

Free travel for 11-16 Year Olds

A report by the Head of Transportation and Development to the Highways Advisory Board on 4th March 2008

1. This report sets out the progress to date in the introduction of free travel for 11 – 16 year olds and describes a programme of implementation for additional pilot schemes in 2008 leading to a full Kent wide roll out in 2009.

Background

2. In September 2006, Kent County Council published “Towards 2010” (T2010) with an aspiration to introduce free travel for school children in secondary education aged 11 – 16.
3. In June 2007 two free travel pilot schemes called Kent Freedom were introduced in Tonbridge/Tunbridge Wells and Canterbury. Excellent press coverage was gained from the launch events.
4. The key policy aspirations of free travel for 11 – 16 year olds are:
 - A reduction in peak hour congestion.
 - Improved social inclusion through improved mobility of young people outside school hours.
 - Encouraging longer term use of public transport by young people.

Pilot Schemes

5. Two free travel trials were introduced on 4 June 2007 in Canterbury and Tunbridge Wells/Tonbridge. Over 5000 passes have been issued which is above expectation.
6. Additional bus capacity has been provided by bus operators in the pilot areas to cope with extra demand given that most existing service buses are full in the morning peak. Eight additional vehicles in each pilot area from 4 June ensured a seamless introduction of free travel providing sufficient capacity for the extra demand. This has been increased to 10 from the start of the September term. We have taken the approach of asking the incumbent operators to provide additional capacity, used on a flexible basis. This is the most efficient way of providing additional seats as trying to set up “competing” additional KCC funded services on commercially provided routes would undermine local bus networks and would be outside the free market spirit of the Transport Act 1985. We have received excellent support from the South Eastern Traffic Commissioner for this approach.
7. Detailed work has been undertaken on the usage of passes in the two pilots and the cost to the County Council in 2007-08 is estimated at £1.4m with a full year cost of £1.9m. In other words, the additional take-up has not directly translated to additional costs. The operators are reimbursed on the gap in their income as a result of the scheme on an open book accounting basis. This is largely income from students who previously paid a fare plus the cost of providing additional capacity.

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8. The Kent Freedom Scheme is very popular in Canterbury and Tunbridge Wells/Tonbridge. Initial results indicate a modal shift from private car movements to bus of 25% which is most encouraging. Impact studies on congestion are being measured and will be reported when meaningful results are available. There is evidence that students are using Freedom passes for travel at weekends and evenings which was a key aspiration of the Kent Youth Forum. Students also have the travel flexibility to use after school clubs which has been greatly appreciated by a number of correspondents.

The Future

9. At the meeting of Cabinet Scrutiny on 12 December 2007, the Committee asked that 'the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste be requested to announce as quickly as possible the areas to be covered by the extension to the existing Freedom Pass Pilot Schemes in June 2008'. An early decision was also necessary to enable bus operators to prepare for additional resource required.
10. Cabinet has now approved the phase two roll-out for June 2008. Freedom will be extended to all secondary schools in the remainder of Tonbridge and Malling District plus the District areas of Maidstone, Shepway and Dover. The District areas of Swale and Thanet will be added in January 2009 with the remainder in June 2009.
11. This roll-out programme reflects discussions with bus operators and the fact that it is not possible to introduce a countywide scheme at the same time. Acquisition of buses and drivers is a key driver in this respect.
12. Concern has been expressed by some Members about the fee of £50. Evidence suggests, however, that there has been no adverse reaction to this charge with many recipients praising its excellent value for money. This charge will be retained in 2008/09.

Financial Implications

13. In 2008/09, the County Council has allocated £5.5 million for the Freedom scheme which will enable us to introduce the additional schemes that have been identified in paragraph 3.1.
14. There has been considerable discussion about the inclusion of rail in the countywide roll-out of the Freedom scheme. There are sound arguments not to include rail and the operator South Eastern remains unenthusiastic about participating. If rail is not included, this will reduce the potential revenue burden by an estimated £1 million per annum.
15. Once free travel has been introduced on a countywide basis, it is recommended that the home to school transport mainstream and Freedom budget are administered from one source to ensure that financial and procurement efficiencies can be met.

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Smart Cards

16. Greater accuracy of the usage of Freedom passes could be achieved through the introduction of smart cards. Such cards could also be used for a range of other purposes such as libraries and school meals. A barrier to this in the past has been the price of on-bus readers which cost around £1000 each. With 800 buses operating in Kent, the capital cost of implementation would be high. Stagecoach and Arriva have indicated that their groups are investing in a new design of ticket machine which included a smart card reader. There may be a willingness to allocate these machines to Kent but some capital pump-priming would be required. Discussions are being held with operators to explore the feasibility of new ticket machines with smart card readers, the timing of the change and the potential costs of implementation.

Conclusions

17. The introduction of the Kent Freedom scheme has been successful and well received. A decision to extend Freedom in June 2008 to include the remainder of Tonbridge and Malling, Maidstone, Shepway and Dover has been taken and arrangements are being made for this to happen. The introduction of smart cards would be highly beneficial in operational and monitoring terms.

Recommendations

18. Members note the success of the Freedom scheme and the arrangements for a further roll-out in 2008 and 2009.

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