
Thanet Loop Improvement Project – Scheme Update

To: **Thanet Joint Transport Board, 21 March 2024**

Main Portfolio Area: **KCC – Growth, Environment and Transport**

By: **Director of Highways and Transportation**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Ward: **Eastcliff, Cliftonville West, Northwood, Salmestone, St Peters**

Division: **Ramsgate, Margate, Broadstairs, Cliftonville**

Summary: **This report introduces the Thanet Loop Improvement Project and provides an update on recent public consultation for associated parking restrictions and highway changes.**

For information and recommendation

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report introduces the Thanet Loop Improvement Project and provides an update on work carried out to date, specifically recent public consultation feedback. The scheme is part of the wider Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) programme of initiatives. Further information on the history of Kent's BSIP is contained in a previous report to KCC Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee on 14 September 2023.
- 1.2. In March 2023, in response to Kent's BSIP Government offered KCC £18.9m of funding to deliver an accelerated delivery programme. This funding has been subject to standard DfT processes for assuring value for money from local transport schemes; including written confirmation from KCC section 151 officer that the programme constituted value for money.
- 1.3. Through Kent's BSIP, the Thanet Loop Service had been identified as a key area for improvement, with the potential to deliver significant operational benefits and subsequent service improvements for passengers. As such the exploration and progression of the initiative formed part of KCC decision 23.00027 when accepting the funding. This work has subsequently progressed in the 23/24 financial year.
- 1.4. The Thanet Loop Improvement Project is proposing a package of multiple interventions targeting journey time improvements on the route of the Thanet Loop bus service which connects Margate, Westwood, Ramsgate and Broadstairs. As well as reducing journey times, the other project objectives are to improve reliability, accessibility, and passenger experience.

2. Background

- 2.1. The Government published the National Bus Strategy (NBS) in March 2021 which set out an ambitious vision for bus services and related bus infrastructure provision across the country. Kent County Council (KCC) and all other local transport authorities were required to produce

Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP) to demonstrate how they would deliver the requirements and aspirations of the strategy at a local level. KCC submitted its BSIP in October 2021 and in April 2022 received an indicative allocation to deliver initiatives within it. There was a further wait until a formal funding offer was provided, which saw the Government offering Kent £18.9m of the total funding in March 2023 to deliver an accelerated initiative programme in the 2023 - 24 financial year.

- 2.2. The funding was offered on the basis that its use would reflect the requirements of the NBS; one of which was that the funding would be utilised to deliver bus priority projects which unlocked reciprocal operator benefits. This is a principle which runs throughout the NBS and is essentially looking for LTAs to provide improved infrastructure for bus in order to unlock improved journey times. The idea is that this not only creates quicker services for bus users but also allows commercial operators to re-invest savings in vehicle requirements back into the network, thus further improving the offering to bus passengers and improving the attractiveness of the service. This is in effect the meaning of the “Superbus” model, with DfT wanting to see this applied to services which are already well performing and which as such can therefore see the biggest benefits in terms of the number of benefiting passengers.
- 2.3. The Thanet Loop service was identified as a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) priority project following an analysis of passenger numbers, congestion hotspots and operator feedback. It was prioritised for National Bus Strategy (NBS) funding due to its potential to encourage reinvestment from its service operator.
- 2.4. The Thanet Loop service is one of the most utilised bus services in Kent, and significantly contributes to the high level of bus patronage in Thanet. The service generated 3.26 million passenger trips in 2023; equivalent to roughly 10,000 passenger trips per weekday. The Loop patronage is comparable to passenger loads observed in successful bus services in London. Therefore, any improvements to the reliability of this service would benefit a large number of users.
- 2.5. The service operates at a high frequency all week and is of key importance in increasing regional connectivity to those who use public transport as their main form of transport. A third of the Loop users use concessionary fares, including 10% of passenger trips validated using a disabled person’s bus pass, 21% using an older person’s bus pass, and 2% using a scholar’s bus pass.
- 2.6. Currently, congestion and pinch points on the route around Thanet reduce the reliability of the service and the ability of the bus operator to introduce service frequency increases.

3. Scheme Overview

- 3.1. After the Thanet Loop service was selected as a BSIP project, work has been undertaken to develop a package of highway interventions to improve journey times and reliability of the service, as well other objectives to improve bus stop accessibility and passenger experience. The bus operator for the Thanet Loop service has committed to reinvesting potential journey time savings back into the route network, with an intention to increase bus frequency as the scheme progresses. This will improve the service offering to both existing and future bus passengers and increase the attractiveness of the route.
- 3.2. An appraisal of the highway network and analysis of bus journey times was undertaken to identify areas where congestion impacted the bus performance. Possible schemes were identified after considering several factors which included bus service reliability statistics and the

vehicle tracking movements of buses within the existing highway network. Due to the short funding period, early optioneering work separate potential schemes into groups. Given the short timescale, more complex schemes which required land acquisition were not able to be considered for this phase of the project.

- **Group 1: Less Complex Schemes.** Small-scale schemes/ interventions containing minimal design or modelling requirements which do not impact junction operation. These schemes largely consist of bus stop accessibility improvements and parking restrictions to allow for small improvements to bus dwell time and overall journey time.
- **Group 2: Moderately Complex Schemes.** Feasible schemes which can be implemented without significant engineering or stakeholder challenges but would require traffic modelling. These schemes will be likely to impact on junction performance.

3.3. Direct feedback was also sourced from the bus operator, using information collated from their drivers who regularly travel this route and have a good understanding of current issues. A number of locations provided in the list of problem areas from the operator have been reviewed and included in the package of Group 1 schemes. Liaison has been ongoing, and the operator has been involved in the development of Group 2 schemes and some of their feedback and suggestions have been incorporated into the design development.

3.4. Schemes identified for Group 1 largely consist of bus stop accessibility improvements and parking restrictions to allow for small improvements to overall journey time through improvements to average speed or reductions in the time taken to service stops.

3.5. As part of Group 1, several locations on the road network have been identified as having a negative impact on bus access. It has been determined some of these would benefit from additional parking restrictions to manage the presence of parked vehicles which often impede efficient operation of the bus route. Many of the proposed areas for parking restriction are located close to road junctions and traffic islands. These are areas where parking can create an increased risk of vehicle and pedestrian safety issues. There are also several locations where inconsiderate parking regularly occurs on existing white hatching road markings, which is intended to discourage parking and blocking of pedestrian routes. There are also several locations where parking impedes the flow of traffic or the ingress and egress of buses at bus stops.

3.6. Additionally, as part of the Group 1 scheme identification, four bus stops on the Thanet Loop bus route have been identified as having a negative impact on bus and passenger access and where there would be benefit in making improvements. As a result, proposals to build out the kerb at four bus stops have been developed to enable streamlined movements for the buses at these stops and better access for passengers to board and alight.

3.7. Each of the changes being proposed as part of Group 1 will each generate time savings, and due to the regular frequency of the service, the total journey time savings over a day/ week will be significant. There are multiple areas of new parking restrictions being proposed, and whilst in isolation each section of yellow lining would generate a small time saving for buses, collectively these will provide meaningful improvement and a better passenger experience. It is also noted that other local bus services which use the same parts of the network where interventions are being proposed will also benefit from reduced journey time and better reliability.

3.8. To determine the most beneficial Group 2 schemes to progress with, feasibility, options assessment, and traffic modelling work was carried out. This exercise showed which were the most viable schemes to take forward for early design work. The result at the end of the feasibility and preliminary design stages, is that one scheme emerged as being viable for

delivery as part of this project and showing positive junction modelling results to improve bus journey times. This scheme is exploring potential changes to the A254 Margate Road junction at the entrance of the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Hospital and an early-stage design has recently begun. This scheme will be subject to consultation when it has reached a suitable stage of development.

4. Traffic Regulation (TRO) Public Consultation

- 4.1. A public consultation for proposed changes to the Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) for parking restrictions and yellow box junction protection was open from 24th November until 18th December 2023. The proposals can be seen in the scheme drawings, included as Appendix A.
- 4.2. The proposed TRO changes are as follows:
 - Multiple areas of parking restrictions on the A254 Margate Road, Ramsgate, from the junction with Allenby Road and Pysons Road, to the junction with Woodford Avenue
 - A proposed 5m extension of existing parking restriction Maderia Walk, Ramsgate.
 - Three sections of parking restrictions on St Peter's Park Road, Broadstairs near St Joseph's Catholic Primary School.
 - A yellow box junction on the west side of the A254 outside the bus depot, south of Westwood.
- 4.3. As part of the statutory Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) consultation, an advert about the TROs were placed within the local newspaper. Over and above this statutory legal requirement, further communication was conducted by putting public notices out on site near proposed parking restriction location. Letters were also delivered to all properties located near proposed new parking restrictions prior to the consultation going live, to ensure residents and businesses were fully aware of the proposals. This included a letter drop to nearby properties along Margate Road. A page was setup on KCC's Let's Talk Page which provides information and plans on the proposals and where comments and representations could be submitted.
- 4.4. During the consultation period, 101 submissions in objection to the proposals were received and 28 submissions in support of the proposals. Two petitions were also sent to KCC opposing the proposed parking restrictions for Margate Road. The first contained 138 signatures and was received on 7 December 2023, within the statutory consultation period. The same respondent later submitted a second petition which contained 300 signatures on 23 December, which was outside the statutory consultation period but still considered by the project team.
- 4.5. The themes raised in the responses included objections based on the grounds of: parking near residential properties, impact on elderly and disabled residents, increased traffic speeds and associated risks to safety, displaced parking, negative impact on businesses, existing lack of parking restriction enforcement in the area, issues when receiving deliveries, requests for the funding to instead be used for highway maintenance, queries about how the parking restriction locations were selected.
- 4.6. All submitted comments were reviewed and a written response was collated in response to themes which had been raised in the objections, and is included as Appendix B. This was sent to all objectors on 2 February who were asked to confirm if they would like to uphold their objection by 12 February. Objectors were also asked to clarify if there were any particular TRO locations which their comments related to. A note was included in the written submission which asked that whilst not mandatory, to enable KCC to be aware of any residents with a blue badge who live near a proposed parking restriction, it was encouraged that anyone in receipt of a Blue Badge, or who has registered mobility needs, provided further information with their follow up

representation (including details of their specific residence). This was to enable such information to be considered and monitored by the project team. No further information was submitted on this matter by objectors. The information from the initial objections relating to this topic was captured.

- 4.7. After this secondary consultation process, 25 consultees requested that their objection be upheld. This included the respondent who submitted both petitions who requested that these both stand (including the petition submitted outside the statutory consultation period). Of these 25 upheld objections, 21 specifically mention Margate Road, and 4 do not reference a specific location. When submitting a TRO representation in line with the statutory consultation process, it is explained to consultees that an objection must explain the impact on traffic in the locality to be classified as being legitimate. Analysis of the upheld objections by the KCC Traffic Management Team determined that 6 objections were legitimate. Of these remaining objections, all 6 related to one or more of the proposed TROs on the Margate Road corridor.
- 4.8. The TROs on Maderia Walk, St Peters Park Road, and the yellow box junction by the bus depot received no valid objections. It is not possible to determine which of the specific proposed TROs on Margate Road the remaining objections relate to; and many of the comments were about the general objection to the installation of further parking restrictions on this corridor. Therefore, following JTB feedback, a recommendation about proposals on Margate Road will be prepared for the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport to make a decision on the scheme and TRO's.

5. Bus Stop Improvements Public Consultation

- 5.1. A public consultation for the proposed changes to four bus stops began on 20 February 2024 and will run until 12 March 2024. The locations impacted are Clements Road bus stop, Hare and Hounds bus stop, Wellington Crescent bus stop, Warwick Road bus stop. The proposals can be seen on the scheme drawings, included as Appendix B.
- 5.2. Letters were delivered to all properties located near the proposed bus stop improvements to ensure all residents were fully aware of the proposals and asking them to submit any comments to KCC. Laminated copies of the letter and proposed design were attached to bus stop flag poles at each bus stop to publicise the proposals further. At the time of this report submission (1 March) the consultation period was not closed so full details of stakeholder feedback are not available. However, at time of submission, the following objections have been received from local residents:
 - 0 objections about the Warwick Road bus stop
 - 0 objections about the Wellington Crescent bus stop
 - 1 objection about the about the Clements Road bus stop
 - 1 objection about the Hare and Hounds bus stop
- 5.3. Liaison with County and District Ward Members is ongoing, and their comments will be considered as part of the decision-making process.

6. Next Steps

- 6.1. The detailed design for the group 2 scheme began in February and will continue to develop the proposed scheme. A public consultation exercise and stakeholder engagement will be undertaken when the detailed design has been suitably developed.

6.2. The recommendation from the JTB in relation to the proposed TROs on Margate Road will be reported to the KCC Cabinet Member for Transportation. This will be taken into account when a decision on whether to proceed with proposed traffic orders is made.

6.3. The results of the consultation about the bus stop build-outs will be analysed and next steps will be planned.

7. Financial

7.1. DfT awarded tranche 1 funding to KCC for their BSIP in March 2023 with an initial spend deadline of 31/03/24. This was a challenging deadline for many of Kent's BSIP initiatives including the Thanet Loop Improvement project which was at a very early stage of feasibility. The approach of separating the project schemes into groups was taken in order to provide the best opportunity to meet the imposed deadline, for at least some elements of the overall project. KCC does however want to ensure that delivery of all parts of the scheme are in line with governance processes and fully take account of local views. As such KCC has been working with DfT to agree timeline extensions to the 2024/25 financial year.

7.2. As part of the reciprocal operator benefits, the Thanet Loop operator (Stagecoach) has committed to re-investing journey time savings that will be realised back into the network, pledging to increase frequency of the Loop to 8 minutes with scheme progression. Whilst plans to introduce this are currently underway, there is a strong reliance on the measures included within the Thanet Loop Improvement Project to make the increased frequency commercially sustainable in the longer term.

8. Legal implications

8.1. None.

9. Conclusions

9.1. There are many benefits to be gained through the introduction of the proposed parking restrictions which were subject to public consultation in late 2023. These include journey time savings for more than 3.26 million bus passenger trips per year, improved accessibility at bus stops, improved safety at junctions, increased frequency of service through the reciprocal benefits agreement, and improved customer experience. However, these are not popular with some local residents due to reduced levels of parking availability on Margate Road. While there are multiple locations where new parking restrictions being proposed within the A254 Margate Road corridor, there are still many unrestricted stretches of this road. The council considers that there are sufficient safe and convenient alternative parking opportunities within the surrounding highway network near the proposed restrictions to accommodate their introduction.

9.2. Kent County Council, like all Highway Authorities accept that parking will often occur on the highway, however it is important this is done without hindrance to the efficient passing and repassing of users, which is the primary function of the highway. There is no absolute right for parking within the highway network for road users, and the proposed parking restrictions are to support the primary function of the network.

10. Recommendations

10.1. It is recommended that the proposed Traffic Regulation Orders are made, and the proposed lining changes implemented.

10.2. It is recommended that the four proposed bus stop improvements as outlined in this report are implemented subject to consideration of stakeholder feedback received through the consultation.

11. Background documents

Appendix A – Thanet Loop Improvement Project - TRO Proposals

Appendix B – Thanet Loop Improvement Project - TRO Consultation Response Document

Appendix C - Thanet Loop Improvement Project - Group 1 Bus Stop Build Outs

Contact Officer:	James Wright, Project Manager, Kent County Council
Reporting to:	Tim Read, Head of Transportation, Kent County Council