

PROPOSED QUALITY BUS PARTNERSHIP (QBP) FOR SEVENOAKS

To: Sevenoaks Joint Transportation Board – 03/09/2015

Main Portfolio Area: Highways and Transportation: Public Transport

By: Policy & Strategy Manager

Classification: Unrestricted

Ward : All in Sevenoaks

Summary: **This report proposes the establishment of a Quality Bus Partnership (QBP) in Sevenoaks and recommends that Officers are asked to pursue discussions with operators and other proposed members of the Partnership.**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report sets out proposals for the establishment of a Quality Bus Partnership (QBP) in Sevenoaks. The agreement, if approved, would be a multi-operator Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) as defined by the Transport Act 2000 and amended by the Local Transport Act 2008.
- 1.2 This report firstly provides a brief explanation of the legislative background to QBPs and sets the context within which a Sevenoaks QBP could be delivered, with examples of other successful QBPs in Kent. It then outlines the present provision of bus services in Sevenoaks, the bus operators who provide those services, the nature of the commercial and supported bus network, and the possible improvements which a Sevenoaks QBP could deliver.

2. Legislative Background to Quality Bus Partnerships and their Operation in Kent

- 2.1 **The Transport Act 2000** established Voluntary Quality Bus Partnerships, enabling Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) such as KCC to enter into partnership agreements with bus operators and district councils. KCC has been at the forefront of developing QBPs during the last decade, each of which has been tailored to the particular transport needs of the district they serve. A QBP is essentially an agreement between the principal bus operator(s), the LTA and the district or borough Council. Each partnership aims to bring about significant improvements to the quality of bus services, with the aim of increasing the number of passenger journeys and reducing reliance on travel by car.
- 2.2 This Act established three types of QBP:
 - **Voluntary Partnership Agreements** (the KCC model)
 - Local authority and bus operator each agree to make improvements.
 - Can work well where good relationships exist – but relies on mutual cooperation and strong partnership working.
 - no enforcement mechanism.
 - **Quality Partnership Schemes** (none in Kent)

- local authorities provide facilities (eg bus stop clearways, raised boarders); operators wishing to use these must meet the “standard of service” specified.
- enforcement powers for traffic commissioners.
- **Quality Contracts** (none in Kent)
 - the regulated London-style “franchising” model.

2.3 Following the successful delivery of QBPs throughout the country, the **Local Transport Act 2008** strengthened the powers of the 2000 Act. Voluntary QBPs could now include multi-operator agreements, an essential legislative provision for districts such as Sevenoaks with multiple bus operators. LTAs also had greater authority in the delivery of Quality Partnership Schemes (QPSs). For the first time they could determine the frequency, timetable and maximum fares for a bus route, in exchange for a bus operator having rights over, for example, the use of new bus priority infrastructure. LTAs also had the option of entering Quality Contracts (QCs) with a planned bus network similar to the Transport for London (TfL) model.

2.4 **Operation of Existing Quality Bus Partnerships in Kent**

KCC has signed eight QBPs with local bus operators and district councils in Kent: Ashford, Canterbury, Dover, Maidstone, Shepway, Swale, Thanet and Tunbridge Wells. In addition, there is a longer term aspiration for the delivery of QBPs in the remaining districts of Dartford, Gravesham and Tonbridge & Malling. The Swale QBP, established in 2012, is the only one of the above to have multi operator involvement owing to the nature of the bus network in the borough. To date all of Kent’s QBPs are Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs).

The intended outcomes which apply to all of Kent’s QBPs can be summarised as follows:

- Improved bus services with newer vehicles, improved reliability and a resulting increase in passenger journey numbers.
- Improved access on to and off of vehicles through raised kerbs, bus stop clearways and hard standing boarding areas.
- Improved waiting environment for passengers with high quality bus stops, accurate information and where possible / appropriate well maintained bus shelters.
- Fewer car journeys, less congestion and reduced emissions where bus euro standards improve.

2.5 **How a Quality Bus Partnership Works in Practice**

Each QBP meets every three months, usually at the appropriate district offices. The meeting is chaired by one of the KCC officers responsible for public transport policy, and aims to include the following representatives from each of the partners involved.

- Bus operator(s)
 - Commercial Manager/Director
 - Commercial Officer
 - Operations Manger (for local bus depot)
- Kent County Council
 - Public Transport Policy and Strategy Manager

- Public Transport Policy and Strategy Senior Officer
 - Public Transport Planner (for supported services)
 - Development Planner (for local district)
- District Council
 - Transport Officer/Traffic Engineer
 - Planning Officer

Attendance from at least one County and District Member is also encouraged.

- 2.6 A QBP is not just a talking shop, it is a living Voluntary Partnership Agreement which meets at regular three-monthly intervals, has accurate minutes taken of its proceedings with actions for which QBP members are accountable, and Working Targets & Reports which determine the measures by which the bus services throughout the district should be delivered. Measures include (but are not limited to) % of buses operating on time, % Increase in passenger journey numbers, % scheduled miles operated, the frequency of service between the principal town in a district and other key destinations and the percentage of environmentally friendly vehicles in the local fleet measured by use of the most modern Euro-emission designated engines.
- 2.7 Each partner of a QBP makes a commitment (where funding permits) to deliver the following:
- KCC looks to invest in: raised kerbs (to permit easy access to low-floor buses for wheelchair users, for those whose mobility is impaired, for parents with children in buggies and indeed for all passengers); bus stop clearways to keep stops clear of parked vehicles to enable buses to pull in and out of each stop and to serve it parallel to the kerb; and bus stop poles with flags and timetable cases to provide clear, accurate and easily understood bus route and timetable information at all stops. KCC also looks to make informed comments on planning applications to ensure that bus services are considered appropriately and that Section 106 developer funding is forthcoming where possible which would see improvements to stop infrastructure, service frequency or vehicle quality.
 - The District Council looks to: provide funding for new or replacement bus shelters each year in order to improve waiting facilities so that bus passengers have the best possible travel experience. The district also has responsibility for the enforcement of bus stop clearways which, in accordance with the Department for Transport (DfT) Traffic Regulations of 2003, do not require Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs). The enforcement of unlawful parking on bus stop clearways is paramount in ensuring the ability of buses to have access to and egress from the bus stop. The district also looks to keep other members of the QBP updated on planning developments, ensuring that bus services and infrastructure are appropriately considered.
 - Bus Operators look to meet the working targets set in point 2.8, invest in new or improved vehicles and improve their networks appropriately in line with emerging development or increased passenger demand.

By way of an example, the Maidstone Quality Bus Partnership has contributed to the following successes since its establishment in 2012:

- A £3.3m investment on 11 new hybrid buses on route 71 serving the A20 & A26 funded from the Green Bus fund, Kent County Council and Arriva.
- 14 new bus shelters.
- £50,000 funding provided through the Quality Bus Partnership to refresh Maidstone's Bus Station.
- Improvement in the quality of bus stop infrastructure and associated branding.
- Helped Maidstone secure trials for new "smart" contact-less payment methods.
- Arriva's bus fleet in Maidstone is now 100% low-floor, wheelchair accessible.
- The introduction of the A20 Statutory Quality Partnership Scheme has introduced legally binding minimum quality standards for bus services and improved stop infrastructure on the corridor.
- Route 101 (Gillingham – Chatham – Maidstone) upgraded to Sapphire standard in July 2014 incorporating Wi-Fi, E-Leather seats and a designated customer service charter. The service has seen a 20% increase in journey numbers since this vehicle upgrade.
- Maidstone Park and Ride Buses refurbished in August / September 2014 to include new liveries, improved seating and free on-board Wi-Fi for passengers.
- A Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) introduced on Chatham Road, Tyland Barn to prevent lorries illegally blocking buses running through the area. This has resulted in a high improvement in bus punctuality.
- An opportunity for Arriva to hear and comment on the Congestion Strategy for the Maidstone area.
- An opportunity for Arriva to learn of progress with respect to the Maidstone Local Plan, related planning developments and the long term transport strategy for the Borough.
- An opportunity for Arriva to engage with the KCC Traffic Manager to discuss congestion issues on Loose Road and how these could be overcome to improve service reliability.
- Developed a forum for discussing route changes, local bus issues, performance and customer comments.

3. Current Bus Network in Sevenoaks

- 3.1 The majority of the bus network in Sevenoaks district is operated commercially, primarily by Arriva and Go-Coach, whom determine their own fares, route network and times of operation. A small portion of the network is supported (as per the Member approved criteria for local bus service support) by Kent County Council (KCC) and is predominantly operated by Arriva, Go-Coach, and Metrobus.
- 3.2 The Sevenoaks bus network consists broadly of the following distinct elements:
- (i) the trunk routes operating east-west from the Westerham area to Sevenoaks and also from the Borough Green area into Sevenoaks.
 - (ii) the trunk routes operating north-south, with services coming into Sevenoaks from Greater London and outlying villages to the north and from Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge and Edenbridge to the south/southeast.
 - (iii) Sevenoaks local bus services which provide a link to the town centre from areas nearby including Chipstead, Riverhead and Seal.
- 3.3 The current total gross expenditure on supported bus services in the Sevenoaks district is £1,049,470, as of August 2015. In many cases KCC supports particular elements of predominantly commercial services, e.g. early morning / evening journeys.

- 3.4 There is also a Kent Karrier service, funded by KCC, operating in the district. This is a membership based scheme for residents of any age with mobility problems, or for any residents living more than 500 metres from a bus route. It provides pre-bookable journeys to key locations in in Sevenoaks. As of August 2015 the Sevenoaks scheme had 31 members.
- 3.5 There are also several closed door services in operation, providing a service for “entitled” scholars who (at secondary school) live more than three miles from their nearest appropriate school.
- 3.6 KCC offers the Young Persons Travel Pass (YPTP) and 16+ Travel Pass in order to assist parents with the costs involved in transporting their children to and from school.

4. A Quality Bus Partnership for Sevenoaks

- 4.1 The present bus network in Sevenoaks has been described above. A new Sevenoaks QBP, in the form of a Voluntary Partnership Agreement as enabled by the 2000 and 2008 Acts, would provide the opportunity for the creation of strong partnership working between the local bus operators, Sevenoaks District Council and Kent County Council with the shared objective of building on and enhancing this network. It is proposed that the QBP would be multi-operator in nature with representation from the two predominant commercial operators in the area, Arriva and Go-Coach. Other operators who operate services under support from KCC would be represented by the Public Transport Planner for Sevenoaks.
- 4.2 Whilst each party would be expected to make funding commitments, everyone recognises the budgetary constraints affecting the public and private sectors alike. The Sevenoaks QBP agreement should identify the areas for which each party would be responsible whilst recognising the difficulties of any immediate provision of substantial resources. The model of the existing Kent QBPs will help to achieve this, where the involvement of each party has been measured to reflect each one's particular circumstances.
- 4.3 There are nevertheless some sources of funding available to “kickstart” a Sevenoaks QBP. KCC has budget available for the installation of RTI displays at key bus interchanges such as railway and bus stations. KCC has also already secured funding for 2016-17 as part of the LTP initiative to replace all concrete bus stop poles in the county with modern, safer and more aesthetically pleasing alternatives. A significant number of these are located in the Sevenoaks district. KCC is also exploring the possibility of enhancing the Sevenoaks Kent Karrier scheme with a view to providing a dial-a-ride offer rather than a shopper bus, thereby providing a greater number of journey opportunities for passengers.
- 4.4 Another key development that the Sevenoaks QBP would seek to deliver would be improved bus stop infrastructure with new bus stop poles and flags, new timetable displays and new district council enforced bus stop clearways. Other developer funding opportunities would also be crucial to the continued delivery of such improvements, and the informed presence of the district planning officer and the KCC development planner at each QBP meeting would be an essential requirement to ensure that such funding opportunities were captured.
- 4.5 The proposed QBP would look to improve commuter links to railway stations in the Sevenoaks district and will liaise with the likes of Southeastern and National Rail to implement initiatives such as integrated ticketing as part of this.

- 4.6 If the formation of a QBP is approved by the JTB then similar agreement would be sought from the relevant portfolio holder at Sevenoaks District Council and with the bus operators who have already indicated their willingness to participate in the QBP. It is envisaged that once the text of the QBP Voluntary Partnership Agreement is agreed, a formal signing ceremony with appropriate media coverage would take place, with the first meeting following soon after. Further meeting dates at three-monthly intervals would then be agreed with all parties to the QBP.

5. Financial

- 5.1 Whilst investment is encouraged from all parties into the local bus network as part of the QBP, the partnership is of a voluntary nature so as such there is no statutory obligation on any partner. The QBP will seek to deliver the best possible outcomes for the local bus network within available means.

6. Legal

- 6.1 There are no legal obligations on any partners as the QBP is entirely voluntary.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 Members of the Sevenoaks JTB are asked to:
- (i) Recommend that the KCC Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport and the Sevenoaks District Council Portfolio holder for Planning jointly approve the establishment of a Sevenoaks Quality Bus Partnership in the form of a Voluntary Partnership Agreement, as provided in the Transport Act 2000 and the Local Transport Act 2008.
 - (ii) Recommend that Officers are subsequently asked to pursue discussions with operators and other proposed members of the Partnership.
 - (iii) Recommend that the agreement, once approved by all parties, be signed by a representative of each of them as soon as possible with the inaugural meeting of the QBP scheduled soon after.

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