

A BUS STRATEGY FOR THANET



October, 2002



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Cover picture courtesy of Stagecoach in East Kent

1. Introduction

The intention of this strategy is to present a ten year plan which, if achieved, will lead to an improvement in the quality, reliability and perception of bus services in Thanet. This will include measures to enhance information, infrastructure and vehicles as well as the actual service delivery.

Why do we need a bus strategy? As measures to regenerate Thanet's economy take effect, there is a need to ensure that the local environment is not adversely affected by increased traffic congestion and consequent air pollution. Government has recognised that buses have the flexibility to provide an alternative to the private car for many journeys. Buses are economical in their use of road space and do not involve the high capital costs associated with light rail schemes. (From Workhorse to Thoroughbred – DTLR – March, 1999).

In July, 2000 a Quality Bus Partnership was signed between Thanet District Council, Kent County Council and the major local bus operator Stagecoach in East Kent. The Partnership aims to increase local bus usage by 3% per annum, year on year, over a ten-year period commencing in 2000. The overall target is to ensure that public transport accounts for 20% of all travel needs, for journeys of one kilometre and over in the Thanet area, by the end of the ten-year period.

Under the provisions of the Transport Act 2000, the Vehicle Inspectorate now monitors bus service quality on behalf of the Traffic Commissioner. Strict performance parameters are set and operators face financial penalties if these are not met. The same Act also places a requirement on the County Council to ensure that high standards in bus service publicity are achieved. It is essential that bus operators and local authorities work together on agreed strategies to ensure that Government and local targets are met.

Kent County Council published its Bus Strategy for the County in July 2001. The Thanet Bus Strategy is intended to complement this document and to explore the local needs and challenges of Thanet in greater detail. In developing this strategy, Thanet District Council is aware of the need to co-ordinate its bus strategy with those of neighbouring Districts, particularly where services cross District Council boundaries.

2. Development Issues

This strategy will need to incorporate the flexibility to accommodate the many new developments that are taking place or are planned for Thanet. The flexibility of the bus to adjust to cope with new demands has already been highlighted. Buses will therefore, be best placed to meet the needs of these developments in the short/medium term.

A major retail and leisure development at Westwood Cross, which will underpin the Council's aspirations for a new district centre, already has the benefit of outline planning consent. It is expected that developer contributions will provide enhanced evening and Sunday bus services and a bus station incorporating high quality passenger facilities with real time arrival/departure information. These are likely to be supplemented at other times by commercial initiatives to improve bus services to Westwood, possibly leading to the development of a major public transport interchange at this site.

At this stage it is not possible to forecast accurately the demand for travel from the Thanet towns to London Manston Airport and the adjacent business parks. However, it is unlikely that demand will reach the level where a light rail or hybrid solution is viable for many years. Again buses are likely to be the most appropriate solution in the short/medium term.

The role of the QEQM Hospital and the range of services provided are set to increase significantly over the next five years. Thanet District Council will continue to work with Kent County Council, the Kent Strategic Health Authority, Primary Care Trusts, the QEQM Hospital Trust and bus operators to promote alternatives to the private car.

OBJECTIVE

To ensure that the Bus Strategy is able to adapt and respond to planned and new developments as Thanet's economy continues to expand and develop.



Thanet District Council supported bus service at Thanet Reach business park

3. Reliability

31% of respondents to the Thanet Travel Survey (1998) identified reliability as their major concern with public transport services. Additionally, bus operators now face penalties under the service quality requirements of the Transport Act 2000. The major cause of unreliability is traffic congestion, with the “school run” being the major single contributor to this congestion.

Opportunities to provide dedicated bus or high occupancy lanes are limited by the current highway network in Thanet. However, where serious delays to bus services are occurring, the Council will explore the scope for giving priority in the allocation of road space to buses, including bus lanes and priority lanes for buses at traffic lights. Any proposals for new road schemes should include priority for buses and high occupancy vehicles, as proposed for the A256 improvements. In the *Bus Strategy for Kent*, K.C.C. sets out a range of criteria for the provision of bus priority lanes.

Most buses operating Local Bus Services in Thanet are now equipped with vehicle location equipment. A pilot trail of this equipment to provide priority for buses at traffic lights is under way. It is intended to roll this facility out to additional sites throughout the District over the coming months.

The number of school children travelling to school by car has increased dramatically in recent years. This increase is particularly marked amongst primary school children. Addressing the problem of the “school run” has the potential to bring about a significant reduction in traffic congestion. As many of these children are travelling very short distances, cycling and walking provide a healthy and safe alternative. Thanet District Council will work with K.C.C. and local schools to encourage and enable the production of School Travel Plans. There is scope for increasing the numbers travelling by bus and this is addressed elsewhere in the strategy. The main impact on bus services, therefore, is likely to come from reduced volumes of other traffic.

Possibly the second major cause of unreliability is illegal and inconsiderate parking. The District Council will rigorously enforce those restrictions that are within its powers to enforce, giving specific attention to the principal bus routes. Legislation is expected shortly that will make parking at all bus stops illegal and all issues relating to this will need to be reviewed when more information is available. However, the District Council will organise resources to ensure regular patrols and enforcement.

Slow boarding times can be a further cause of delay and unreliability. Although one-person-operation has undoubtedly resulted in slower boarding, commercial considerations preclude a return to crew operation. The new range of multi-journey tickets introduced recently by the major operator are showing early signs of having a positive effect on reducing boarding times. The operators, local authorities and other stakeholders need to work together on developing opportunities for off-bus ticket sales. Possibilities might include bulk purchase of tickets by employers, health authorities, etc. and sales through existing retail outlets.

The Kent BusNet System, which uses satellite tracking technology to positively locate vehicles, will provide bus operators with much improved information on how their services actually operate. This will allow more efficient control of vehicle and staff resources and more realistic time schedules. In return, operators will be expected to plough back these savings in service enhancements and improved reliability.

OBJECTIVE

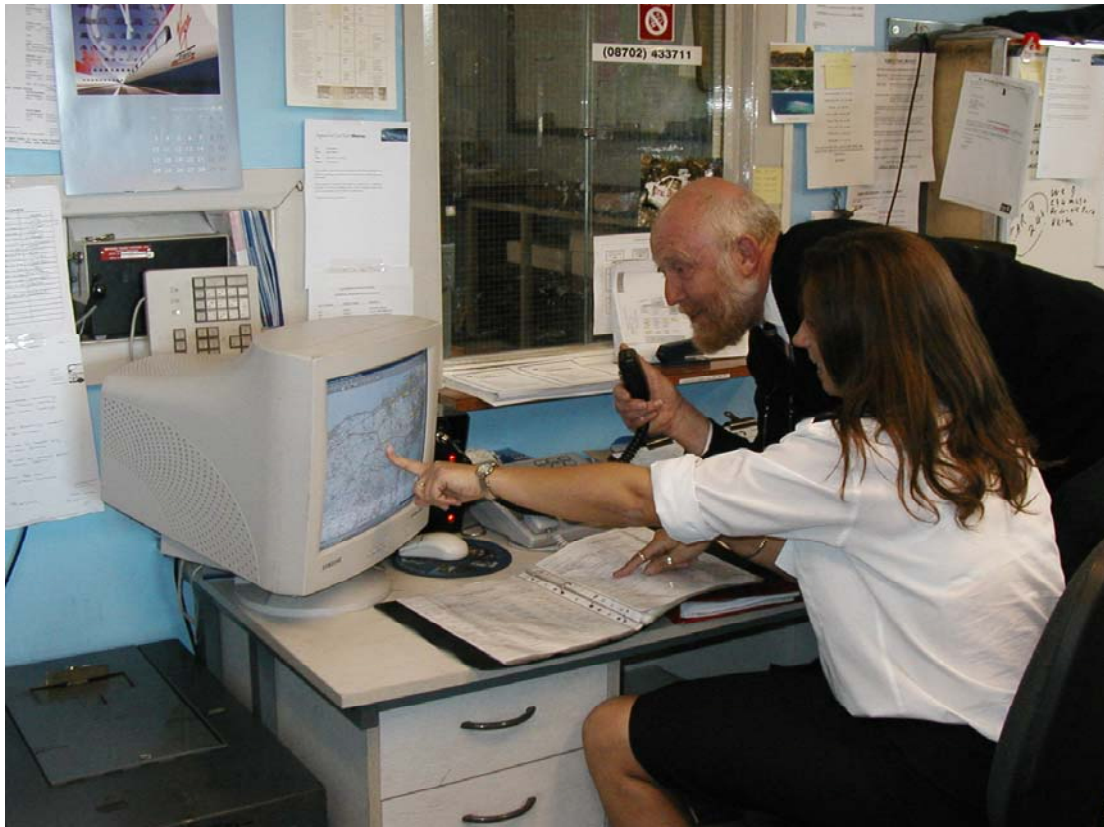
To improve the public perception of bus services as a reliable alternative to the private car for work and leisure journeys.

TARGETS

1 – 5 years

Not less than 95% of journeys to operate within the –1/+5 minutes criteria laid down by the Traffic Commissioners.

Not more than 1% of journeys not operating for whatever reason.



BusNet terminal & Controllers at Westwood Bus Depot

Picture courtesy of Stagecoach in East Kent

4. Information

Through the Quality Bus Partnership, considerable efforts have been made to improve the standard and availability of bus service information in Thanet. Section 139 of the Transport Act 2000 places a duty on the local authority (K.C.C.) to determine what local bus information should be made available to the public and the way it should be made available. K.C.C.'s response is set out in the Kent Information Strategy. Thanet

District Council supports this strategy and will continue to co-operate with partners to achieve and where possible, exceed this standard.

Traditionally, bus services have been advertised by timetable leaflets/booklets and by panel timetables displayed at bus stops. In spite of developments in technology, these traditional methods will remain an important means of communication of bus service information. Partnership working between the local authorities and bus operators has already brought about improvements in the availability and quality of timetable leaflets in Thanet. A new leaflet also explains the availability of a range of multi-journey tickets. Timetable displays at bus stops have largely been replaced by “departure sheet” displays, which are considerably easier to read and understand than the conventional timetable. KCC have now produced a new Thanet bus map, with support from TDC and it is intended that this will be updated and re-issued on an annual basis.

Installation of the Kent BusNet vehicle location system on vehicles operating Local Bus Services in Thanet is nearing completion. The data gathered by this system can be used to display “Real-Time” bus arrival information at key locations. Contributions from commercial developers are being sought to supplement funds identified in the Local Transport Plan to roll-out this system throughout the District. Three “Quality Corridors” have been identified as a priority for displaying “Real-Time” departure information at bus stops. Virtually all Local Bus Services in Thanet use one or more of these corridors for part of their journey. The proposed Quality Corridors are:

1. Margate – QEQM – Westwood – Ramsgate,
2. Margate – Cliftonville – Broadstairs – Ramsgate,
3. Thanet – Canterbury.

A bid by K.C.C. to D.T.L.R. for funding to implement Corridor 3 and the first phase of Corridor 2, has been successful. Other key locations to be considered for the display of “Real-Time” information are shopping centres, business parks, colleges, rail stations and the QEQM hospital.

Arising from the Transport Act 2000, a national bus enquiry service (PTI2000) has been established. Anyone seeking bus timetable information can dial a single nationwide number, which is routed to the regional call centre. The technology available allows staff to deal with local enquiries and route enquiries for other areas seamlessly to the appropriate centre. Stagecoach in East Kent also operate their own telephone enquiry service.

Information on the services provided by Stagecoach in East Kent, Eastonways and Thanet Community Transport is now available on the Internet. Links to these sites are being incorporated in the T.D.C. and K.C.C. corporate sites.

OBJECTIVE

To ensure that the non-availability of accurate up-to-date information on bus services does not present a barrier to using buses.

TARGETS

1- 5 years

1. Timetables at all bus stops
2. Real Time Passenger Information displays at key stops on 2 corridors

5 – 10 years

1. Real Time Passenger Information displays at key stops and other locations on all three corridors.

5. Accessibility

With the majority of bus services in Thanet being operated commercially, it has to be understood that vehicle policies will be subject to commercial decisions. However, through the Quality Bus partnership, the District and County Councils will seek to encourage bus operators to provide fully accessible vehicles ahead of the legal obligations contained in the Disability Discrimination Act.

Funds have been identified through the Local Transport Plan process for measures to improve the environment at bus stops along the three “Quality Corridors” detailed earlier. Where physically possible, this will include the provision of Bus Piers or Bus boarders. These are sections of raised pavement, which reduce the height of the step onto or from the bus to assist the mobility impaired; i.e. elderly, infirm, disabled, mothers with buggies and those with heavy shopping, etc.

During 2001 a bid was made jointly by T.D.C., K.C.C. and Stagecoach in East Kent for funding from the Government’s Urban Bus Challenge. The bid envisaged converting a busy local bus service in Margate from conventional van-derived minibuses to small Super Low Floor buses. Stopping facilities and publicity would be enhanced and a demand-responsive evening service, based on the Q.E.Q.M. Hospital introduced. Whilst this bid had wide support from the health authorities and community groups, it was not successful. Recent enquiries of the Department for Transport have suggested that it is unlikely that a similar bid will be successful. Negotiations are now underway with the operator to investigate the possibility of implementing a similar scheme using existing resources.

Adverse perceptions of safety and security when using or waiting for buses can be a further barrier to some residents using buses. The Thanet travel Survey suggested that this was a particular concern of female residents. Whilst the reality is that bus travel is inherently safe, measures may be necessary to correct the public perception. As part of the Kent BusNet system, most vehicles operating Local Bus Services are now fitted with two-way radios. Consideration is also being given to providing a video link to buses funded from a bid to the Government’s Urban Bus Challenge fund.

Although not generally recognised, information about bus services, or the lack of it, can be a barrier to potential users of those bus services. Much work has already been done to improve the quality and availability of timetable information. More recently, a leaflet has been produced explaining the range of bus tickets available on Stagecoach East Kent services. As detailed elsewhere, T.D.C. will continue to work with its partners to ensure that the non-availability of information is not a barrier to the use of local bus services.

OBJECTIVE

To ensure that those wishing to use bus services are not prevented from so doing by reasons of physical access, fear of crime or lack of appropriate information.

TARGETS

1 – 5 years

1. Investigate alternative ways of providing Super Low Floor (SLF) vehicles and infrastructure improvements (bus stops and bus boarders/piers) for Service 32 based on the unsuccessful Urban Bus Challenge bid.
2. Super Low Floor (SLF) vehicles and infrastructure improvements for Services 8 & 88
3. Improved information (as above)

5 – 10 years

1. Super Low Floor (SLF) vehicles and infrastructure improvements on all three Quality Corridors

6. Community Transport

Local bus services are set to become more accessible, both as a result of the Disability Discrimination Act and measures in support of the Quality Bus Partnership. There will, however, still be residents for whom these services are not appropriate for a number of reasons. Thanet Community Transport exists to meet the needs of these residents. This strategy recognises the vital role played by Thanet Community Transport within the wider public transport picture in Thanet. Where possible, T.D.C. will continue to encourage and enable that role.

OBJECTIVE

To ensure that Community Transport continues to meet those needs which commercial bus services cannot serve.

Thanet Community Transport's fleet of fully accessible minibuses.

7. The Rural Perspective

With the loss of facilities such as shops, post offices, pubs etc., in the rural areas, there is a greater need for rural residents to travel and to travel further, than their urban counterparts. Coupled with this, these same rural settlements have, in many cases, also lost their local bus service. All of Thanet's rural parishes are currently served by bus services linking them to the main towns, mainly with support from K.C.C. However, in most cases these do not run in the evenings nor on Sundays. Thanet Community Transport provides a service throughout the District, which supplements the services of the commercial operators. However the scope for providing evening and Sunday services is limited by the availability of volunteer drivers prepared to work unsocial hours.

One solution might be to integrate taxis with the bus network or to pursue the possibility of existing taxi operators operating taxibus services (vehicles of up to 8 seats operating on Hackney Carriage licences, but providing a registered local bus service).

As part of a Village Health Check, a transport needs study of Minster has been carried out recently by a consultant. The results of this study, funded by a partnership of T.D.C., Minster Parish Council and the Countryside Agency, will now be evaluated. The potential for Minster station to act as a railhead for the other villages is also being considered as part of a Rail Passenger Partnership bid to provide regular rail services between Minster, Sandwich and Deal. This would involve better facilities at Minster Station and the co-ordination of existing and enhanced bus links during the working day; some initial work having already been carried out. More innovative solutions, such as taxibuses, could provide links at other times.

OBJECTIVE

To ensure that a lack of appropriate transport does not become a barrier to rural residents accessing work, training or other facilities.

TARGETS

1 – 5 years

Submission of Rail Passenger Partnership bid based on Minster Station and drawing on results of Minster Transport Study.

Further co-ordination of existing rural bus services.

5 – 10 years

Examine feasibility, identify funding and launch a demand responsive evening (and Sundays?) rural bus service using Community Transport or Taxibuses.

8. Inter-modal Issues

Limited facilities for through ticketing between rail and local buses already exist with the Thanet RailBus ticket, although take-up has been limited. In the longer term, it is hoped that more comprehensive through ticketing facilities can be encouraged.

Plans have been formulated to re-model Ramsgate rail station forecourt to allow buses to pick up and set down near to the station entrance. Provision is incorporated within these plans for dedicated bus services to/from London Manston Airport and Ramsgate New Port to access the station. A dedicated high quality bus service to and from Ramsgate Station is seen as the best option for passengers accessing London Manston Airport in the short to medium term. Ramsgate has better and less congested access to the road network than the alternatives of Minster or Birchington. Ramsgate has also been identified as a possible railhead for the surrounding area as part of the South Coast Multi Modal Study (SoCoMMS).

Considerable work has already been done in providing cycle storage facilities at Thanet's rail stations and town centres. This strategy will seek to explore ways in

which journeys can be completed by a combination of cycle and bus and what opportunities exist for the carriage of cycles on buses. In both suburban and rural areas, cycles have the potential to extend the catchment area of bus services by up to 5Km. As part of the current revision and updating of the Thanet Cycling Strategy, the Local Authorities will investigate the scope for secure cycle storage at bus service termini, particularly in rural areas. It is unlikely that providing cycle accommodation on the busy urban bus services in Thanet would be either practical or commercially desirable. However, cycle trailers, which can be towed behind a bus, are now available and we will look at the possibility of conducting a trial, if a suitable bus service can be identified in Thanet.

The strategy also seeks to acknowledge the role of taxis within the total public transport provision in Thanet. There are two possible areas where taxis could be co-ordinated with buses: One is the potential for a passenger to make a journey in one direction by bus, but returning by taxi. This would be particularly useful for shopping trips or, perhaps, hospital visits. As suggested elsewhere, taxis or taxibuses could be used to provide a service during those times when conventional bus services do not operate.

OBJECTIVE

To increase the attractiveness of journeys on public transport by ensuring that these journeys meet Government aspirations for “seamless interchange”.

TARGETS

1 – 5 years

Re-modelling of Ramsgate Station forecourt to allow better bus/rail interchange and to accommodate services to London Manston and Ramsgate New Port.

Improvements to facilities at Minster Station funded from Rail Passenger Partnership bid.

Extend Bus/Rail through ticketing facilities.

5 – 10 years

Re-modelling of Margate Station forecourt to allow better bus/rail interchange.

“Bus-Cycle” cycle trailer in use in Suffolk.

Photograph courtesy of Jason Engineering Systems Ltd., Southampton.

9. School Travel

Nationally, the “school run” has been identified as the single biggest cause of traffic congestion and this is equally true of Thanet. It is, therefore, important to explore alternatives to the private car for these, often very short, journeys.

There appears to be considerable public support for the operation of dedicated school buses, possibly based on the U.S. “yellow bus” model. However, it has to be recognised that school journeys are amongst the most expensive to provide, as the vehicles may not be used at other times of the day or during school holidays. These additional costs would place considerable pressure on the County education budget, which would be hard to justify.

Arguably, the effect on the commercial bus network of removing school traffic could result in some marginal services becoming unsustainable. This could result in the withdrawal of some services or increased demand for revenue support to maintain the network. Conversely, the presence of large numbers of school students could be a deterrent to other passengers.

Unruly behaviour, sometimes resulting in serious damage to vehicles, is known to be a problem on buses carrying schoolchildren. This has resulted in calls for attendants to be provided on school buses. It is unlikely that commercial bus operators will have funds available to provide additional staff for local bus services, although some may consider building the cost into future tenders for dedicated school services. Once

again to provide attendants directly, or indirectly through the route tendering process would put considerable pressure on the education budget.

Buses continue to be an important means of enabling children to reach school, with 33% of secondary pupils and 7% of primary pupils using this means. However, the private car has become the most popular mode for those who do not walk, particularly for primary school children. This growth in car traffic represents a major cause of traffic congestion and a very real threat to children's health from crashes, air pollution and lack of exercise. A package of "carrot and stick" measures will be necessary to reduce car parking, congestion and promote the alternatives.

Whilst recognising the role of buses in school travel, other alternatives need to be considered. As the majority of school journeys are short, walking and cycling offer the best opportunity to reduce car journeys. The advantage of these modes is that they can have a positive effect on children's health and combined with "safe routes to school" initiatives, can lead to a reduction in crash injuries. Policy S30 of the Kent Local Transport Plan sets a target of increasing the number of children walking and cycling to school by at least 20%.

OBJECTIVE

To reduce the adverse effects of travel to school on traffic congestion, air pollution and children's health.

TARGETS

1 – 5 years

20% of schools in Thanet to have School Travel Plans in place.

5 – 10 years

All schools in Thanet to have School Travel Plans in place.

10. Company/Green Travel Plans

The submission of travel plans is becoming an increasing requirement of the planning approval process. As a comparatively new concept, production of these may present problems to applicants, particularly small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), schools, etc.

However, the production of travel plans will be especially important for those developments where large numbers of the public will be travelling, in addition to staff. As indicated earlier, the strategy will need to be flexible to take account of future expansion at the Q.E.Q.M. Hospital, development of the business parks and the

projected growth in air passengers at London Manston Airport. A travel plan has been submitted by the airport developers and reviewed by Thanet District Council. The Council will continue to work with the airport operators to ensure the implementation and further development of this plan. The East Kent Hospitals Trust and the Kent Strategic Health Authority have now produced a Green Transport Plan for Q.E.Q.M. Hospital.

This strategy recognises the potential role for buses to play an important part in delivering “green” travel to and from work, education or health facilities. It also recognises that the local authority can play a part in the development of travel plans as well as approving these for development control purposes. It should also lead by example, developing and implementing its own Travel Plan, as an example of “Best Practice”.

Areas where the local authority might assist include advice to businesses, schools, etc. on writing travel plans, providing information to new and relocating enterprises on existing travel facilities (bus and rail services, cycle routes, etc.), co-ordinating joint travel plans for a number of small enterprises on a business park and in establishing “best practice” in the writing of travel plans. Some work has already started on Travel Plans for three primary schools and a secondary school in Thanet. Three further secondary schools are working on informal plans to encourage cycling.

OBJECTIVE

To reduce the adverse effects of commuting journeys on traffic congestion, air pollution and the health of the community.

TARGETS

1 – 5 years

All major employers (i.e. those with over 250 employees) in Thanet to have Company Travel Plans in place.

5 – 10 years

Company/Green Travel Plans produced for all major business parks (i.e. those with car movements exceeding 100 in the peak hour or with more than 100 car parking spaces) in Thanet.

11. Reducing The Need To Travel

Although beyond the immediate scope of this strategy, it is recognised that the issues of why people need to travel will have to be addressed through the Local Plan and land use planning policies. Reducing the distance that people need to travel can encourage a modal shift away from the private car. The concept of sustainable communities, where people can live, work and access facilities without the need to travel long distances, will need to be pursued through the planning process. It is accepted that this will, of necessity, be a long-term objective, but one that is accepted by T.D.C. as Local Planning Authority.

The proposed development at Westwood Cross presents an opportunity to combine shopping, leisure facilities and housing on one site, thus reducing the need to travel. Nevertheless, a combination of developer contributions and commercial pressures will ensure good public transport links between Westwood and the rest of Thanet.

In the short/medium term innovations such as home deliveries, Internet shopping and home working can contribute to a reduction in travel.

OBJECTIVE

To reduce the need to travel through sustainable land use and transport planning policies.

12. Summary of Priorities and Actions

Whilst this strategy attempts to address the provision of bus services in Thanet, there are some wider issues that will need to be addressed:

Although the majority of bus services in Thanet are provided commercially, the rising costs of providing bus services, coupled with local authority budget pressures, may present a barrier to the expansion of the bus network and could threaten some existing services. However, three key urban routes have been identified as potential Quality Corridors, which will receive priority for investment. The following diagram shows the proposed Quality Corridors and their relationship to the major traffic objectives in Thanet.

THANET QUALITY BUS CORRIDORS

Insert diagram

There are a number of Government funding initiatives in place, which can assist in the provision of local bus services. However, it is often difficult to meet the qualifying criteria for these funds. Some grants are limited to a three-year period, making them unsuitable for ongoing revenue support, particularly where the guidelines require innovative and demand responsive services.

Short term (1 - 5 years)

High priority will be given to investigating ways of obtaining the benefits envisaged in the unsuccessful Urban Bus Challenge fund bid to enhance the quality of Service 32 in Margate, using existing resources. This bid sought to bring the advantages of

Super Low Floor (SLF) midibuses to Thanet, with improved roadside infrastructure and a demand responsive evening service based on the Q.E.Q.M. hospital.

Assess the implications for Local Bus Services in Thanet of the new Concessionary Fares scheme introduced under the 2000 Transport Act and review the Kent Countywide scheme accordingly.

Upgrade bus-stopping arrangements at Ramsgate Rail Station forecourt. As well as improving inter-modal interchange for existing passengers, facilities will be provided for additional services providing a dedicated link to London Manston Airport and Ramsgate New Port.

Extend Bus/Rail through ticketing facilities.

Not less than 95% of journeys to operate within the -1/+5 minutes criteria laid down by the Traffic Commissioners.

Not more than 3% of journeys not operating for whatever reason.

Timetables at all bus stops.

Installation of Real Time Passenger Information at key stops on two Quality Corridors and upgrade roadside infrastructure. A28 between Canterbury and Margate (Cliftonville) funded by the Government's Transport Direct initiative.

Conversion of Services 8 & 88 to Super Low Floor vehicles.

Submission of Rail Passenger Partnership bid.

Further co-ordination of existing rural bus services.

20% of schools in Thanet to have School Travel Plans in place.

All major employers in Thanet to have Company Travel Plans in place.

Long term (5 – 10 years)

Extension of RTPI and improved roadside infrastructure to three Quality Corridors.

Conversion of other principal services to Super Low Floor vehicles.

Feasibility study of demand responsive evening and Sunday bus services.

Re-modelling of Margate Station forecourt to allow better bus/rail interchange.

All schools in Thanet to have School Travel Plans in place.

Company/Green Travel Plans produced for all major business parks in Thanet.

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