

Maidstone Joint Transportation Board

13 February 2024

Maidstone Local Bus Focus Group

Timetable	
Meeting	Date
Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Policy Advisory Committee	29 January 2024
Maidstone Joint Transportation Board	13 February 2024
Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure & Economic Development	Following Maidstone Joint Transportation Board 13 th February 2024

Will this be a Key Decision?	No
Urgency	Not Applicable
Final Decision-Maker	Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure & Economic Development
Lead Head of Service	Karen Britton (Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development)
Lead Officer and Report Author	Tom Gilbert (Principal Planner, Strategic Planning)
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

In 2021 the Government published the National Bus Strategy. This brought about changes to the way buses are regulated within England at a local level. In Kent this has led to the production and adoption of a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and Enhanced Partnership Agreements by Kent County (KCC) Council who are the responsible body.

Resulting from these changes a new structure of interaction between the Local Transport Authority (KCC) and bus operators was created. One of these changes is the termination of Borough/district Quality Bus Partnerships., The proposal is for these to be replaced by Local Focus Groups administered by the boroughs/districts rather than KCC, but still with KCC attending.

This report summarises the changes and proposals for the future.

Purpose of Report

Recommendation to Cabinet Member

This report makes the following recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Planning, Infrastructure & Economic Development

1. That the committee recommends the creation of a Local Bus Focus Group to allow for interaction & work on strategic issues (for example: bus infrastructure improvements and wider strategy/policy updates) with bus operators.
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Maidstone Local Bus Focus Group

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place <p>We do not expect the recommendations will by themselves materially affect achievement of corporate priorities and may contribute to the delivery of infrastructure associated with the first priority.</p>	Karen Britton – Head of Spatial Planning & Economic Development
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected. <p>The report recommendations support the achievements of the four, cross cutting objectives by ensuring that plans from the County authority do not materially harm the council’s ability to achieve these objectives.</p>	Karen Britton – Head of Spatial Planning & Economic Development
Risk Management	Covered in the risk section.	Karen Britton – Head of Spatial Planning & Economic Development
Financial	The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation.	Head of Finance

Staffing	We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing.	Karen Britton – Head of Spatial Planning & Economic Development
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acting on the recommendations is within the Council's powers as set out in the Transport Act 2000 as amended by the Bus Services Act 2017. Maidstone Borough Council is not a local transport authority under the Act, however, it is a statutory consultee. The arrangements proposed will allow Maidstone Council to work appropriately with the local transport authority. 	Team Leader (Contentious and Corporate Governance)
Information Governance	The recommendations do not impact personal information (as defined in UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018) the Council processes.	Information Governance Team
Equalities	The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment.	Equalities & Communities Officer
Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We recognise that the recommendations will not negatively impact on population health or that of individuals. 	Senior Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	There are no implications to Crime and Disorder	Karen Britton – Head of Spatial Planning & Economic Development
Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The recommendation has no immediate impact on budget headings or expenditure in the current year. 	Karen Britton – Head of Spatial Planning & Economic Development
Biodiversity and Climate Change	Establishing a new Local Bus Focus Group as outlined in the KCC structure within the BSIP, would align with Action 1.8 of the Council's Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan to "Actively participate in Quality Bus Partnership and ensure that the borough's	Biodiversity and Climate Change Officer Manager

	infrastructure is bus friendly” as well as supporting several actions in the plan to reduce borough carbon emissions and pollution, while supporting public transportation.	
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2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 This report sets out the changes that are taking place to bus regulation in Kent and recommends how Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) can take this forward.
- 2.2 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).
- 2.3 The traditional role of Maidstone Borough Council is responsible for the provision of infrastructure, such as bus signage and shelters in the Borough.
- 2.4 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.
- 2.5 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.
- 2.6 Up until this point Maidstone Borough Council has had two roles:
- Infrastructure (i.e. bus signage and shelters)
 - Quality Bus Partnerships (QBPs)
- 2.7 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?

2.8 As indicated in para.2.4 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)**

2.9 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.

2.10 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.

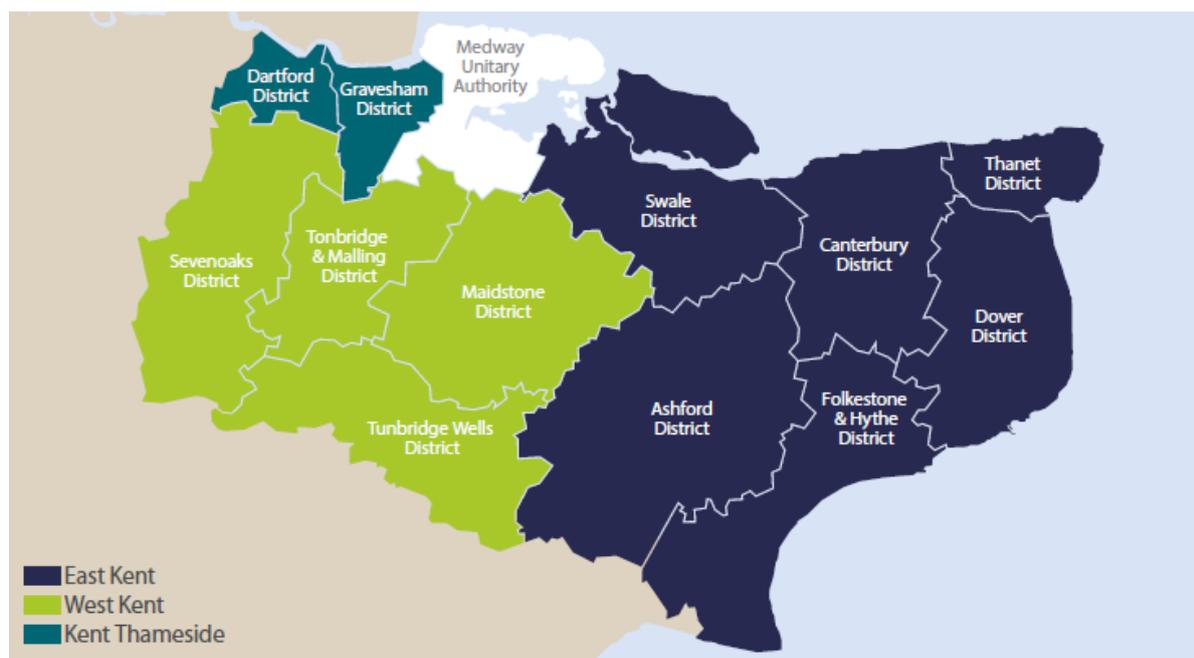


Figure 1. Enhanced Partnership Scheme Areas

2.11 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)
Reps				
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
Role				
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'	(replaces QBPs): District input to EPs, planning matters, service development
Meeting frequency				
6 monthly	3 monthly	3 monthly	6 monthly	3 monthly

Figure 2 KCC BSIP Meeting & Governance Structure

2.12 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.

2.13 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

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

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

OPTIONS

2.16 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).

2.17 Below is a discussion of these options.

Local Bus Focus Groups (LBFG)

2.18 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

2.19 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

2.20 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

2.21 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

- 2.22 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.
- 2.23 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.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 3.1 Option 1: The Borough Council through the Head of Spatial Planning & Economic Development in consultation with the Cabinet member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development creates a new Local Bus Focus Group for the Borough. .
- 3.2 Option 2: The Borough Council brings together the bus operators and members with the existing officer sustainable transport group to form a new group.
- 3.3 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.

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Option 1:

4.2 The Borough Council through the Head of Spatial Planning & Economic Development in consultation with the Cabinet member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development creates a new Local Bus Focus Group for the Borough. Plus, the Head of Spatial Planning & Economic Development, in consultation with the with the Cabinet member for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development, be given the authority to commit the monies received from Authority Bus Subsidy (Revenue) Grant in accordance with the grant funding agreement refer to paragraph 2.4. It is felt that this allows the Council the space to raise strategic issues it may have and

not lead to the dilution of these if it was part of a wider geographical or structural group.

5. RISK

- 5.1 The risk associated with the recommendation, including the risks should the Council not act as recommended, have been considered in line with the Council's Risk management Framework.
- 5.2 If agreement is secured, per the recommendations, then we are satisfied that the risks associated are within the Council's risk appetite and will be managed as per the Policy.
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6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 6.1 A report on this topic was presented to the Planning, Infrastructure & Economic Development Committee on the 29th January 2024 ahead of this meeting. The following feedback was received:
- Members would like greater involvement in the decision making process
 - It was noted that there is a funding crisis for bus services in the Borough and would like to see great funding allocation for services
 - Members would like to review progress of this group and an update to that committee is to be provided after at least two meetings of the group.
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7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 7.1 Following the meeting feedback will be collated and presented to the Cabinet Member for Infrastructure, Planning & Economic Development for a final decision.
- 7.2 At the 6th of September 2023 Planning, Infrastructure & Economic Development Planning Advisory Committee meeting it was advised that the Council would like to start work on an refresh of the Maidstone Integrated Transport Strategy (agenda item 45). This strategy would set out the strategic objectives for transport within the Borough including buses. The Council still propose to pursue this work and foresee that the proposed Local Bus Focus Group would be part of a structure to enable the Council to achieve the objectives set out in any future strategy.
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8. REPORT APPENDICES

- N/A
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9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Kent Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) (October 2021) - [National Bus Strategy - Kent Bus Service Improvement Plan \(amazonaws.com\)](#)
- Kent Enhanced Partnership Plan And West Kent Enhanced Partnership Scheme (April 2023) - [9131b1c7152ea236b8c123cca6866098 West Kent EP - Apr.23 variation DfT.pdf \(amazonaws.com\)](#)