

BUS BACK BETTER - THE NATIONAL BUS STRATEGY:

Introduction

The Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers, ATCO, is the association for professionals in passenger transport working in local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales, predominantly outside London. Their responsibilities span a wide range of activities including co-ordination of public transport services, education transport, special needs transport for both schools and adult social care, provision of infrastructure from bus stops to bus stations, bus priority measures in conjunction with highways colleagues and more.

ATCO's membership is around 360 dealing with all land public transport modes, from car-sharing through taxis to bus and coach transport in all its forms and rail services in many cases. We are pleased to have this opportunity to submit the following notes for use by the House of Commons Transport Committee in its consideration of the Government's "Bs Back Better", the longterm National Bus Strategy

We heartily welcome the Government's initiative in providing the first comprehensive statement of bus strategy for decades. Possibly the last was "Workhorse to Thoroughbred" in 1999.

- The emphasis on partnership is pleasing. Covid may have had the hidden benefit of establishing or reinforcing close authority and operator working relationships throughout England.
- The emphasis on bus priority and the use of bus design, information and payment technologies facilitated by Bus Open Data is timely. This will bring all passengers faster, more comfortable journeys with flexible fares and the information to plan them and monitor progress.

But, although the strategy is strong on principles, it has weaknesses in a number of delivery areas:

Levelling up accessibility for all

- There is no specification of how access to bus services across England will be levelled up. Whilst in recent years London Buses has been the standard to which the rest of the country has aspired this aspiration is based on control of the network. Far more important in the London model are:
 - the use of PTALs (Public Transport Accessibility Levels) used to set the level of service to be delivered under contract in every part of Greater

London from rural villages at the outer fringe to the densely occupied residential areas and business centres in the inner core;

- performance based contracts to monitor and enforce the quality of service delivery which also provide a tool to highlight areas where improvement is necessary, whether in infrastructure or traffic management or operator performance.
- Across England, there should be minimum standards of service based on accessibility needs. These need to be set in the Strategy.

Changing the car-oriented mindset

- Ever since majority car ownership became a reality in the 1950s, many town and country planners and the politicians whom they serve have been wedded to the ideal that the car should provide more or less unfettered access anywhere, anytime. The results have been congestion, wasteful use of land for parking, environmental pollution and, in an increasing number of cases, air quality that is harmful to health.
- Correspondingly, the ethos of highway and traffic managers has been to maximise vehicle flows on the network, scarcely differentiating between the essential needs of communities for goods and servicing traffic and wasteful use of road space by low occupancy passenger cars. These problems are not significantly changed by the switch to electric vehicles to eliminate exhaust emissions. The problem of in-journey recharging will be added to road occupancy and parking.
- To deal with these car-oriented mindsets engrained in local political leaders, their planners and highways managers a fundamental “hearts and minds” campaign is required for senior politicians and officers. We shall return to this in considering the Centre for Excellence proposal.

Consequences of Austerity: loss of services and local authority skills and capacity

- A decade or more of austerity has applied to local authority spending. Discretionary services such as subsidised local services have been cut leading to a common complaint from elderly and disabled people that, whilst entitled to free bus travel for most of the day by the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme y, they have few, if any, services on which to use their concessions.
- Additionally, local authorities have economised in other ways. Staffing has been cut, departments have been merged so that frequently the Director in charge of a group of services has no direct knowledge or experience of

planning and procuring public transport. Furthermore, the officers dealing with those functions have often lost status as experienced staff have left, often to become better paid consultants providing services to local authorities, so that public transport may not even be represented directly in the senior management group.

- The groupings of functions are diverse too: in particular the highways management and public transport functions may lie in different directorates so there is no routine conversation or understanding of the deterioration in bus speeds and increasing variability of journey times.

The Centre of Excellence

- This is a superb proposal that should be welcomed by all concerned with better bus services. We suggest the following points should be addressed in setting up the CoE:
 - o Changing the mindsets of politicians and chief officers needs shorter seminar type events;
 - o For highway and traffic engineers the needs are both to change the mindsets and to build familiarity with tools to maximise people flows in the network;
 - o Local authority public transport officers need both to build skills in strategic design of networks to complement the operational skills of operators and also to evaluate public transport performance and initiate corrective action with the operators.
- The availability of professional qualifications, including those earned by Continuous Professional Development, may incentivise the rapid build-up and transfer of skills.
- The introduction of apprenticeships in both local authorities and operators may facilitate interchange of qualified staff during their careers assisting the efficient working of partnerships.

Timescales and Guidance

- Through no fault of the Department, publication of the National Bus Strategy was delayed. Even if there were no skills shortage completion of Bus Improvement Programmes by October 2021 would be challenging and practitioners suggest December 2021 or even March 2022 would be more realistic. The Department should be prepared to allow some elasticity in timescales.
- A key factor in taking forward the strategy will be guidance. This is promised but with no timescales. As an example, both authorities and operators have an urgent need for the new guidance on Enhanced Partnerships if they are to avoid taking uninformed decisions when

delivering their commitments to deliver EPs by the Department's June 2021 deadline.

Resourcing the Strategy

Replacing BSOG

- BSOG has certainly outlived its time and whilst modified to incentivise emissions reduction and adoption of new technology does not reflect the outputs expected from the New Bus Strategy. Unfortunately, a grant based on the distance run by buses offers little advantage over one based on fuel costs. The grant should relate to patronage and the community value that buses confer.
- The new Bus Passenger Support Grant should replace BSOG, and perhaps Concessionary Travel payments with a new social contract grant based on passengers carried and reflecting social and environmental benefits. All passenger transport providers including Community Operators would be eligible for this support. Concessionary travel would not necessarily be free, but a new scheme should include young, disabled and seniors.

The Recovery Phase

- At present there are considerable uncertainties around what will follow, hopefully, the full relaxation of the Covid-19 lockdown in June 2021. All of work, shopping, holidays and socialising will change with consequent impacts on the need to travel. It will take some time for stable patterns to emerge. Although there is a consensus in bus industry circles that patronage could return to 80% of March 2020 levels by the end of March 2023, surpassing pre-pandemic levels is unlikely before 2025.
- Whilst the commitment to continue CBSSG through 2021-22 is very welcome, the industry believes that this will not be sufficient to enable previous levels of commercial operation to be recovered and it would be prudent for the Government to establish a contingency for enhanced support in 2022-2023, perhaps as a discretionary extension to the grant that replaces BSOG.

The longer term

- Many have been disappointed that the National Bus Strategy does not include a 5-year spending programme, similar to the settlement periods for National Rail and the Strategic Road Network. The funding allocated does, however, run to the end of this Parliament in December 2024. Inevitably it will be insufficient in the view of both local authorities and bus operators but that is an enduring follow on discussion!

NOTE: This response represents the consensus view of officers in different councils and their professional associates and must not be taken as representing a consensus on behalf of the employing authorities.

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