



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Tim Read
Kent County Council
Ashford Highway Depot
Henwood Industrial Estate
Javelin Way
Ashford
Kent, TN24 8AD

Sent by email only.

Reference No. HW41268

31 August 2021

Re: Kent Bus Service Improvement Plan

Dear Tim

I'm writing to respond to Kent County Council's engagement process on the new Bus Service Improvement Plan.

Please accept this letter as my response to the consultation.

I'm pleased to see Kent County Council is developing an Improvement Plan for our local bus service, following the publication of the Government's National Bus Strategy earlier this year.

As you know, the Government is investing £5 billion to overhaul bus and cycle links in every region outside London. I'm determined to help Kent get its share of this new funding.

Out of the £30 million of funding provided in 2020/21 to improve current bus services, and restore lost services, I'm pleased Kent County Council was allocated over £1 million in funding – another step in helping to deliver a better bus service locally.

I've long been a supporter of buses. They can help reduce congestion on our roads, improve air quality, and provide a vital lifeline for people. But I know services have been under pressure in recent years.

One area in particular that has suffered is rural bus services. These are particularly important as buses are often the only form of public transport that can connect villages with towns and local services, like hospitals. I would like to see a focus on the rural bus network in KCC's Improvement Plan. As part of this, I would like to see bus services that are sufficiently frequent and reliable to provide current bus users with better access and enable people to switch some car journeys to bus journeys.

There are some specific areas where constituents have told me the service needs to improve, such as services connecting Langley Park and Maidstone, Faversham and the William Harvey hospital, and between villages and centres of employment. I encourage KCC to listen to local people when developing routes and timetables for services. This should include consulting parish councils and local councillors as much as possible.

I previously supported KCC's bid for funding from the Better Deal for Bus Users fund. I recall this included a proposal for Super Bus Network in Maidstone. A Super Bus Network would help tackle congestion and air pollution in the town, and assist older people and those on lower incomes to travel more. I would be grateful for an update on the Super Bus Network and anything I can do to support this initiative.

It's also important that buses help to join up our local towns. The lack of direct rail routes between towns – e.g., no direct train between Maidstone and Faversham, or Faversham and Ashford, means buses are essential to give people more employment opportunities and an alternative to car travel.

I would like to see more express services, such as between Faversham and Canterbury, and between Maidstone and Ashford. These express services have worked well in other parts of the country, and they would help to connect towns across East Kent – helping to ease pressure on our roads and create more opportunities when it comes to looking for work or choosing a school.

Bus services also need to be better integrated with other forms of public transport, especially train services. It's really frustrating when timetables between different services do not match as it can have a huge impact on journey time. Ideally, we need an integrated transport strategy in Kent, which can help people make the most of our public transport network. An app and/or website with live travel information for both buses and trains would be a great help for local people.

A more integrated service is needed for commuters to help make travelling to work easier, but it is also needed to help our tourism sector. Frequent and well-timed bus services could enable more commuters to travel by bus and train, rather than relying on cars for the journey between station and home. Similarly, buses connecting train services to tourist destinations could help the local economy as well as reducing congestion. For example, improving bus services between Leeds Castle and local train stations would be extremely helpful – perhaps with a specific weekend and holiday timetable – which I know is already in place for some of our seaside towns.

Finally, it's important that the Improvement Plan looks to make bus fares simpler and cheaper. At present there are bus passes for young people travelling to and from school, or student passes which cover a specific town or the whole of the South East. I was recently contacted by a constituent in Faversham who has taken on a job in Canterbury and found that their journey did not qualify for any existing monthly or yearly passes. A bus pass that allowed travel between towns in East Kent would be a great help to local people. Ideally, some form of Kent travel card, as used by TFL for trains and buses, would be a great initiative for making journeys easier.

Improving our bus service is really important for local people and the environment. Making bus travel easier and cheaper will help get more cars off our roads – cutting traffic and air pollution. It's also vital for improving quality of life by helping people get to the shops, keep an appointment, or visit a friend.

I welcome the investment that the Government is putting into bus travel. I'll continue to work with KCC to make sure this benefits people in Faversham and Mid Kent.

If you would like any more information, or if it would be helpful to discuss any of the points in my submission, then please do not hesitate to contact me.

All best wishes,
Helen

Helen Whately MP