

## Traffic Congestion in Maidstone

**Municipal Year 2011/12**



### **Committee Membership:**

Councillor Burton (Chairman)  
Councillor Beerling (Vice-Chairman)  
Councillor Black  
Councillor Cuming  
Councillor English

Councillor Mrs Joy  
Councillor Newton  
Councillor Ross  
Councillor Mrs Springett



## Chair's Summary



The effects of traffic congestion affect every single person's quality of life who live or work in Maidstone, be it on their health or on their free time. Indeed, in a recent DfT study, 23% of adults said congestion was a problem most or all of the time on their general road journeys<sup>1</sup>. With an estimated 1,427,400 people living in Kent and 148,200 in Maidstone,<sup>2</sup> congestion continues to be a problem in Maidstone with pollution control zones increasing to mitigate the effects of congestion on the environment. Its impact on the economy and on the quality of life of Maidstone's residents cannot be underestimated. And it can easily be understood why, we as a committee focused our efforts on investigating how the existing levels of congestion can be managed, particularly in light of the proposed growth agenda in Maidstone.

The Committee recognised the work being undertaken in planning growth without more congestion, and were pleased that the detailed Integrated Transport Strategy and its associated appendices were reaching their fruition and have made our recommendations in light of the work already being undertaken, focussing largely on how to address existing problems.

We considered a variety of evidence in drawing together our recommendations and an evidence pack detailing our primary research has been produced<sup>3</sup>. It was enlightening to see how others approached tackling congestion, and witnessing fantastic working relationships across other two tier authorities in relation to transport, something we feel is attainable and can only benefit both ourselves and Kent County Council.

*A survey was undertaken in Maidstone's Gateway in 2009 in which 43% of respondents listed traffic congestion as a priority that the Council should concentrate on over the next three years*  
2009-12 Strategic Plan

As part of our visits, we were shown that Maidstone's roads are already stretched to capacity and realistically there are only so many more tweaks that can be done to stagger the build up of traffic moving along our roads<sup>4</sup>. We understand that while larger schemes should be aimed at to reduce congestion, they are costly and as such are unlikely to be funded in the short term in the current financial climate, so we must look to other methods to reduce single car dependency. We feel that a key component to tackling congestion is promoting sustainable transport options within Maidstone and specifically amongst our own staff. Across the UK, it is estimated that 71% of people commute to work by private motor transport.<sup>5</sup> National figures from the Department for Transport showed that in 2009, 85% used car/van/taxis as their mode of transport compared to 8% that commute by train. Sixty percent of those surveyed for a recent study by the RAC said that financial incentives to encourage modal shift, such as the £5,000 electric car grant, along

<sup>1</sup> DfT (2008) Public attitudes to congestion and road pricing

<sup>2</sup> mid year ONS estimate from 2009

<sup>3</sup> Available on request

<sup>4</sup> Maidstone Traffic Control Centre Visit June 2011

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/work-blog/2011/jun/02/commuting-british-workers> [accessed 22/7/11]

with more investment in public transport, would help<sup>6</sup>. In the South East, people travel further on average than in any other region, at over 8,300 miles per person per year. Correspondingly, the region has a larger proportion of the UK's road traffic than any other, at 16%. Kent's dispersed settlement pattern means that many journeys involve travelling through the countryside between urban centres, making the car the most suitable mode of transport<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, in order to address congestion in Maidstone it is crucial that the Council, as one of the largest employers in

*Car Travel is still the most popular form of transport, despite rising fuel costs and the increasing cost of insurance. A public attitudes survey carried out by the Commission for Integrated Transport found that those who travel to work by car do so mainly for convenience, whilst nearly one fifth of respondents believed there was no other option than to use a car.*

*Local Transport Plan for Kent 2011-16*

Maidstone, proactively support the production, implementation and marketing of its own Travel Plan in order to reduce single car dependency amongst its own staff. Anecdotally it seemed a number of parking permits were based on historic reasons rather than in relation to actual job requirement, in turn only perpetuating Maidstone's congestion problems. Also, we feel that some jobs requiring car availability may not necessarily require that the car be made available on every day and so on those days that it was not required, parking in the town centre should be actively discouraged. As such we feel that a review of parking permits and ways to assist and offer real incentives for car sharing or public transport is required.

Public involvement was considered to be vital for this review and a number of calls for evidence were made through press features, via the Council's website and in various transport related businesses, such as busses, taxis and car parks. We had a great response from the public, with some interesting, often low cost, ideas from the people who are actually sitting in our traffic jams. We feel these ideas should be listened and responded to.

Finally, a comment from Chelmsford City Council gave us much food for thought, highlighting the need to make a service like Park and Ride a real option to commuters, but also to continue providing real alternatives with the purpose of getting people into their town centres to support residents and local businesses, rather than driving them away, especially in the current economic downturn. And the message of providing choices to commuters was again emphasised by Kent County Council's Sustainable Transport Team Leader, highlighting that you should not force transport options, such as by reducing parking spaces in the town, but rather make sustainable alternatives more attractive to achieve the desired modal shifts<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> RAC (2010) *RAC Report on Motoring 2010*

<sup>7</sup> Local Transport Plan for Kent 2011-16

<sup>8</sup> Regeneration and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Meeting 22/11/11

# Recommendations



## Unlocking Maidstone – Enabling Growth

A survey of perceptions of Maidstone town centre had identified that people felt that there was not enough parking and there was too much congestion. Clearly a solution is needed, but it is important that any changes made are done ensuring that Maidstone remains attractive to businesses.

Congestion has a huge impact on Maidstone's economy, especially the crippling effects of operation stack. An urgent long term solution that does not hold the town to ransom is required.

That the Cabinet Member lobbies the Highways Agency for a permanent solution to the crippling effects of operation stack on Maidstone as a matter of urgency



## ...But Are We Listening?

A large number of suggestions were made by the public on ways to reduce congestion in Maidstone. They have seen the problems first hand and many are low cost ideas to ease congestion. As such the committee put forwards the ideas attached at Appendix A for further consideration.

That the public suggestions attached at Appendix A be considered and responded to

The Committee heard a number of requests that the Transport User Forum be reinstated. Members understand that it had been disbanded due to some feeling it had become a 'talking shop'. It is therefore important that a clear terms of reference be applied with a limited membership to ensure independence. It was felt that the public forum had enabled passengers, employees and agencies to discuss potential changes and could be used to inform the Advisory Locality Board.

That the Transport User Forum be reinstated with a clear terms of reference and a limited membership



## "Carrot Carrot Carrot"

There was consideration of ways to encourage the use of public transport such as by reducing parking in the town centre, employment parking levies and congestion charging zones. Whilst the Committee recognised the Council only controlled a



small amount of the town centre car parks, Members were concerned that this was being considered as a possible solution to increasing the uptake of public transport. Members heard evidence of the importance of offering a real choice to travellers, and accepting that people will use cars. Our role is to not force people out of their cars by removing it as a plausible option, it is to offer them a real attractive alternative. Members felt it was so important that we don't stop cars and in the process drive people into other town centres. We need to support our residents and businesses and keep giving people incentives to come to Maidstone, not make it harder on businesses and customers.

That Maidstone Borough Council owned car parking spaces in the town centre not be reduced as a means of effectively forcing the use of public transport



## Lead by Example

The importance of credible leadership with regard to encouraging own work forces to choose sustainable options can not be underestimated. As Maidstone Borough Council is one of the towns largest employers, it should take a lead and actively find ways to promote the utilisation of sustainable transport options.

The Committee would like to congratulate the work being done in producing the council's new travel plan, and asks that its completion be treated as a high priority. Members also feel that the implementation of the travel plan requires management buy-in, offering proactive support and finding ways to offer incentives. It is not just a paper exercise and needs to be used to support people to change their behaviours.

That a small level of financial support be given to support the implementation and marketing of Maidstone Borough Council's Travel Plan

Members considered the parking arrangements at Maidstone House and were surprised that there were 139 distributed parking permits across just 277 full time employees at Maidstone House and Gateway<sup>9</sup>. Members really feel that such a high proportion indicates that a review of policies is required. Furthermore, it was noted there was some confusion regarding the necessity of having the essential user/lease car user's car available everyday in the office. It was felt that essential users and lease car users should be discouraged from parking at Maidstone House on those days when their cars were not needed to fulfil work duties.

That the parking permit policy and allocation be reviewed

A survey undertaken to inform the draft travel plan revealed that people were willing to car share and therefore this is something Members felt needed to be proactively encouraged, by identifying who was willing to car share and partnering them up. The Committee understands that the Kent Journey Share website is

<sup>9</sup> Information supplied by Facilities Management in January 2012

available for officers, but felt that a Council only based sharing opportunity may be more attractive. It was also felt important that incentives be put in place, such as subsidised car parking spaces, to encourage uptake. Furthermore, it was apparent that more cycle stands were required as they were regularly insufficient and people were therefore chaining them to other areas.

That car sharing be promoted within the Council using subsidised parking spaces as incentives

That essential and lease car holders actively be discourages from parking at Maidstone House on days their car is not required for work purposes

That more cycle storage stands be provided at Maidstone House



## Hand-In-Glove

Members were informed on a number of occasions that there was a need for a closer working relationship with Kent County Council with regard to road infrastructure<sup>10</sup>. This was particularly shown to be apparent in contrast to the close working relationship seen between Chelmsford City Council and Essex County Council during the Committees visit. It was therefore clear that ways to improve a better working relationship with Kent County Council should be sought, particularly as an enhanced relationship could only serve to benefit the two Councils.

That a better working relationship between Kent County Council and Maidstone Borough Council be achieved regarding transport issues



## Further Consideration

That opportunities for a Transport Interchange be welcomed.

That the ambition for a South East Strategic Link route should not be written off entirely as growth was still identified to take place in the south of Maidstone.

That one camera be pointed towards St Peters Street and one towards Tonbridge road constantly during peak traffic flow hours at the Traffic Control Centre to assist traffic management on to the gyratory.

<sup>10</sup> Regeneration and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Meetings and informal conversations with officers and Members

## Thank you

The Committee considered evidence from a variety of stakeholders and would like to thank the following individuals and organisations who have personally contributed to this review:

**Arriva**, Business Development Manager, Robert Patterson

### **Chelmsford City Council**

Principal Transportation Planner, John Pollard  
Planning Policy Officer, Anna Wheldale  
Planning Policy Officer, Clare Stuckey  
Parking Manager, Ben Sherman  
Director of Sustainable Communities, David Green  
Cllr Penni Panner

### **Essex County Council**

Transport Planning Team, Hannah Neve  
Transport Planning Team, Alistair Southgate

### **Godstone Traffic Control Centre**

Call Handling Officer, Jeff Parks  
Traffic Officer, Sarah Haddow

**Invicta Chamber of Commerce**, John Taylor

### **Kent County Council**

Councillor Malcolm Robertson,  
Sustainable Transport Team Leader, Graham Tanner  
Strategic Transport & Development Planner, Peter Rosevear  
Strategic Transport & Development Planner, Paul Lulham

### **Maidstone Borough Council**

Economic Development Manager, John Foster  
Economic Development Officer, Keith Grimley  
Assistant Director of Environment and Regulatory Services, Steve Goulette,  
Head of Development Management, Rob Jarman  
Interim Head of Core Strategy Development, Flo Churchill  
Team Leader of Spatial Planning, Sue Whiteside  
Principal Transport Planning Officer, Jonathan Morris,  
Senior Pollution Officer, John Newington,  
EMS Project Manager, Jennifer Hunt,

### **Medway Council**

Director for Regeneration, Robin Cooper  
Road Network Schemes Manager, Ian Wilson  
Consultant, Bob Bertrium

**Nu-Venure Coaches Ltd**, Norman Kemp

**Streamline**, Business Development Manager, Stewart White

The Committee would also like to thank the council officers and members of the public who took the time to contact the Committee and offer their opinions and ideas on the traffic congestion. All of the correspondences received were considered and added a valuable dimension to this review.



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