

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Background

- Kent County Council (KCC) currently commits around £5.7m of net revenue per annum to supporting local bus services which are not provided commercially. These are largely catering for people living in rural areas and to enable services to operate in off peak periods. The objective of the 'Big Conversation' was to gather and evaluate service users', residents' and key stakeholders' input on the future delivery of rural bus services.
- This document is a Management Summary of key findings from the Consultation. A full written report is available at www.kent.gov.uk/bigconversation or on request.
- A summary of the three ideas described in the Consultation document are as follows:
 1. 'Feeder Service' - Using either a small bus or a taxi to provide a service which would connect rural communities with an existing commercial bus service for the onward journey.
 2. 'Bookable bus service' - A service which would collect passengers from designated points within a community and could be used to access a range of destinations in a given area. Passengers would book the service.
 3. 'Taxi-style bus services' – KCC makes significant use of taxis as part of its network of home to school transport and there is an opportunity to make greater use of these vehicles. Instead of a bus or as a new transport link, there could be a taxi-bus - a smaller vehicle, such as people carrier or minibus. The taxi-bus would run to an agreed timetable and route and would stop at agreed points in each community it serves.

Methodology

- The Big Conversation Consultation was launched on 13th June 2018 for an eight-week period. Consultees were invited to submit their views on the proposals via a questionnaire, (online and hard copies), or at 12 Public meetings held across Kent. Parish meetings with Parish, Town and District Councillors were held in for locations, as well as 3 deliberative sessions with a targeted sample of Kent residents. Market engagement was undertaken with bus, taxi and community transport operators prior to the Consultation, which in conjunction with Public Transport helped develop ideas.
- The Consultation was promoted in the following ways:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on KCC's website, including a banner on the homepage; • Promotion on KCC's Facebook and Twitter; • Leaflets handed out at local bus hubs across the county; • KCC press release resulting in coverage in local newspapers and radio; • Targeted advertising on social media; • Community notice boards, Healthwatch Kent and Kent Association of Local Council's newsletters; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emails to key stakeholder organisations; • Email invites sent to c4,000 individuals registered on the KCC Consultation Directory; • Documents and posters available at KCC Libraries and Gateways; • Posters displayed at rural bus stops; • Banners posted outside the 12 public meeting community venues; • Messages on road-side electronic signs.
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Key Point Summary from the Questionnaire Responses

- In total, 2,329 people completed a Consultation questionnaire; with 1,887 completing online and 442 completing a paper copy, of which 16 of these were via the Easy Read version. Just under three quarters (73%) of Individual Consultees noted that the availability of public transport restricts the places they go, suggesting existing provision doesn't meet current needs. This increases to 77% of Consultees living in rural areas. Rural areas have been defined using Rural-Urban Classification created by the Office of National Statistics for Local Authority Districts.
- A timetabled service that takes you where and when you want to go are the most important factors in a rural bus service. Relative price to a taxi is more important to those aged 24 and under, whereas a timetable and transport links are more important to those aged 65 and over.

- Levels of likely use range from 52% likely for 'Idea 1 – Feeder Service', 46% likely for 'Idea 3 – Taxi-style bus services' and 39% likely for 'Idea 2 – Bookable bus services'. Appeal increases for all three ideas amongst those living in rural areas (but not significantly). Appeal is highest for those living in rural hamlets and isolated dwellings and current taxi users.
- There are a number of key issues put forward with each idea:

Idea 1 - Feeder Service	Idea 2 – Bookable bus services	Idea 3 – Taxi-style bus services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connection needs to be guaranteed / needs co-operation of other operators. The frequency of the feeder service must be / at suitable / range of times/ routes. Determine best solutions to minimise extended journey times. Make the transition between buses as smooth as possible to minimise concerns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mindset change of booking versus a timetabled service. Confirmation of how flexible users will need to be for pickup and arrival times. Determine best solutions to minimise extended journey times. Capacity / planning concerns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity / planning concerns. Potential cost to the user. Difficulty in access for specific user groups, e.g. those with buggies / wheelchairs.

Key Point Summary from the Public Meetings

- All three ideas for the future delivery of rural bus services in Kent held a degree of acceptance from the meeting attendees; all having different opinions. However, primarily the acceptance was based on the concept that 'something was better than nothing'. What was also clear from the public discussions was that the solution for rural transport was not a 'one size fits all'. Many Kent residents saw the solution as a combination of the three ideas outlined at the meetings and this was largely dependent on area.
- There were a number of key issues with each idea put forward and these tended to have key themes across the three ideas, which are outlined below:

Idea 1 – Feeder Service	Idea 2 – Bookable bus services	Idea 3 – Taxi-style bus services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliability of adjoining service. Issues of changing buses – disabled, elderly. Overcrowding concerns. Safety concerns (left on bus/side of road/having to stand). Cost of the fare. Journey time/distance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elderly, vulnerable, disabled, those in poverty being able to access IT/Web/apps. Overcrowding concerns. Safety concerns (having to stand). Timings: Evenings & weekends. Room for disabled, buggies, shopping trollies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Room for more than one disabled traveller? Room for buggies, shopping trollies, rollators. Overcrowding concerns. Safety concerns (having to stand). Will any be available at school run times?

- Views regarding a concessionary charge were mixed, with some Senior Citizens Bus Pass holders adamant that they would not pay extra (despite having no service currently) to use the suggested services; others were more willing to pay a small charge if it meant they had a service where currently there was none.

Key Point Summary from the Parish Sessions

- Parish representatives used the words: Reliable; Frequent; Flexible; Affordable; Punctual / Timely; to describe what a ‘good bus service’ looked like, as well as operating in off peak periods. All similar to other views collected.
- As with the Public meetings, all three ideas for the future delivery of rural bus services in Kent appealed to some degree and there was a sense of ‘something was better than nothing’. Many Parishes suggested combining solutions and adding local activities in the form of community transport or car share type approaches into the mix as a potential solution going forward to be as collaborative as possible.
- Parish representatives were asked how they could help, and many suggestions were made such as; volunteer drivers; community buses; helping create links to GPs, hospitals and helping to identify hubs; providing some part funding and helping to promote any new rural bus services.
- There were a number of key issues put forward with each idea with consistent themes apparent;

Idea 1 – Feeder Service	Idea 2 – Bookable Bus service	Idea 3 – Taxi-style bus services
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliability of adjoining service • Not enough room for mobile impaired / issues of changing buses – disabled, elderly. • Concerns left on roadside if bus is late. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elderly, vulnerable, disabled, those in poverty being able to access IT/Web/apps. • Would this be cost effective even for one person? • Length of journey time. • Concerns over sharing small vehicle with strangers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sounds like a door to door service? Can this be a bookable service? • Difficult for those with mobility issues/or pushchairs • Overcrowding worries/ not being able to get on. • What happens at school pick up when these taxis are needed.

Key Point Summary from the Deliberative Sessions

- Attendees used the phrases; Prompt reliable service; Positive on-board experience (clean bus, polite driver); Good information provision (timetables); Space provision (room for wheelchairs, prams and buggies); Affordable; Safe; Punctual, to describe what a ‘good bus service’ looked like.
- As with both the Public and Parish meetings, all three ideas presented for the future delivery of rural bus services held appeal. Again, the concept that ‘something was better than nothing’ was a key driver to assess these schemes for use in individual communities. It was also clear again that the solutions for rural transport were not ‘one size fits all’ and feedback suggested that a combination of some or all three of the approaches would be best, dependent on the community and area.
- Once again, there were a number of key issues with each idea put forward and these tended to have key themes across the three ideas, all similar to the issues raised in the Public and Parish sessions;

Idea 1 – Feeder Service	Idea 2 – Bookable Bus service	Idea 3 – Taxi-style Buses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliability concerns of adjoining service; • How and where are tickets purchased? • Issues and difficulties of changing buses – disabled, elderly, vulnerable or mobility-impaired; • Concerns over what happens if feeder or main bus breaks down; • Concerns over insufficient space for buggies, prams, wheelchairs, etc.; • Longer journey times. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some residents may have issues in accessing IT or internet, using the technology or be in digital poverty and hence unable to access booking; • Perhaps overcomplicated to book for some; • Concerns over insufficient space for buggies, prams, wheelchairs, etc.; • Concerns over potentially longer journey times; • Potential safety concerns (anti-social behaviour / alone with strangers on buses). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns over availability at peak school times; • Concerns over insufficient space for buggies, prams, wheelchairs, etc.; • Potential safety concerns (anti-social behaviour/alone with strangers on buses); • Concerns about overcrowding and not enough room to get on.

- Attendees of the groups felt that fares for these services should be affordable and pitched somewhere between a bus and a taxi fare. For feeder buses a fare of £2 seemed to resonate with most, although some residents with no service would pay up to £4 – however, younger respondents would only pay £2. People that had no service (as it had been cut) felt that any new service being introduced in their area should be free. Those with a Senior Citizens Bus Pass expressed mixed views about whether they would pay a small charge.

Overall findings

- Overall, a timetabled service that takes you where and when you want to go are the most important factors to Consultees in a rural bus service. This was supported by deliberative session feedback in what constitutes a ‘good bus service’. Overall, the key factors were a reliable service, a frequent service, a flexible service, affordable fares, punctual / timely arrivals and or departures, safe journeys, polite drivers and a service that operates evenings and weekends.
- Of the three ideas tested in the Consultation questionnaire, ‘Idea 1 – Feeder Services’ held the most appeal, particularly for those living in rural hamlets and isolated dwellings, defined using Rural-Urban Classification created by the Office of National Statistics for Local Authority Districts. The deliberative sessions showed a mix of preferences; with some residents feeling ‘Idea 1 - Feeder Services’ was the solution for their community and this tended to be smaller, less dispersed communities that were relatively near a main bus service, also supporting Consultation questionnaire feedback. Communities more dispersed and perhaps less near to a bus stop felt that ‘Idea 2 – Bookable Bus Service’ might suit their community better, particularly those with mobility issues. The concept of ‘Idea 3 – Taxi-style bus services’ appealed to those who live rurally as having smaller buses on the roads reduced congestion and benefitted the community. All elements of the Consultation feedback streams referenced concerns regarding safety, overcrowding and the service being unreliable at school drop-off and pick-up times.
- The benefits raised across the Consultation were very similar in their nature. All the ideas were considered a good solution for those who were without or had lost a bus service. The smaller buses on the roads were perceived as safer (for pedestrians in rural areas) more economical and more environmentally friendly. Some believed that having these services might also ‘reconnect communities’ providing a tool to help to reduce isolation and loneliness.
- A key finding of the Consultation was the need for many residents to be able to get to a hospital appointment easily and on a fairly direct route, as for some, just getting to these appointments took hours. Many residents asked for direct services to hospitals or GPs, or to Hubs such as large supermarkets or Park and Rides. There was concern regarding the future of GP surgeries and their locations being increasingly less accessible, with concerns that transport links to GP surgeries would not be available.
- There was also a very strong desire from many residents without a current off-peak service, to actually have an off-peak service. This was considered essential, both for social occasions and also for people to be able to return home in the evening. The suggestion was that this did not have to run every night; but perhaps Thursday to Friday would suffice and also attract the youth market to use the evening buses.
- With any idea proposed, widespread publicity is required to ensure that all age groups are aware of any new services to promote and encourage trial and use. There were a variety of suggestions from residents regarding the different methods of getting the message out there to the community about these schemes. It was interesting to note that younger Kent residents suggested posters, bus advertisements and social media but also made suggestions of ‘free trips’, such as first two trips free’ for Idea 1 (Feeder Services) or Idea 2 (Bookable Bus Service) as this would prompt them to try the scheme (this idea was very well received). Local Consultation is important in the setup of any new idea / pilot put forward to ensure it is relevant to the potential needs of users. It will also be a significant challenge to persuade non-bus users to use these new schemes rather than take the car. Feedback from the Consultation suggests promotion of the concept of the schemes being regular, reliable, convenient and cost effective will help to encourage use.
- At the Parish meetings (and also some of the Public meetings), there did appear to be a local appetite in some areas for community buses to operate, or new schemes to be created. The feedback suggested that there were many ‘hurdles’ that Parish Councils or communities found difficult to navigate and this often resulted in a scheme falling flat or falling at the last hurdle. The feedback was very clear that communities/Parishes would appreciate

and welcome more help from Kent County Council in setting up the schemes, sourcing the right vehicle, obtaining necessary paperwork and also sourcing reliable drivers. If Kent County Council could assist in the 'enablement' of these schemes, then the feedback was that it was very likely that many more community schemes would be set up and would look to work with the Council and local bus providers to provide a 'joined up' transport solution.

- With respect to any 'new ideas' emerging from the Consultation, only a few ideas were suggested, and these tended to be in key themes:
 - Use the money to subsidise (improve and extend) existing bus routes;
 - Kent County Council to create and run their own bus company (not legally permissible under the Buses Act 2017);
 - Kent County Council to operate a car share scheme and manage it;
 - Kent County Council to assist communities with setting up community buses – provide or part subsidise vehicle or driver etc.
- With respect to the level of fares for these services, there were very mixed views across the Consultation. Some residents who had no service at all (meaning that life was difficult as a result) would happily pay a fare to have a service and those with a bus pass in these areas would happily pay as much as £4 for a return journey to be able to access a type of transport. Others in certain areas, particularly those in more deprived areas, were much less likely to be happy to pay a fare. In some areas, residents were of the opinion that as their service had been removed they should be able to travel to a mainline service for free. In addition, those with bus passes in these deprived areas were adamant that they would not be prepared to pay anything extra for their journey. In areas where people were slightly more affluent, there was a distinct willingness to pay over and above a bus pass to be able to have a regular reliable service.
- The feedback across the Consultation with regard to the commercial bus providers in Kent is important to include, as many residents felt that the success of one of the new ideas (Idea 1 – Feeder Service) would be wholly dependent on the reliable provision of services by these providers. There was a consensus among residents and Parish Council representatives that these bus companies needed to be regulated, managed and controlled to a greater extent by Kent County Council and providers be made accountable for any poor service provided.
- Identifying the key reasons why people use their car over the bus is also important to note, with respondents in the sessions citing factors such as bus stops being too far to walk to, the bus service being unreliable, too much anti-social behaviour on the bus and the waiting / journey times as key issues. Addressing these directly may prompt some residents to use buses instead of their cars.
- Across the Consultation there was a great deal of consistency in responses with regard to the benefits of these services and also the concerns of these services. Kent County Council will need to address these going forward in the promotion of these services to encourage use. The issues by service idea are:

Idea 1 - Feeder Service

- The reliability of the main connecting service;
- Punctuality of the main service (kept waiting);
- Location of bus stops, for some elderly or less mobile it might be too far to walk;
- Increased journey time;
- Concerned about being left by the side of road if connection is late or bus full;
- What happens to passengers if bus is late or the feeder or the main bus breaks down.

Idea 2 - Bookable Bus Service

- Concerns of overbooking with smaller vehicles;
- Hard for some individuals to access if not IT savvy or suffer from digital poverty;
- Potentially complicated for some elderly or vulnerable to use;
- Expensive to use;
- The barrier to using amongst those wanting a timetabled service.

Idea 3 – Taxi-style bus services

- Reliability of taxi buses around school drop off/pick up hours;
- Capacity concerns in terms of volume and type of user, e.g. buggies or wheelchairs.

General concerns – across all three ideas

- The price of fares for those with low incomes;
- Use of smaller vehicles provide a perception of transfers being difficult for disabled, mobility issues, elderly or vulnerable to change buses;
- Concerns whether there is sufficient space for buggies, wheelchairs, rollators, trollies;
- Overcrowding concerns with small vehicles;
- Some elderly are concerned about having to stand, it's unsafe on smaller bus;
- Concerns about sharing a small vehicle with strangers;
- Concerns as to whether the ideas will work as described in the Consultation.