

Revised Medway Valley Sustainable Transport Strategy

DRAFT MEDWAY VALLEY SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT STRATEGY

Background

The Medway Valley Sustainable Transport Strategy (MVSTS) was first developed by Kent County Council (KCC) in 2003 to establish a defined and agreed approach to the mitigation of the combined transport impacts of six major developments (Frantschach, Halling Cement Works, Holborough Valley, Kings Hill – Phase 2, Leybourne Grange, and Peters Pit). The MVSTS proposed a coordinated programme of measures that adds value to the individual Section 106 developer contributions and reduces the need for ongoing financial support for new and enhanced public transport services beyond the initial period of pump-priming. The MVSTS is cited as a key mitigation strategy within Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council (TMBC)'s Draft Air Quality Action Plan (June 2011) and specifically to the achievement of the Air Quality Objectives in the Ditton, Aylesford and Larkfield A20 Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs).

Approximately £10.3 million (subject to indexation) in Section 106 contributions has been agreed to date, which can be grouped as follows:

Providing pump-prime funding for bus services	£3.79m
Delivering specified traffic calming or safety schemes	£1.37m
Delivering A20 bus priority measures	£1.99m
Improved bus/rail interchange at West Malling Station	£0.25m
Widening of M20 Junction 4 eastern overbridge	£2.92m

It should be noted, however, that the triggers, conditions and timescales attached to individual contributions vary considerably from site to site. In addition, these need to be coordinated with other uncostered obligations that require developers to work directly with service providers to introduce new bus services.

For various reasons, the approach set out in 2003 is no longer considered appropriate. The recent economic downturn has slowed the rate of housing development throughout the UK and greatly reduced the level of public funding available for local transport schemes. Indeed, KCC's Local Transport Plan (LTP) allocation from the Department for Transport (DfT) for infrastructure schemes worth £5 million or less has been reduced from £16.41 million in 2010/11 to £8.19 million in 2011/12. There has also been a significant change in personnel at both officer and Member level within KCC since the MVSTS was originally drafted. Several of the Section 106 Agreements are now reaching the trigger points at which KCC and TMBC must claim the agreed sum from the developer. There is consequently a pressing need to review and update the MVSTS in light of these changed circumstances and to secure maximum value for money from the limited funds now available.

There has also been a shift in policy focus and perhaps a sharpening of what is meant by sustainable transport in the intervening period. In the previous policy climate, much focus was given to the reduction of road space for cars in favour of physical bus priority measures. Whilst bus priority remains in vogue, experiences have led to a more refined approach that recognises the need to provide an appropriate balance between transport modes and to look at improving bus transport by smarter and more coordinated intervention. It is on this basis that the review of the MVSTS has been considered.

The Proposal

The success of the MVSTS is dependent in large part on the ability of the bus network to provide an attractive and cost-effective alternative for local and inter-urban journeys. This paper therefore focuses on the public transport aspects of the MVSTS on the A20 corridor, which form the bulk of the Section 106 funded measures by value. Three principal inter-urban bus routes currently serve this corridor:-

- Route 58 – Trottiscliffe to Maidstone via Ryarsh, Leybourne, West Malling, East Malling and Larkfield (4-6 journeys, Monday to Saturday daytimes);
- Route 71 – Holborough and Snodland (every 30 minutes, Monday to Saturday daytimes) / Leybourne Lakes (every 10 minutes, Monday to Saturday daytimes; every 30 minutes, Monday to Saturday evenings; every 2 hours, Sunday daytimes) to Maidstone via Lunsford Park and Larkfield;
- Route 72 – Kings Hill to Maidstone via West Malling, East Malling and Larkfield (every 30 minutes, Monday to Saturday daytimes).

Routes 58, 71 and 72 collectively provide up to 9 buses per hour (at an average frequency of every 6-8 minutes) between Larkfield, Ditton and Maidstone on weekdays. However, the quality of vehicles, information and bus stop infrastructure on this corridor is variable and the high-frequency network is not marketed in a unified manner. There are traffic signal priority measures for buses between the Lunsford Lane and Hermitage Lane junctions, with a few short bus priority lanes within Tonbridge and Malling.

In 2003, KCC's term consultant Babbie was commissioned to investigate the potential for physical bus priority measures on the A20 corridor between Leybourne and Allington. Interventions were proposed at seven junctions; three of which – those at Hermitage Lane, New Hythe Lane and Coldharbour Roundabout – were subsequently implemented, either in part or in full. In each case, it was possible to complete the scheme with relatively little disruption to other road users and without additional land take.

Bus priority measures were also proposed at the Mills Road/Hall Road, Station Road/New Road, New Road (East Malling), and Lunsford Lane/Winterfield Lane junctions. However, with the exception of Lunsford Lane / Winterfield Lane, these schemes would require significant land take and junction remodelling and would have a consequently greater impact on general traffic flow that might well result in worsened rather than improved air quality within the A20 AQMAs. Moreover, at the time of the 2003 study, Babbie estimated the total cost of these schemes at approximately £3 million (excluding land costs), which far exceeds the Section 106 contributions now available. Current funding would permit one of either the Mills Road/Hall Road or the Station Road/New Road schemes to be implemented in full. However, in the present financial climate and in the light of experience it is no longer considered that these schemes are worthy of pursuing.

It is therefore proposed that the funding available for bus priority measures is allocated to smaller-scale improvement schemes throughout this corridor, to add maximum value to the new and enhanced bus services to be provided. These schemes are likely to include:-

- Upgraded traffic signal priority, including full integration with KCC's Urban Traffic Management and Control (UTMC) system to provide coordinated priority between Leybourne and Maidstone. This would assist in overall traffic terms as well as aiding bus service efficiency;
- Enhanced bus stop infrastructure, including raised kerbs to permit level boarding and new shelters where appropriate; and
- Real Time Passenger Information at principal bus stops.

To complement the above, Section 106 contributions secured for the pump-priming of bus services will be focussed on coordinated improvement and local diversion of Routes 71 and 72 which both use substantial lengths of the A20 corridor. Inter-urban routes such as these have the strongest prospect of achieving long-term financial viability as they provide relatively fast, frequent and direct links between principal centres and encourage bi-directional travel. Utilising these two established core routes would be considerably more effective in serving new developments than a series of ad-hoc extensions and/or support for secondary routes that are only just achieving commercial viability.

A distinct but highly complementary component of the MVSTS is the planned remodelling of the West Malling Station forecourt. A master plan for this project was adopted by the Joint Transportation Board (JTB) in April 2004. This set out at a conceptual level a scheme to radically improve multi-modal access to the station, including safe pedestrian access to the station building from nearby car parks, bus stops and non-motorised routes; access arrangements and layover space for buses and taxis; and 'kiss-and-ride' facilities.

Representatives from KCC, TMBC, Southeastern, Network Rail and local bus companies have since been working to promote the station forecourt remodelling project and have recently agreed a brief for design work, which will be commissioned by the end of 2011. This will involve transforming the broad outline concepts into firmer detail and, crucially, identifying a firm budget estimate for the project. This is important because there is no defined funding for the scheme beyond the agreed Section 106 contribution from the Leybourne Grange development. A wider partnership with the developers of the major sites in the area will therefore be essential.

Strong and effective partnership working between KCC, TMBC and local bus operators will be crucial to the longer-term sustainability of the public transport enhancements proposed in this paper. Given the scale of these enhancements, a formalised and enforceable partnership agreement is recommended, to ensure that specified quality standards on the A20 corridor are maintained and to protect the investment made by each partner. Potentially the most appropriate model available is a Statutory Quality Partnership Scheme (QPS); the powers for which were introduced by the Transport Act 2000. Under a QPS, the local transport authority agrees to implement improved infrastructure ('facilities') at particular locations along specified bus routes and operators wishing to use these facilities commit to provide services to an agreed standard. Only those operators which are prepared to meet the quality standards specified in the Scheme are permitted to use the facilities. However, there are also clear safeguards in place to ensure that unreasonable conditions are not imposed on operators and that their right to a fair commercial rate of return on investment is not compromised.

This revised approach to the delivery of the public transport aspects of the MVSTS offers clear benefits to all parties, including:-

- Effective use of Section 106 developer contributions which might otherwise be lost;
- Increased likelihood that those bus services to which Section 106 contributions are applied become or remain commercially viable at the end of the period of pump-priming;
- For KCC and TMBC, the opportunity to develop a high quality bus corridor offering integrated ticketing, regular interval services, low-emission vehicles and, potentially, savings to the supported bus budget, through the incorporation of the tendered Route 58 and 70 services into the A20 network;
- For operators, a degree of certainty that effective measures to enhance the quality and reliability of bus services will be implemented and that any complementary investment made in service quality will not be undermined by another operator running services to a lower standard immediately ahead of theirs; and

- A contribution towards achieving the objectives and targets of the draft Air Quality Action Plan for the Borough and particularly for the AQMAs declared for parts of Ditton, Larkfield and Aylesford.

Annex 1 – Medway Valley Inter-Urban Bus Route Maps



