



Bus Users response to the call for evidence – National bus strategy: one year on

a) The challenges facing the sector as it recovers from the pandemic and the effectiveness of steps taken by both Government and stakeholders in response

The bus industry, much like the rest of the country, is a long way from post-pandemic recovery. With the number of Covid cases still high, people are continuing to work from home and avoiding public transport in line with Government messaging. Bus services are running at roughly 80% of pre-pandemic levels across the country and if the stall in passenger numbers continues, the frequency and reliability of services will be severely impacted.

The problems have been exacerbated by increased operating costs resulting from rocketing fuel prices and pressures on staff recruitment, availability and wages.

Government financial support has been vital in keeping buses on the roads and ensuring essential workers can get to where they are needed. But operators are now facing likely reductions in local authority revenue support, reform of the Bus Services Operators' Grant and reduced reimbursement rates from the National Concessionary Scheme.

Many operators were quick to respond to the pandemic with innovative tech solutions that helped passengers plan their journeys and travel safely. They continue to offer initiatives to get people back on board but the market has been slow to recover. In light of these challenges, the current model for delivering bus services is unsustainable.

b) Progress against the ambitions and targets set out in the national bus strategy including the effectiveness, pace and priority of the strategy's implementation

Placing buses at the forefront of transport policy with a National Bus Strategy (NBS) was something the industry had long been asking for. Increasing access to more reliable, affordable and frequent bus services is an ambition shared by the industry and urgently needed by passengers and local communities.

Ensuring the strategy filtered down to local levels with the creation of Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) forced LTAs to examine local bus networks and question whether they were fit-for-purpose. Unfortunately, however, this proved to be a costly and time-intensive exercise, made worse by the lack of transport policy expertise at local authority level. This is clearly evidenced in the wildly differing BSIP proposals and supporting research, and their sometimes poor design and consultation.

The timescales have also been unrealistic. The expectation that measures can be delivered within months is simply not achievable given the regulatory framework within which highway authorities work. Even relatively straightforward improvements can involve Traffic Regulation Orders, public consultation, design and procurement. To achieve rapid delivery as the strategy requires, authorities have to work around their democratic processes which requires decisions to be made formally, with scrutiny and stakeholder involvement.

There is also a mismatch between the cost of what can be achieved and funding. This, coupled with the decision to financially support only new activity means implementation is a long way off, if at all.

There was always concern that the gap between metropolitan areas and rural areas would in fact widen as a result of the strategy and the uncertainty around budgets, funding and passenger numbers seems to support that.

Our 10 priorities for Enhanced Partnerships document (attached) highlights what Bus Users expects LTAs to be delivering as part of the NBS. To date, however, we have seen little evidence of this.

c) Innovation in the sector, including examples of new methods that have been trialled successfully

The pandemic forced operators to deliver services and information at a time of national crisis against a backdrop of ever-changing guidance from Government. Despite this, the industry responded quickly and effectively providing service information and real-time updates through various channels including mobile phone apps. Ticketing systems now allow greater flexibility than ever but the barriers to universal application have proven to be more institutional than technological. Many operators, for example, were allowing passengers onto their buses during the pandemic with return tickets issued by other operators; this sort of alliance should be welcomed and enabled.

The swift move toward digital information and ticketing has been broadly positive but has done little for passengers who are digitally or financially excluded. This tends to be a greater proportion of the bus travelling public so measures are needed to ensure these customers are not further marginalised.

There are now more zero-emission vehicles on the road, although primarily in urban areas and many regions have also been investigating how Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) could be used more effectively across their networks. DRT offers significant potential benefits but only when integrated with other services and by operating some commercial, timetabled services alongside community transport. Without proper funding and investment DRT will not only fail to achieve its potential, it will cease to exist.

d) Bus funding over the short and long term

The announcement a year ago that £3 billion would be made available for bus services was widely welcomed. Uncertainty has been growing, however, as to how much of that funding will still be available, and when LTAs are likely to receive it.

Despite the promises of the NBS, bus funding is in crisis with the prospect of fewer rather than more and better services. A combination of rising costs and depressed demand means that services are untenable in all but the busiest corridors.

An increasing number of services have been cut over the last ten years as LTA budgets have shrunk, with some counties no longer funding any socially necessary services. The NBS was widely expected to return of some of these services but that does not appear to have been the case. Even now, Kent County Council is consulting on a real-term cut of £3 million to its transport budget. If approved, this will see the majority of socially necessary and community transport services cut, leaving some communities without any transport whatsoever. This is more than a matter of providing an alternative to the car: it has a real and negative impact on people's lives, health and wellbeing.

Funding for new vehicles has been welcome, but the erosion of revenue funding has not been addressed and without it, loss-making services will be cut. New forms of funding and consistent revenue support need to be considered to avoid stagnation and future decline. Emergency funding will help operators recover from the pandemic but it cannot continue to be short-term, as the recovery is taking longer than expected.

Patterns of demand have changed, particularly for journeys to work, retail and leisure and they are unlikely to return to previous levels. There remains a fear of bus travel amongst older passengers following advice from Government during the pandemic. Public and Government messaging must now actively promote bus travel as both safe and sustainable.

e) Decarbonisation of the sector and modal shift from other forms of transport

Buses are the solution not only to meeting transport decarbonisation targets and reducing congestion, but to achieving the Government's levelling-up agenda. One of the most inclusive forms of transport they ensure everyone, including older people, people with disabilities and rural communities, can access life's opportunities through work, education, health services and leisure activities.

Transport policy needs to focus on sustainable modes including public, shared and active travel. That means investment in infrastructure and priority measures to make these forms of transport faster, more reliable and more affordable than private cars. It also means actively discouraging private cars with workplace parking levies and road pricing, to incentivise modal shift and make sustainable transport the most attractive and convenient option for everyone.

Conclusion

In 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson unveiled the most ambitious shake-up of the bus sector in a generation. The aim was to deliver lower, simpler flat fares in towns and cities, turn-up-and-go services on main routes and new, flexible services to reconnect the communities who depend on them. One year on and these ambitions are no closer to being realised.

With the cost of living rising and family budgets growing ever-tighter, cuts to fuel duty do nothing to benefit the millions of people either unable to drive or who choose not to for health or environmental reasons. In Germany, the Government's approach has been to provide a cheap and widely available monthly public transport ticket which will also help to meet environmental goals rather than working against them, as cuts to fuel duty do.

The ambitions of the NBS could still be achieved but it needs more time, expertise and funding before we are all able to reap the benefits.

About Bus Users

Bus Users campaigns for inclusive, accessible transport. We are the only approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body for the bus and coach industry and the designated body for handling complaints under the Passenger Rights in Bus and Coach Legislation. We are also part of a Sustainable Transport Alliance, a group working to promote the benefits of public, shared and active travel.

Alongside our complaints work we investigate and monitor services and work with operators and transport providers to improve services for everyone. We run events, carry out research, respond to consultations, speak at government select committees and take part in industry events to make sure the voice of the passenger is heard.

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