

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

Chairman's Summary

Councillor David Burton



Traffic congestion affects the quality of life of every person who lives or works in Maidstone. This could be as a result of the impact on their health or by limiting their free time as they attempt to travel within the borough. In a recent DfT study, 23% of adults said congestion was a problem most or all of the time on their general road journeys¹. With an estimated 1,427,400 people living in Kent and 148,200 in Maidstone² 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. 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 with the Core Strategy to enable growth in the borough and in particular the work undertaken on the Integrated Transport Strategy. However, it was noted that in its present form, the Committee were unable to make any conclusive recommendation to move forward with in relation to the Integrated Transport Strategy.

We considered a variety of evidence in drawing together our recommendations and an evidence pack detailing our primary research has been produced³. 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 adjustments that can be made using the Traffic Management System for Maidstone to stagger the build up of traffic moving along our roads⁴. We understand that while larger schemes should be aimed for to reduce congestion, they are costly and as such raise challenging issues about how to fund them in the current climate. In addition to the major solutions we also need to look at the simple, inexpensive solutions available to help ease the problem. We feel that a key component to tackling congestion is promoting sustainable transport options within Maidstone and encouraging walking, cycling and car sharing. All these options have roles to play. It is also noted that in examining sustainable transport it was found that electric cars would only add to our transport problems. Across the UK, it is estimated that 71% of people commute

¹ DfT (2008) Public attitudes to congestion and road pricing

² mid year ONS estimate from 2009

³ Available on request

⁴ Maidstone Traffic Control Centre Visit June 2011

to work by private motor transport.⁵ 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 with more investment in public transport, would help⁶. 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 transport⁷.

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

The public's appetite for this review topic was evident in the response both in the quantity and quality of ideas put forward. They were 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 for 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. 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 shifts⁸.

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

⁶ RAC (2010) *RAC Report on Motoring 2010*

⁷ Local Transport Plan for Kent 2011-16

⁸ Regeneration and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Meeting 22/11/11

Recommendations



Unlocking Maidstone – Enabling Growth

A survey of perceptions of Maidstone town centre 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 ensure 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 Council 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 within the further formulation of the Integrated Transportation Strategy

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 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 improvements.

That a platform be found to enable dialogue between public transport providers and users



"Carrot or Stick?"

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 'stick' 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 as well as choosing to cycle, walk or use public transport. Our role is to not force people out of their cars by removing it as a plausible option; it is to offer them an attractive alternative. Members felt it was very important that we do not 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.



"Carrot Carrot Carrot"

That Maidstone Borough Council encourages and supports the use of all methods of transport in and around Maidstone



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 town's 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.

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 Gateway⁹. Members feel that such a high proportion of permits in circulation 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 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 more cycle storage stands be provided at Maidstone House

⁹ Information supplied by Facilities Management in January 2012



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 infrastructure¹⁰. 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 clarification be sought on the remit of Kent County Council and the Highways Agency as partners involved in Road Infrastructure Delivery

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 the wider aspects of the relationship between park and ride, parking standards, on-street parking and development control, including the use of contributions from developers towards highways and public transport schemes are considered when addressing congestion and ways to encourage the use of public transport

¹⁰ 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

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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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