

STAPLEHURST PARISH COUNCIL

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION

MAIDSTONE INTEGRATED TRANSPORT STRATEGY

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Maidstone's Integrated Transport Strategy while well meaning in its approach to walking and cycling in reality offers no real solutions to the traffic congestion currently affecting the Borough. The Sutton Road (A274) and the A229 are already suffering severe traffic congestion. And the junction at the Wheatsheaf where these roads meet will become even worse given the volume of new houses currently being envisaged in the Emerging Local Plan. A fact brought out in the recent Inspector's decision to refuse the development of 220 houses in Boughton Lane, North Loose.

We particularly take issue with paragraph 11.21 headed Rural Service Centre junction modelling. This states that "modelling undertaken within Lenham, Headcorn, Staplehurst and Coxheath, indicates that key junctions within these RSCs and Larger Villages will continue to operate satisfactorily in future years, taking into account the additional traffic generated by Local Plan development sites, with mitigation measures implemented where necessary". We now know from subsequent investigation that in the case of Staplehurst this is factually incorrect. And if any mitigation was to be attempted it would involve narrowing pavements and doing away with an important crossing. This would prevent access for many residents and could in our view be potentially dangerous given that the road concerned is the A229, which is one of Kent's main North/South routes.

Pages 56 to 114 appear to be devoted entirely to walking and cycling. This seems to be rather unrealistic given that a significant proportion of the Borough is rural. No one disputes that as leisure activities these are important pursuits. However, to argue that these can be serious alternative means of transport for those living in rural areas, has not understood the practicalities involved. Many country lanes are narrow, have humped back bridges and speeding traffic while cycling on the A229 is hardly an enjoyable experience. There is an assumption that a journey up to four miles would be possible by bicycle; this is not feasible for many commuters in rural areas, especially in the middle of winter. In addition it should be remembered that despite the title Rural Service Centre, rural facilities remain severely limited and most residents have to use their cars to go shopping.

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The Integrated Transport Strategy appears to offer no real solutions to the additional traffic that will be generated by the number of new houses currently planned for the Rural Service Centres (circa. 700 for Staplehurst) and Larger Villages. Its strategy seems totally town centric as far as walking and cycling is concerned. We recognise that bus services remain severely under utilised. This is due to a number of factors. But again the Integrated Transport Strategy is weak on this subject. To state in paragraph 4.18 that Maidstone has a well established bus network ignores the fact that in rural areas the service is often very poor. The service is infrequent, uses older less reliable buses and a lack of real-time signage can leave residents stranded. It also makes no mention of any integrated bus/ rail strategy in the South of the Borough. For example, Staplehurst is on the mainline to Charing Cross and Cannon Street and is well used by commuters. Some commuters travel to Staplehurst Station from south of the village and make use of the bus. If the strategy is to encourage more people to use the buses then an essential part of this strategy must be to ensure bus services are properly integrated with the train services, which is not currently the case; and unfortunately no mention of this seems to be made in the Integrated Transport Strategy.

Poor road access into Maidstone from the South means that buses can be held up in traffic, which is now likely to get much worse. The provision of a dedicated bus lane would not be possible given the width of the A229. It is recognised that the percentage bus usage shown under paragraph 4.7 is very low. But, any improvements would require the cooperation of the bus operator and these would involve funding by the parties involved. We know from experience that this is not an easy option.

We understand that Kent County Council has expressed major reservations concerning Maidstone's Integrated Transport Strategy. We consider that as it currently stands it is very superficial and does not offer any real solutions to additional demands on the infrastructure generated by the significant numbers of houses envisaged in Maidstone's Emerging Local Plan.

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