra and larger buses have been used on a flexible basis by bus operators to cover actual demand emerging over time. Currently some 60 routes have been enhanced across the county. This approach has ensured a smooth launch at each roll out. Bus operators have also reported a calmer peak school travel period at the start of the school year in September.

4.6 On the pass application form parents are asked to state what their usual mode of travel to school is. It is hoped that this will translate into a similar actual switch to bus. It was anticipated that initial take up of the scheme would be from people who are already paying for their bus journey to school, but that over time and with word of mouth a higher take up will come from those currently being driven to school. This has been borne out as application form returns have indicated a rise through 14% of applicants who would have travelled by car to 27% and now 30% as the scheme has become established. To date, no adverse switch has been detected from children currently walking or cycling or using the train to get school.

4.7 There is a good deal of anecdotal evidence from schools and bus operators to suggest that *Freedom* has had a positive impact on reducing congestion. To try to determine this empirically, journey time per km travelled surveys were undertaken in Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells, Maidstone, Dover and in Canterbury using the Kent police Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system. There is some evidence from this study to suggest an initial 2-6% improvement in journey times in the vicinity of schools with a high pass take up and a significant mode switch. This is backed up by results from the latest National Pupil Census where the national average for secondary school children travelling to school by public transport is 33%, compared to Kent where trips by public transport have increased from 33% in 2007 to 39% in 2009 and the percentage of Kent children travelling by car has decreased from 25% to 22% over the same period.

4.8 A questionnaire survey of young people was undertaken in May 2008 in conjunction with the Kent Youth County Council. Around 1,000 responses were received. They give clear qualitative evidence that young people are benefiting from using their *Freedom* passes for leisure travel at weekends and evenings and to get to after school clubs. Quotes from pupils at Angley, Herne Bay High, Mascalls and Tunbridge Wells Girls Grammar schools are particularly note worthy:

- *"It has helped me to get to school early and I have been able to see my friends at weekends"*
- *"It gives me freedom to have a social life beyond school"*

- “I have used it to get to school and I have started to use it to help to get to my part time job”
- “It has given me confidence about travelling on buses”
- “It has helped my mum heaps, because she works so hard to look after us”
- “I am no longer subject to bullying as they cannot steal my bus money”

## 5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

5.1 Now *Freedom* is fully rolled out countywide and the impact and benefits of the scheme are clearer, any future changes or expansions can be properly considered. There is, undoubtedly, widespread support and enthusiasm from *Freedom* pass holders for the scheme to continue to be offered in its current form by the Council. The longer term sustainability of the core scheme, in the light of the high take up/use of passes and the current budget pressures, must be the key consideration.

5.2 In its current form, the scheme is and will remain a significant financial burden over the coming years. The pilot scheme cost the County Council £2 million in 2007/08. In 2008/09, the scheme cost £4.5m, with its roll out in new areas. In 2009/10 net costs are estimated at £8.7m. There are a number of external risks which may see further cost increases above these estimates for the current financial year and in the future; for example the continuing recession may lead to further increases in take up and use of passes, also rising fuel prices may generate increases in pass take up and use as well as higher reimbursement levels as bus operators increase fares to compensate.

5.3 There is pressure to extend *Freedom* to include young people living in Kent, but attending out of County schools. Numerous letters have been received and calls taken by officers. Out of County schools have been excluded to date in order to limit costs and to support Kent schools. Some 2,252 children currently attend schools outside of the county, in Medway, Sussex and London. Of these 751 are entitled to receive free school travel, but are not currently able to upgrade to a Freedom Pass to use outside of school. The cost of extending the scheme to all in academic years 7-11 living in Kent is estimated at £170k per annum.

5.4 The other main request is to extend *Freedom* to include all secondary school and college students. Two petitions have been received and have been reported to Highways Advisory Board Members. Currently, students in academic years 12-13 may be eligible to receive an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) of up to £30 per week accessed via [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk) and/or travel assistance from the County Council's existing means tested funding system via [www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-learning](http://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-learning). Extending the scheme to older students certainly has merit in terms of tackling congestion and increasing long term use of public transport. There are also changes in education for older students which may affect parental perceptions of how fair the scheme is. Firstly, diplomas are being introduced this year for those aged 14-19 and therefore there will be students who will cease to qualify for Freedom part way through their diploma. Secondly the education leaving age will be increased to 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015. There is a significant cost implication which makes extending the current scheme impossible; this is likely to amount to some £3m as these students are, at present, outside of the free transport provisions currently supported by Government.

5.5 The inclusion within *Freedom* of previously private schools services is a concern. Their existence continues to cloud the simplicity of the scheme and creates tensions

with parallel standard bus services. It is expected that over time many more Special School Services will be registered adding to scheme costs and, as parents who have not previously paid the relatively high fares or annual charge start to use these, pressure will mount on the County Council to pay the full reimbursement costs. A petition asking the Council to remove top up payments has already been received from parents of Hugh Christie School.

5.6 Negotiations over reimbursement rates to the main bus operators from September 2009 are also not yet fully resolved. The Freedom scheme makes payments to bus operators for fares foregone and to cover additional capacity. It is established under Section 93 of the Transport Act (1985) where transport authorities are able to deliver discounted travel on public transport by way of payments to operators on the basis that operators are no better and no worse off than if the scheme did not exist. Subject to the outcome of these negotiations, there may be additional budget pressures from 2009/10.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

6.1 The *Freedom* scheme has proved very successful for the County Council. Feedback from users, the general public and other stakeholders has been extremely positive. The scheme can genuinely be described as trailblazing in a national context, with many other authorities outside of London still just considering youth travel concessions. Good lessons have been learned in terms of engagement with young people and integration both within the County council and with other organisations and transport providers.

6.2 Bold initiatives are needed to make a difference to tackle congestion on the school run to improve young people's independence and to remove transport costs as a barrier to school choice. *Freedom* is undoubtedly a very bold initiative to tackle big transport and social issues at a time of great change in the county. It is also a scheme which, if it continues to prove so successful in terms of take up and use, will be extremely difficult to fund. Extending the scheme will also add to the burden on the County Council.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Members are asked to APPROVE the following recommendation to modify the Freedom scheme and to ENDORSE the updated scheme conditions as set out in APPENDIX 1:

- 1) Extend the scheme to include all young people living in Kent and attending schools in Kent as well as outside of the County in academic years 7-11 at an estimated cost of £170k pa (09/10 prices).

It is proposed that this change will apply from September 2010. Provision for the necessary additional funding has been included in the draft Medium Term Financial Plan for Environment, Highways and Waste.

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**Background Documents:** None

## APPENDIX 1 - THE *FREEDOM* OFFER

The main conditions of the Kent *Freedom* Pass are outlined below. Following completion of the roll out period these now apply Countywide. The alterations (in bold) are proposed, subject to Member approval, to apply to the scheme from September 2010.

- Passes are available to young people living in Kent and attending secondary schools in Kent in academic year groups 7 to 11. **From September 2010 passes are available to all young people living in Kent and attending schools in Kent or outside of Kent in year groups 7 to 11.**
- Passes are available to home educated children in equivalent year groups.
- Passes are available to Young People in Care (aged 16-18) and Care Leavers (aged 18-20) who are part of the County Council's Catch 22 Scheme (formerly Rainer). They are not available to Care Leavers fostered into Kent by other local authorities or Asylum Seekers in foster care in Kent.
- The pass has a photo and is charged at £50 per year. **The Council reserves the right to increase this charge from September 2010 subject to review.** The charge for Care Leavers and some Young People in Care is funded by the Council. The latter excludes young people fostered into Kent by other local authorities.
- Passes enable free travel on all registered local bus services starting in Kent and continuing outside of the county to the destination of the service. The return journey is also valid. A very small number of services are excluded for operational reasons. These are listed on the Kent Freedom Pass website.
- Passes can be used all day, every day.
- Passes may enable free or subsidised travel on some additional registered 'special' school bus services listed on the Kent Freedom Pass website.
- Passes are valid on the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Railway. Passes are not valid on national rail services.
- Existing entitlement to free school travel arrangements is unchanged. It is possible to upgrade an entitled pass to cover off peak travel on payment of the annual charge.
- One replacement pass is issued at a cost of £10, thereafter passes are charged at the appropriate annual pass charge. These charges apply at any time in the year.
- Ordinarily there is a 28 day turn around on receipt of a valid pass application. Applicants must check for cut off dates for issue of new academic year pass applications. No renewal reminder letters are issued. There are no refunds.

It should be noted that *Freedom* is a discretionary concessionary fares scheme founded under the terms of the Transport Act (1985), through this Act the Council is able to set its own eligibility criteria.

Full terms and conditions can be found at [www.kent.gov.uk/kentfreedompass](http://www.kent.gov.uk/kentfreedompass)