

A REPLY FROM KCC TO OUR ENQUIRY ON BUSES ON BEHALF OF MEMBERS
5th July 2021

A Review of Local Transport, mainly buses

A response from David Brazier, Cabinet Member for Highways & Transport, Kent County Council

KCC is a Local Transport Authority, and as such has to set out policies and objectives for local transport and to manage the spending of local transport budgets. It has certain duties:

- Statutory requirements around the provision of school transport
- A requirement to determine local non-statutory concessions policy and administer both statutory and non-statutory travel concessions like the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS)
- To identify and consider funding socially necessary bus services that bus operators will not provide
- To consider the needs of elderly and disabled individuals

Other local authorities such as Boroughs and District Councils, Town and Parish Councils may sponsor or even operate bus services of different kinds but they do not have the statutory duties of the County Council.

I have to make something very clear from the outset: KCC does not “run” the buses. An operator who wishes to establish a service applies to the Traffic Commissioners to do so and a licence may be granted without reference to the County Council. Many people think that every service is the subject of a contract between its operator and the Council: that, quite simply, is not the case.

The bus industry was deregulated from public ownership to private companies by the Transport Act 1985, so that bus companies are owned by shareholders and are in business to make profits. This is why many services don't run in the evenings or on Sundays and why some small villages don't have services at all – it isn't profitable to provide them.

KCC's 2016 – 2031 Local Transport Plan LTP4 “Growth without Gridlock” does assert the council's aims to promote affordable, acceptable and connected transport for all. These aims are achieved when it is able to work and cooperate with the bus industry to take the public's needs to the operators and achieve integrated, efficient services.

If a service is discontinued because it is unprofitable, the County Council will consider whether that service, or a reduced version of it is needed to get children to school, elderly people to medical care or essential shopping, and may pay the operator to provide it. There is a limit to what the Council will pay, however, and this is expressed in terms of cost per passenger journey. Subsidised Bus Services, as we call them, presently cost the Council (and the taxpayer) about £7m per annum and we are constantly aware of the need not to allow this amount increase and, indeed, to reduce it. It isn't a statutory duty to provide subsidised buses, and we occasionally discuss the saving that could be achieved by abolishing the spend, as other Councils have done.

Some services are provided by elected Members of the Council combining to use their Community Grants to pay for a service that crosses their division. I, and other Sevenoaks Members for years paid for a Sunday service from West Kingsdown through the Darent Valley villages to Bluewater.

There are services largely paid for by the County Council such as the Kent Karrier, providing transport to and from rural settlements where the commercial operators don't go. The County Council

conducted a county-wide survey of needs called “The Big Conversation” as a result of which new services to rural settlements that had never had a bus service were trialled, but ultimately failed because, although marketed, there was insufficient patronage.

Public perception of bus services in Kent are not very good. The problems the travelling public have with buses are late or non-arriving services, services not provided when people want to travel, and unacceptably high fares. Sometimes the criticism is unfair – traffic congestion is often the cause of late buses, and where I live near Dartford the problems can be immense. Fares are dictated by the need for services to be profitable.

Government has been well aware of the unsatisfactory state of bus travel in the UK, much worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic, and has put forward the National Bus Strategy, popularised by the term “Bus Back Better”. There are a number of important factors involved:

Enhanced Partnerships

These are formal agreements where Local Authorities and operators work together to improve bus services. The authority has much more influence over services but not full control. Services are still registered by the operators.

Consultation will be needed with operators, community transport, local businesses, passenger groups and local people.

Partnerships will detail how the infrastructure for buses will be improved, how operators will use them and how better ticketing, marketing and air quality will be achieved. Investment from both sides will be required and when the objective of a Bus Service Improvement Plan has been met, it will need to be consulted on and adopted.

Firm commitments from both sides will be needed to achieve a Bus Service Improvement Plan for Kent. The shared vision is that this may include:

- Authorities promoting bus priority schemes able to get funding
- Environmentally friendly vehicles, including zero-emissions buses
- DfT expected to expand definition of “socially necessary” services to include buses to isolated places and evening and Sunday services
- Key corridors in urban areas should have frequent “turn up and go” services, bus priority on highways and at least 15 minutes frequency in the evenings.
- Diversions on long distance buses replaced with feeder buses
- Buses should have high priority in highway network management
- More Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services in rural areas and in the evenings and Sundays
- More routes to rail stations and out of town employment areas
- All operators will have to accept contact payments
- Lower fares, simpler fares and flat fares in towns and tickets accepted across operators
- Cross-modal ticketing i.e. bus/train
- Timetables and fares across England for bus/light rail/rail journeys.
- Local branding to reflect communities rather than operators
- A bus passenger charter to include panels with refunds and redress where there have been failures

What is my view of this? Government is serious and is investing £3bn in the scheme nationally. Continuing funding will be needed and to ensure its payment, performance by both parties to a partnership will have to be to a high standard. There is much here to please, but much to be

sceptical about. No matter how they are funded, services to rural areas and other that are barely used will not continue beyond a trial period, nor will a frequency of service beyond actual needs. My experience is that asked to express their needs for transport, people will often ask for services they will hardly, if ever, use. Notwithstanding this, existing needs and the Government's wish to reduce the use of the private car will require much better and more extensive bus services. There have been pilots in the Sevenoaks area with Go-coach's DRT services that have been very popular, although success does seem to be dependent on location. Although Kent is covered principally by Arriva in the west and Stagecoach in the east, there are many smaller operators who will be part of the mix, often using the smaller vehicles needed for rural services. Those of us in local government have much work ahead of us and will need to be able to manage expectations.

As Cabinet Member with responsibility for local transport I have signed a decision to undertake Enhanced Partnerships in accordance with the National Bus Strategy and the Council is presently undertaking an online public consultation, asking the following questions:

1. What are the things that would make using buses easier and more attractive for you? (*This is a multi-choice question*)
2. Do you have any other suggestions on how we can improve the bus service in Kent?

The consultation closes on the 25th July.

Government requires publication of the first version of our BSIP by the 31st October and our Enhanced Partnership schemes to start in April 2022.

Although LTP4 "Growth Without Gridlock" has currency until 2031, we have begun working on LTP5 to accommodate the enormous changes that have already taken place in transport and those that are accelerating towards us.