
Thanet Loop Improvement Project – Scheme Update

To: **Thanet Joint Transport Board, 12 September 2024**

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

By: **Director of Highways and Transportation**

Classification: **Unrestricted**

Ward: **Salmestone**

Division: **Margate**

Summary: **This report introduces the Thanet Loop Improvement Project and provides an update on recent public consultation for proposed changes to the QEQM Hospital junction on A254 Ramsgate Road in Margate.**

For information and recommendation

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report provides an update about the Thanet Loop Improvement Project and highlights 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. This is in line with the National Bus Strategy's ambition to build on successful services, a term they refer to as Superbus. 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.

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 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.

3. Scheme Overview

- 3.1. After the Thanet Loop service was selected as a BSIP project, work was 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 committed to reinvesting potential journey time savings back into the route network by increasing bus frequency to 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 separated 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. Several locations provided in the list of problem areas from the operator were reviewed and included in the package of Group 1 schemes. Liaison has been ongoing, and the operator was also involved in the development of the Group 2 scheme with some of their feedback and suggestions being incorporated into the design.

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. These schemes were detailed in a previous report to Thanet JTB held on 21 March 2024.

3.5. To determine the most beneficial Group 2 scheme to progress, 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 involves changes to the A254 Ramsgate Road junction at the entrance of the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother (QEQM) Hospital in Margate.

3.6. As part of the reciprocal benefits agreement, Stagecoach have already invested in the Thanet Loop service. The service had been running up to every 10 minutes, but from 1 June 2024, after progress had been made on earlier stages of the project, Stagecoach increased the frequency to every eight minutes. The proposals at the QEQM Hospital junction will help to maintain the increased frequency levels in the future, through journey time savings.

4. Group 2 Public Consultation

4.1. A public consultation for proposed changes to the Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) and overall changes being proposed for the QEQM Hospital junction on A254 Ramsgate Road was open from 5th July until 29th July 2024. The proposals and scheme drawings can be seen in the consultation brochure, included in Appendix A.

4.2. The proposed changes for the QEQM Hospital junction and surrounding areas include:

- Alterations to the 'Lesters' northbound bus stop near Nash Court Road to make it easier for buses to pull in and out of the bus stop and improve passenger access.
- A new bus and taxi lane on Ramsgate Road on the southbound approach to the junction to allow buses and taxis turning into the QEQM Hospital to avoid the queue in the straight-ahead lane at the junction.
- Removal of the uncontrolled crossing outside Lesters Pub and Restaurant to accommodate the new bus and taxi lane.
- A new footpath link to help improve access for pedestrians to the south of the QEQM junction.
- A new left turn filter phase at the QEQM Hospital signalised junction to allow traffic to leave the Hospital junction earlier.

- On the northbound approach to the traffic signals, the right turning lane would be extended to enable buses, and other vehicles, to access the lane earlier, meaning that vehicles trigger the traffic signal detector in the road at an earlier point.
- Replacement of all traffic signal equipment at the QEQM Hospital junction to facilitate all the proposed changes at the signalised junction.

4.3. To enable the overall changes at the junction to be implemented, some TRO changes are proposed. These include several areas of parking restriction amendments on A254 Ramsgate Road and Ramsgate Road Service Road. These will result in a reduction of 3 parking spaces near Lesters Pub and Restaurant to the north of the junction and 9 parking spaces near Pilgrims Hospice to the south of the junction. The TRO also includes amendments to the existing yellow box junction marking and 2 bus clearways. A separate TRO was proposed for a new 70m section bus and taxi lane on Ramsgate Road on the southbound approach to the junction.

4.4. Traffic modelling was carried out to determine the potential benefits of any changes when developing the proposals. This showed that the proposed changes to the junction would make a significant improvement to journey times for the Thanet Loop Bus Service, as every bus travelling via this junction enters the hospital grounds. During the busiest time in the morning, modelling shows potential savings to journey times through the junction of 13.5% northbound and 43% southbound, while during the busiest time in the evening savings of 14.5% northbound and 16.5% southbound could be achieved. There would also be a benefit to users of the hospital as emergency vehicles (such as ambulances) would be able to move through the junction quicker without parked vehicles reducing available carriageway area.

4.5. As part of the statutory Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) consultation, a notice about the TROs was placed within the local press. Over and above this statutory legal requirement, further communication was conducted by putting public notices out on site near proposed parking restriction location. As part of the wider consultation there was significant further work undertaken to ensure that resident and stakeholders were fully aware of the proposals. Postcards advertising the consultation were hand delivered to over 900 properties within the surrounding area prior to the consultation going live. Other communication included updates to District and County Members, posters were put up on all Thanet Loop buses, updates were shared with key stakeholders, and a programme of social media updates were released by KCC. A page was setup on KCC's Let's Talk Page to provide information and plans on the proposals and where comments and representations could be submitted. A full summary of the consultation process is included in the Consultation Report included in Appendix B.

4.6. During the consultation period, 60 responses were submitted to the TRO consultation.

- Of these responses, 36 submissions were in support and 24 submissions were in objection to the parking restriction TRO proposals.
- Of these responses, 31 submissions were in support and 29 submissions were in objection to the bus and taxi lane TRO proposals.

4.7. 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 a legitimate objection. Analysis of the objections by the KCC Traffic Management Team determined that 0 submissions for the parking restriction TRO were classed as objections, so all 24 submissions were reclassified as comments. Analysis of the bus and taxi lane TRO objections determined that 1 submission could be classed as an objection, with the remaining 28 submissions were reclassified as comments

- 4.8. As part of the TRO statutory consultation process, all submitted comments were reviewed and a written response was collated in response to themes which had been raised in the objections. This is included in the Consultation Report in Appendix B. This was sent to all responders on 9 August, who were then asked to respond and confirm if they would like to withdraw their objection by 24 August. After this secondary consultation process, 1 consultee whose responses to both TRO consultations were classified as comments rather than objections requested that their submission be withdrawn.
- 4.9. While completion of the first part of the questionnaire relating to the TROs was mandatory for respondents, the second part of the questionnaire was seeking feedback on the wider junction proposals and was optional. This section of the questionnaire asked consultees for further information such as their means of travel to QEQM Hospital, their level of usage of the Thanet Loop bus service, and the extent to which they agree or disagree with each of the proposed changes on a five-point agreement scale, as well as a free text boxes for the opportunity to provide any other changes or improvements to the proposed scheme in their own words. The Consultation Report in Appendix B contains a full analysis of responses.
- 4.10. Of the individual changes put forward, support is highest for the following:
- A new controlled pedestrian crossing within the signalised junction to replace the existing uncontrolled pedestrian crossing – with 79% agreeing with the proposed change and 21% disagreeing.
 - A new footway link from Ramsgate Road to provide a connection to the new signal-controlled pedestrian crossing – with 72% agreeing with the proposed change and 19% disagreeing.
 - Extended right turn filter lane on the northbound approach to the signalised junction, to allow buses (and other traffic) earlier access to the lane – with 67% agreeing with the proposed change and 27% disagreeing.
- 4.11. Overall support for the remaining elements are comparably lower, namely:
- A new southbound bus and taxi lane to allow buses and taxis turning left into the hospital to bypass queues at the junction – with 52% agreeing with the proposed change and 42% disagreeing.
 - Changes to 'Lesters' northbound bus stop to improve bus movements and passenger accessibility – with 45% agreeing with the proposed change and 45% disagreeing.
- 4.12. Consultees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the proposed scheme as a whole on a five-point agreement scale in the optional second part of the questionnaire:
- 48% of those answering indicated they agree with the proposed scheme as a whole (27% strongly agree, 21% tend to agree).
 - 48% indicated they disagree with the proposed scheme as a whole (18% strongly disagree, 30% tend to disagree).
 - 3% indicated they neither agree nor disagree.
- 4.13. The themes raised in supportive submissions included improving traffic flow and safety, reducing congestion, improving safety, and improving the bus service. The themes raised in objections were around the impact on QEQM Hospital staff who park on the public highway rather than in the hospital grounds due to lack of permit eligibility or staff parking availability, concern from local residents that the new restrictions mean parking for QEQM Hospital will be displaced to residential roads, queries about how the new bus and taxi lane will operate, the perception that the proposals are unnecessary, and no improvements are needed to the bus service. There were also several submissions which mentioned the removal of an informal crossing point. A replacement signal-controlled pedestrian crossing facility is proposed to be introduced on the northern arm of

the QEQM Hospital junction, but for certain pedestrian routes this will increase the distance to travel of around 90m in each direction.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1. The recommendation from Thanet JTB in relation to the proposed changes for the QEQM Hospital junction on the A254 Ramsgate 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 and junction changes is taken.
- 5.2. The detailed design for the Group 2 scheme has been underway since February 24. The remaining steps in the detailed design process are currently being finalised. As part of this process, it may be necessary to alter and provide supplementary landscaping and tree planting on the highway verge opposite the QEQM junction to facilitate the new footpath connection.
- 5.3. If a decision is made to progress with the scheme, then ward members and stakeholders will be notified in advance of construction commencing. It is anticipated that phased delivery would take place between October 2024 to March 2025. All reasonable measures will be explored to reduce disruption to road users and the hospital during construction.

6. Financial

- 6.1. 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 worked with DfT to agree timeline extensions to the 2024/25 financial year.
- 6.2. The estimated construction cost for the proposed changes at QEQM Hospital junction is £469,000. However, cost estimates will be further refined once the scheme detailed design has been completed.
- 6.3. As part of the reciprocal operator benefits, the Thanet Loop operator (Stagecoach) 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. This was introduced by Stagecoach in June 2024, however there is a strong reliance on the measures included within the Thanet Loop Improvement Project to make the increased frequency sustainable in the longer term.

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1. None.

8. Conclusions

- 8.1. There are many benefits to be gained through the introduction of the proposed Traffic Regulation Orders combined with the overall proposed changes around the QEQM Hospital junction which were subject to public consultation in July 2024. These include journey time savings for more than 3.26 million bus passenger trips per year, improved accessibility at the Lester's northbound bus stop, increased frequency of service through the continued support for the reciprocal benefits agreement, and improved customer experience.
- 8.2. There have been a number of objections and comments not in support of the proposed changes. However, there has also been a high level of support. A significant proportion of the objections relate to the lack of existing parking with the QEQM Hospital grounds and how this will impact local residential parking. 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.
- 8.3. 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 and the layout changes being proposed within the scheme are intended to support the primary function of the network.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1. It is recommended that the proposed Traffic Regulation Orders are made, and the proposed changes to QEQM Hospital junction on A254 Ramsgate Road are implemented.

10. Background Documents

Appendix A – Thanet Loop Improvement Project - QEQM Hospital Junction Consultation Document
Appendix B – Thanet Loop Improvement Project - Hospital Junction Consultation Report

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