

## **Written evidence submitted by Buckinghamshire Council (BUS0045)**

Buckinghamshire is a largely rural county with a network of market towns. This is reflected in a bus network which is made up of urban and inter-urban bus services focused on our main towns and providing connectivity and accessibility within Buckinghamshire and to cities and key areas outside of the county. The majority of bus routes serving our rural communities run at lower frequencies and need local authority financial support to operate.

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

The challenges are huge with passenger numbers and fare income down. Government support has been positive, both through CBSSG and now BRG. These have allowed councils and bus operators to maintain most of the bus network in place up to now. We expect that the final BRG uplift will maintain services through summer 2022 but it is likely that passenger numbers and fares revenue will not have fully recovered when this funding ends. Putting in place a financially sustainable network after this point is likely to mean some lowering of service levels.

To address this and support the climate change agenda a national campaign led by government is needed to encourage bus use, similar to the promotion of rail travel. This will have a much greater impact than individual councils or bus companies could manage.

The admin process for CBSSG and BRG has caused problems with often short timescales to provide data which put pressure on council staff and our smaller bus operators. We are aware of at least one bus company who didn't claim for BRG because of the level of administration needed.

The extension of BRG into 2022/23 is very welcome but the late timing of the decision also created additional work and resulted in some service reductions that may have been avoided with an earlier decision.

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

This has been a difficult process to follow for councils. As was expressed by many local authority staff from the start, the timescales were too tight given all of the other issues happening. This has resulted in council staff and stakeholders putting a large amount of time into BSIP and the EP development only to see delays, late changes to timescales and the Department for Transport not meeting their own deadlines.

Councils were asked to be ambitious which we have but the Bus Strategy has raised expectations with local councillors and passengers that it now seems unlikely can be fulfilled. It is local councils that will have to deal with the inevitable criticism that will result now that the promised funding has been significantly reduced. The financial reality is that the priority is now to maintain a decent network with significant improvements not being funded in most areas.

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

In Buckinghamshire we are starting two DRT pilot schemes this summer, partly funded by a Rural Mobility Fund award and hope this will attract new bus users.

d) bus funding over the short and long term; and

Councils are maintaining local funding but this only helped around 20% of network pre covid as other services ran commercially. There is a strong likelihood that previously commercial bus services will struggle once the BRG support ends and government needs to put in place a long-term plan over at least 5 years rather than one off funds or the limited support most councils can now expect from BSIP funding. Buses services need the certainty to plan over a number of years in a similar way to long term investment in roads and rail.

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

Buckinghamshire Council has a strong commitment to decarbonisation but achieving this is very challenging as there is no additional funding to help deliver this.

Moving to low emission buses in the public bus sector is particularly challenging for rural shire councils such as Buckinghamshire with many of our

bus routes covering long distances with relatively low frequencies. With bus operators based both inside and outside the county and many cross-boundary bus routes into neighbouring council areas this needs to be viewed regionally or nationally. Councils can contribute through changes to their own fleets and provision of infrastructure but the level of funding to upgrade the public bus fleet needs co-ordinated support from government. Current funding is focussed on urban areas, but this needs to be extended more widely.

There is a higher likelihood that residents in rural areas will be car dependant and these higher car dependency levels are a real challenge for Buckinghamshire. In this context, buses provide the most likely modal shift opportunity (as opposed to active travel for example). To attract rural car users, work is needed to reduce friction across the customer's whole journey, particularly where interchange is needed. The bus network and funding needs to be better aligned with other transport modes (eg improved rail / bus integration) to compete with the private car.

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