

Sittingbourne Area Committee	
Meeting Date	12 December 2023
Report Title	Kent County Council's Enhanced Bus Partnership, Local Focus Group
EMT Lead	Emma Wiggins, Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods
Head of Service	Joanne Johnson, Head of Regeneration, Economic Development and Property and Interim Head of Planning
Recommendations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Note the content of the report 2. Nominate a representation from the Sittingbourne Area Committee to sit on the Swale Local Focus Group 3. Feedback any bus related issues that can be raised at the first Local Focus Group end January/ beginning February 2024

1 Background

- 1.1 Kent County Council (KCC) used to manage and run Quality Bus Partnerships (QBPs) in each district. These consisted of KCC and Swale Borough Council (SBC) members, KCC and SBC officer reps, and the commercial bus operators in Swale. They were used to raise local issues, discuss planning applications that may have impact and any highway and / or parking related items. Whilst it was not a statutory requirement, it was resourced and administered by KCC. These meetings ceased to exist when Government started development of its National Bus Strategy.
- 1.2 In March 2021, Government launched its National Bus Strategy which was the blueprint nationally to help improve infrastructure, bus travel, air quality and so forth. £3 billion of funding was allocated and each area had to respond very quickly by developing a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). KCC sought input from districts (Swale did respond) and submitted its plan to Government with an ask of £230 million across the county for various scheme improvements.
- 1.3 In April 2022, KCC received an indicative allocation of £35 million from the Department of Transport (DfT). This was very prescriptive and mainly for capital schemes. There was no revenue funding allowed to keep existing projects going. The influence that districts can have over the BSIP and any spend of the funding is limited. Projects have already been identified by KCC in the BSIP.
- 1.4 KCC received £19m at the end of March 2023 to deliver a reduced set of initiatives within its BSIP. This included £100k of fare initiatives that were delivered over the summer county-wide (e.g. Big Kent Weekend) and also £2.5m of network improvements.

- 1.5 In July 2023, KCC were told they had received a further £16m to deliver BSIP initiatives for 2024/25.
- 1.6 As part of the funding, Government requires that each area (KCC) set up an Enhanced Partnership (EP). This is a statutory Board, without which KCC will not receive their funding. KCC have established their EP Board which is chaired by the Cabinet Member for Highways and Infrastructure at KCC. It is an officer-led meeting, high level and strategic. There are no representatives from districts. The bus operators do have representatives (including Chalkwell).
- 1.7 There are also EP Scheme Monitoring Groups set up for East Kent, West Kent and Kent Thameside. Swale is part of East Kent and has one place at that meeting. They are still developing and haven't met consistently as yet. KCC run and manage these meetings and it is anticipated these will run twice a year. They will be the group that monitors the schemes in that area linked to the BSIP.
- 1.8 EP Scheme Monitoring Groups will be high level and as such will not cover any local district issues. KCC feel that this will leave a gap. To fill that gap, KCC are suggesting EP Local Focus Group (EP LFGs) meetings be set up in each district. They are happy to send representatives but cannot resource it like they used to for the QBP and so are asking districts to set up and resource them. These are not a statutory requirement of the hierarchy.
- 1.9 KCC envisage that the EP LFGs are a replacement for the previous QBP meetings in that they are a way of local issues from the bus companies being raised. The idea would be that they are held every six months and be informal. A standard agenda would include local bus network issues and aspirations, planning and development updates, parking enforcement issues and any other items for Swale such as active travel and air quality. Representatives at these meetings will be district councils (leading and chairing the meetings), KCC Public Transport, KCC Planning and Transport Development, Primary Bus Operators, and district council officers from planning, parking, active travel, environmental health. They would be operational, and officer-led.
- 1.10 It has been agreed by Policy and Resources Committee to set up a Local Focus Group. That this is kept high level, meets twice a year and is managed by the Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods chairing and coordinating the group. KCC would lead on the updates on the BSIP at the forum. SBC would be a conduit, or enabler bringing partners together as opposed to leading or delivering any work directly. Then the resource pressure it is believed would be manageable. All attendees would be actively made aware, and reminded, of SBC's restricted role.
- 1.11 Given the interest locally in bus infrastructure, it is proposed that issues to be raised are requested from each Area Committee prior to the LFG, with feedback at each Area Committee after the LFG has met (twice-yearly).
- 1.12 It is anticipated that the first LFG meeting will be held end Jan/ beginning February 2024.

- 1.13 Given the focus on infrastructure in the BSIP, it is proposed that the Planning and Transportation Working Group is the conduit for any feedback into the council. Two members of PTWG will attend the LFG as member representation, as well as representatives from each Area Committee who can provide local voice.

2 Proposal

- 2.1 Note the content of the report.
- 2.2 Nominate a representation from the Sittingbourne Area Committee to sit on the Swale Local Focus Group.
- 2.3 Feedback any bus related issues that can be raised at the first Local Focus Group end January/ beginning February 2024.