

## **MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR PLANNING, INFRASTRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Decision Made: 19 February 2024

#### **Maidstone Local Bus Focus Group**

##### **Issue for Decision**

To determine whether to replace the terminated borough/district Quality Bus Partnerships with Local Focus Groups administered by the boroughs/districts rather than Kent County Council (KCC).

##### **Decision Made**

That

1. A local bus focus group be created to allow for interaction and work on strategic issues with bus operators;
2. Delegated authority be given to the Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development, to commit the monies received from the Local Authority Bus Subsidy (Revenue) Grant, totalling £39,766, in accordance with the grant funding agreement as outlined in point 2.4 of the report; and
3. An update be provided to the Planning Infrastructure and Economic Development Committee after at least two meetings of the local bus focus group have taken place.

##### **Reasons for Decision**

Since the Transport Act 1985 bus operations within England have been deregulated and privatised. There are some routes run by subsidy from the Local Transport Authority (LTA), which is Kent County Council (KCC).

The traditional role of Maidstone Borough Council is being responsible for the provision of infrastructure, such as bus signage and shelters in the Borough.

Since 2013 Local Authorities including Maidstone have also received funding to support local bus services or related infrastructure through the Local Authority Bus Subsidy (Revenue) Grant. This year Maidstone Borough Council has received a funding allocation, which will be used towards:

- Further reinvestment in Maidstone bus Station.
- Incentives to bus operators to upgrade their fleet in the borough.

- Any actions that may result from interaction with the bus companies.

In March 2021 the Government published the National Bus Strategy on the back of the Bus Services Act 2017. This strategy set out a new approach to buses within local transport authority areas. This allowed for the creation of Enhanced Partnerships or franchising. In Kent the responsible body, which is the local highways authority (KCC) chose the enhanced partnerships and associated Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) model. The KCC BSIP was published in October 2021.

Up until this point Maidstone Borough Council has had two roles:

- Infrastructure (i.e. bus signage and shelters)
- Quality Bus Partnerships (QBPs)

QBPs were created by the Transport Act 2000 and a QBP has been operating in Maidstone since 2000 and was administered by Kent County Council as the Local Transport Authority. It included officers and members from the Borough Council and Local Transport Authority (Kent County Council), plus bus operators. The remit of the QBPs was to act as a forum between the LTA, MBC and the bus companies and focused on service reliability, accessibility, technology, and development. QBPs are not within the formal Enhanced Partnership framework and indicated in the Kent BSIP to be replaced by Local Focus Groups (see figure 2).

### **What is the New System?**

As indicated in above, a new system has been created consisting of Enhanced Partnerships and BSIPs. Below is a timeline of the stages so far.

- 1. Publication of first version of Kent Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)** (October 2021)
- 2. Publication of draft Enhanced Partnership Notice and Scheme Plans** (January/February 2022)
- 3. Enhanced Partnership Schemes came into effect** (1 April 2022)

A BSIP is a strategic document on how the LTA (KCC) and bus operators will work to achieve the goals of the National Bus Strategy. The intention is that the BSIP will provide a framework for delivery. The BSIP also acts in part as a bidding document for future funding available through the National Bus Strategy.

In Kent KCC created an enhanced partnership. From April 2022 Kent has been split into three scheme areas: east Kent, west Kent and Kent Thameside. Maidstone is within the west Kent area. It is intended that the partnership will last for 5 years 2022-27 and then be renewed.

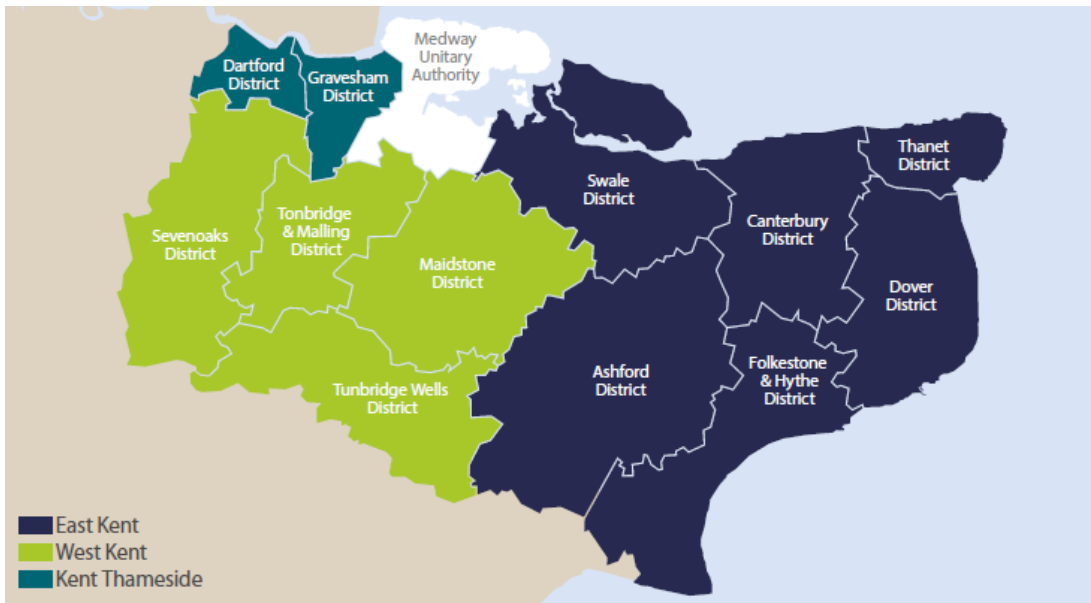


Figure 1. Enhanced Partnership Scheme Areas

The new structure is set out in Figure 2 below which comes from the adopted KCC BSIP.

Enhanced Partnership Board (Countywide)	EP Scheme(s) Monitoring Group (One for each EP Scheme)	Network and Punctuality Improvement Partnerships (One for each EP Scheme)	EP Scheme(s) Passenger Charter Group (One for each scheme area)	Enhanced Partnership Local Focus Group (One for each District)
<b>Reps</b>				
TBC Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport (Lead)	KCC Public Transport (Lead), bus operators in the scheme area, district councils, Kent Highways, KCC Environment and Air Quality, schools rep, Kent and Medway CCG, Passenger Focus	KCC Public Transport, bus operators in the scheme area, KCC Highways, district councils	Independent host, KCC Public Transport, bus operators, schools reps, Passenger Focus, Bus Users UK, bus users and public	KCC Public Transport, KCC District Transport Planner, District Council – Planning & Parking Enforcement, bus operators
<b>Role</b>				(replaces QBPs):
Executive Board to oversee the success and fitness for purpose of the EP Plan, EP schemes and downward governance structure prompting review and revision where necessary	Review compliance to EP Schemes targets, identify and review progress of initiatives and service development needs, address feedback from passenger charter groups	Support for bus operation through network management and schemes development (parking enforcement, roadworks management, bus priority measures etc.)	Presentation of EP Schemes compliance, review of passenger charter targets and customer satisfaction, input to EP Schemes Monitoring Group and feedback from 'the floor'	District input to EPs, planning matters, service development
<b>Meeting frequency</b>				
6 monthly	3 monthly	3 monthly	6 monthly	3 monthly

Figure 2 KCC BSIP Meeting & Governance Structure

Under the new enhanced partnership/BSIP model KCC have disbanded the QBPs (see figure 2). They are proposing to replace them with a Borough/District lead organisation called 'Local Bus Focus Groups'. KCC are still proposing to be part of these groups, however they do not propose to organise and administer them. Their proposal is for these groups to still be a forum between the Borough/District, the LTA and bus operating companies, but the format for these groups is being left to the Boroughs/Districts to decide and run.

At present the following districts/boroughs have set up new Local Bus Focus Groups:

- Ashford Borough Council
- Canterbury City Council
- Swale District Council
- Thanet District Council
- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Dartford Borough Council are currently in the process of finalising arrangements for a group.

A sample agenda of these meetings includes reports on patronage, bus infrastructure improvements and wider strategy/policy updates (Local Plans)

### **OPTIONS**

Having reviewed the proposals in the BSIP and held discussions with KCC, officers propose three options, in no particular order:

- The creation of a Local Bus Focus Group managed by Maidstone Borough Council
- The inclusion of bus operators within a new transport group managed by Maidstone Borough Council
- Not to set up a new group, but to use the Network and Punctuality Improvement Partnerships forum (use an existing group within the BSIP framework) (see figure 2).

Below is a discussion of these options.

### **Local Bus Focus Groups (LBFG)**

The advantages to the creation of a LBFG are:

- There is a set format and structure and they have been set up by other LPAs.
- Such a group would allow for Maidstone to have strategic level input on Maidstone specific issues within the current bus regulation structure.
- If there is any future central government funding to be distributed, it appears that the council will be in a better position to benefit from it as this is anticipated to be the structure it is to be distributed through.

The format and membership is decided by MBC as the host of the meetings.

The disadvantages are:

- Any new group is to be administered by MBC rather than KCC as was the case previously with the QBPs.

### **Create a new alternative group**

At present, the adopted Maidstone Walking & Cycling Strategy 2011-2031 is monitored by an officer sustainable transport group which meets once a quarter to review opportunities for delivery of sustainable transport schemes. It includes officers from MBC and KCC Active Travel and Transport Innovations Teams. It is proposed that the membership of this group could be widened to include bus operators and members as it falls within the sustainable transport umbrella and could be renamed the 'Integrated Transport Group', to reflect the wider Maidstone Integrated Transport Strategy. The downside is that bus issues could be diluted, less input into the new bus regulation structure and strategic issues more difficult to discuss.

### **Network and Punctuality Improvement Partnerships**

Within figure 2 two other structures are listed that are presently operating to which the Borough Council is listed as a partner. At present the Borough Council has only been invited to the EP Schemes Monitoring Group. However, if the Borough Council was invited to the Punctuality Improvement Partnership those issues that fall within the remit of the Local Bus Focus Group would be covered. As such there would be no duplication. However, these are officer groups with no member input and lack a strategic focus.

### **PREFERRED APPROACH**

It is proposed the Council set up a Local Bus Focus Group as outlined in the KCC structure within the BSIP. This meeting would be 6 monthly, rather than every 3 months and meet only if there is business to be discussed. It would involve the Cabinet member for Planning, Infrastructure & Economic Development with reports provided to the Maidstone Joint Transportation Board where relevant.

It is felt appropriate to keep the structure and agenda of this group at a strategic level as illustrated in figure 2 and to avoid levels of detail with regards to service level issues (i.e. punctuality). It is felt that this is appropriate as these issues can be dealt with through other mechanisms; for example: the Network and Punctuality Improvement Partnership, the Passenger Charter Group as outlined in figure 2 or through direct contact with the bus operators themselves.

This was discussed at the Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Committee on 29 January 2024 which supported the report recommendations and made an additional recommendation to the Cabinet Member that an update be provided to the Committee after at least two meetings of the local bus focus group had taken place. The Maidstone Joint Transportation Board also considered the matter on 13 February 2024, and supported the report's recommendations.

### **Alternatives considered and why rejected**

Option 2: The Borough Council brings together the bus operators and members with the existing officer sustainable transport group to form a new group.

Option 3: The Borough Council does not set up a new group but relies on existing formalised structures, such as KCCs PiPs and EP Schemes Monitoring Group.

These options were not selected as creating a LBFG would be an improvement on the current situation, with it hoped that the Council could secure improvements through the group.

### **Background Papers**

- Kent Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) (October 2021) - [Bus Service Improvement Plan - Kent County Council](#)
- Kent Enhanced Partnership Plan And West Kent Enhanced Partnership Scheme (April 2023) - [Enhanced Partnerships - Kent County Council](#)

I have read and approved the above decision for the reasons (including possible alternative options rejected) as set out above.



Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
Councillor Paul Cooper, Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development

Full details of both the report for the decision taken above and any consideration by the relevant Policy Advisory Committee can be found at the following area of the [website](#)

Call-In: Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call-in form signed by any three Members to the Proper Officer by: **5pm on Monday 26 February 2024**