

Written evidence submitted by the West of England Combined Authority (BUS0030)

Local background

The West of England Combined Authority is a mayoral combined authority, created in 2017, and it covers the areas administered by Bath & North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council and South Gloucestershire Council. It has a strong economy founded on highly skilled workers, dynamic clusters of businesses, and research centres that drive innovation.

The CA, its constituent councils and its neighbour North Somerset Council, have an enviable track record of working together to deliver major transport infrastructure, as exemplified by projects such as the Greater Bristol Bus Network, Bath Transport Package, Weston Package and metrobus. This investment was a contributory factor in the strong growth in bus patronage locally from 51.2 million journeys in 2009-10 to 72.3 million in 2018-19, in sharp contrast to the national trend of decline.

Prior to the pandemic, the CA and North Somerset Council developed a Bus Strategy that showed how a better route network could be operated within the available funding envelope. The Bus Strategy was adopted in June 2020 but, by that time, the pandemic had brought about a dramatic fall in patronage. Total bus patronage for 2020-21 fell to 22 million journeys.

Our Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) – produced jointly with North Somerset Council - sets out ambitious targets to:

- (i) reduce average bus journey times by 10%;
- (ii) ensure 95% of bus services run on time;
- (iii) return to pre-pandemic bus patronage by 2025 and continue to grow;
- (iv) increase bus passenger satisfaction; and
- (v) aim for all buses to be zero emission by 2030.

The BSIP is published on our website at: www.westofengland-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/transport/bus/

Items of specific interest to the Committee

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

Recovery in the West of England has consistently lagged behind the national trend. At the end of March 2022, bus patronage in the area had recovered to 76% of the equivalent period in 2019, compared to the total for England (outside London) of 83%.

The aftermath of the pandemic is that the trend of lifestyle changes such as more home working and more online shopping has accelerated, and those changes have been more pronounced in the West of England than elsewhere because more of our residents are able to work from home. Many office-based employers have embraced a hybrid way of working that requires their staff to attend the office between one and three days per week. Commuting on Mondays and Fridays is markedly lower than on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. This is a fundamental change in the pattern of demand for public transport.

Bus travel at weekends has recovered much more strongly – suggesting that leisure journeys have not been affected significantly.

The level of recovery of concessionary travel has been consistently lower than the overall level and is currently at 58% of the pre-pandemic level. This suggests a good deal of apprehension on the part of older people about travel on buses, and that may be a lasting legacy of the negative messages about the safety of travel on public transport that were disseminated by Government in Summer 2020.

The NBS (page 28) stated: *“Our goal is to get bus use back to what it was before the pandemic. Then we want to increase patronage and raise buses’ modal share. We can only do these things by ensuring that buses are an attractive alternative to the car for far more people.”* This statement underestimates the impact of lifestyle changes. They have brought about a permanent reduction in travel by pre-pandemic bus users. It will be necessary to raise buses’ modal share just to get back to pre-pandemic levels - let alone exceed them.

As our West of England Bus Strategy recognised, one of the major challenges to getting modal shift is the legacy of years of planning decisions that optimise access by car to the detriment of access by public transport.

A challenge for bus operators at the present time is the availability of drivers. Many short-notice cancellations have occurred as drivers have contracted COVID-19. Future expansion of the bus network will require more drivers. It will be necessary to improve pay and conditions, and to increase the ratio of spare staff to cover sickness etc. Inevitably, that will cause operating costs to rise but the offer of a more frequent, more reliable service should lead to an increase in patronage and revenue.

The steps taken by the public sector to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on bus services have been effective overall in preserving most of the pre-pandemic network. However, some of the decisions by Government to extend support have been made very close to the wire and that has made longer-term planning difficult.

At the present time, there needs to be a major promotional campaign to get modal shift onto the bus network. It was regrettable that Government gave out negative (and inaccurate) messages about the safety of public transport during Summer 2020. There must be a concerted effort now to dispel that negative perception.

b) progress against the ambitions and targets set out in National Bus Strategy including the effectiveness, pace and priority of the strategy's implementation;

The timeline set out in the NBS was challenging for local transport authorities but achievable. The delays in implementation have occurred because the Department for Transport has not been able to keep to its own dates. For example:

- Guidance on the content of Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) was not published until 13 May 2021 – two months after the NBS;
- Updated guidance on enhanced partnerships was not published until 1 July 2021;
- Initial bids by for City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRTSTS) had to be submitted by 17 September 2021, even though that the bulk

of that funding comprised the capital element of the BSIP bid (for mayoral combined authorities) – which was not due for completion until 31 October 2021;

- Awards of the BSIP bids – that were due to be made during February 2022 – had still not been made by 1 April 2022

The NBS set out an ambitious vision for buses, but the funding to implement it fully was inadequate – as many commentators remarked at the time of publication.

The assumption in the NBS of an easy recovery to 100% of pre-pandemic patronage was unrealistic from the start. It neglected to consider the impact of accelerated lifestyle changes, and the onset of the Omicron variant was unforeseen.

The NBS underestimated the challenge of getting bus operators to take a broader, more holistic view of the bus market and cross-subsidise those parts of the network that they had previously regarded as not commercially viable. This is a fundamental change in operators' business models and it goes against the longstanding interpretation of competition law in the bus industry.

Some of the commitments by Government in the NBS have not been met yet. For example:

- To consult in 2021 on the details of a modernised BSOG (page 48)
- To review eligibility for disabled people for concessionary travel (page 58)
- To look to digitalise the concessionary bus pass (page 58)
- To digitally transform the bus service registration process (page 58)
- A comprehensive review of PSV Registration Regulations (page 58)

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

The NBS (page 24) showcased our metrobus network as an example of success. It has been noticeable that patronage of metrobus services has recovered more strongly from the pandemic than other local bus services. An additional metrobus route is under construction, serving a new residential development in South Gloucestershire, and we will be incorporating some metrobus

features – where practical – in our general programme of bus corridor upgrades.

Our BSIP highlighted our experience in offering DRT as a solution to areas of low demand or dispersed population, and we continue to look for suitable opportunities.

Our area is one of the Future Transport Zones and we received £24m to develop innovative projects, including Mobility as a Service (MaaS) and Dynamic Demand-Responsive Transport. We aim to use the lessons learned from these projects to make a lasting difference to the local public transport network.

d) bus funding over the short and long term

Since the first lockdown in March 2020, the bus network has relied on public sector support as a lifeline to offset the fall in fares revenue. To supplement Government support through CBSSG and BRG, we have maintained reimbursement for concessionary travel at the pre-pandemic level. We welcome the Government's decision to extend support until October 2022 but there seems to be a disconnection between the need to maintain existing services until they recover and additional funding to enhance them.

We were advised that the bid for funding that accompanied the BSIP should not include any element to replace recovery funding, even though patronage and revenue may not have recovered. That raises the prospect that services will be cut when recovery funding runs out in October 2022 and that any new BSIP funding to enhance them will have to restore them from scratch. However, if services cease and passengers find alternative means of travel, it becomes much harder to attract them back.

In the longer term, we believe that public sector support will always be needed to some degree for provision of bus services – particularly with the level of service aspired to in the NBS. The high quality of bus services in London is highly reliant on the public sector support received by Transport for London.

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

We welcome the commitment of Government to decarbonisation and the associated funding it is making available.

The West of England CA has been awarded £500k by the Department for Transport to develop a Zero Emission Transport City (ZETC) pilot project in Bristol. This will show how a mix of zero carbon transport initiatives can provide efficient, affordable and accessible transport in the city centre. The initiatives include 250 electric buses and a new Park & Ride site on the corridor from the M4 motorway.

Our major bus operators (First Bus and Stagecoach) have made commitments at a national level to transition to a fully zero emission fleet by 2035 but we set an aspiration in our BSIP to achieve that for the whole local bus fleet by 2030. We recognise the difficulties faced by very small operators in reaching that target and we are committed to supporting them.

The NBS referred to the need to get modal shift but failed to endorse the use of demand management tools (such as congestion charging and workplace parking levy) by local authorities to achieve it. Such measures can be controversial and difficult for local politicians to promote, but they can be very effective – as shown in London and Nottingham. A strong steer and supportive words from Government would make it much easier to promote demand management tools at a local level, and local politicians would feel less exposed to accusations of being anti-car.

We are keen to make use of Key Route Network (KRN) powers and we responded to Government's consultation on that subject in 2021, but we are waiting to hear the outcome.

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