

Written evidence submitted by West Sussex County Council (BUS0049)

Summary

WSCC welcomes Bus Back Better and the opportunity it has provided to improve services. In particular that it increases the role of councils and users which is very helpful. The underlying change from largely commercial provision of bus services to co-operative working is welcome. West Sussex looks forward to working with DfT to improve the bus offer to users, and will welcome opportunity to showcase achievements that might be useful to other LTA.

Overall bus services are recovering from Covid in West Sussex, but results are mixed. There is a strong return in patronage on certain routes. However this is not the case for traditional commuting services or for ENTCS users where levels vary between 60% and 85%. Patronage bottomed about 10% one week during Covid restrictions. Government financial support has been vital to maintain the network at all and this remains the case. Routes serving Gatwick Airport are in-line with activity at the airport. Cost inflation is reported by bus Operators to be 10% or more, although driver shortages have eased.

The variability of general traffic volume, and the spreading of peak hours means that the reliability of services is more difficult to achieve. Many people seem to have turned to using cars and therefore modal shift is going to be more complex to achieve.

The cost of fuel may help but the 5p reduction in fuel duty will not. There has been innovation in ticketing with tap on /off to allow for flexible tickets given the now variable nature of employment attendance.

There is a need to recast some of the bus network, however we do need to wait to see whether further increase in patronage occurs before doing so.

WSCC has worked well in partnership with bus operators for many years. Plans for decarbonisation are being pursued particularly by Metrobus. Smaller providers will struggle with the investment needed in the short to medium term.

Implementation has not been a smooth process and has presented various difficulties to WSCC and bus operators. In addition last year media mention of

the funding available and potential for improving bus services across England led to expectations that are very unlikely to be met, especially in shire authorities given the use already made of the £3bn. It appears that after a huge amount of work across transport authorities in England that many will be disappointed and there will be limited initial benefit for users, which is a very frustrating outcome.

Issues observed:

- a. The originally expected timescales for developing BSIP and EP documents were extremely tight for most authorities, and have proved too fast for best result.
- b. There is now considerable delay to the timescale from DfT to evaluate BSIP and EP documents and to feedback outcomes to LTA. The late extension of the BRG, pausing EP development, and advice about ENCTS leaves some LTAs operating draft EPs, and needing to commence a recast of their bus network without full knowledge of the outcome or sufficiency of their BSIP or funding.
- c. This may have come about due to a lack of input from people experienced in LTA processes, and from commercial bus operating organisations.
- d. It may be that assumptions were made that LTAs have staff teams, or access to resources that are no longer present or easily available. This year WSCC recruited for a team leader Public Transport which attracted no suitable applicants.
- e. Lack of staff can mean that there is little ability to assume additional functions without a long term funding stream being available for staff. The 3 year BSIP funding suggestion could be more attractive if say 5 years were possible.
- f. Governance in Local Authorities has timescales which did not appear to be factored into either the initial DfT timeline or subsequent revisions. Something as important as BSIP requires a Key Decision at the top of authorities, which in West Sussex includes presentation for a scrutiny committee, 28 day advance advertisement, a decision report, and 10 day call-in period. When working in partnership with other councils and stakeholders, such governance time is months rather than weeks.
- g. Directing 77 LTAs to all following the same sequence of steps at the same time led directly to need for resource exceeding DfT capacity i.e. a

“ bottleneck “ resulted, and now continuing unspecified delay. This may reflect an optimism bias in programme management about peak resource manhours requirement.

Other comments on our experience with the Bus Back Better process from DfT;

- h. Weak explanation of what the overall change would mean for ‘shire’ councils, such as West Sussex, and what would be considered “ambitious”. Ambition now appears to mean infrastructure projects which are difficult to develop in the timescales so far allowed. In addition retrofitting such projects is not always possible given the limitations of existing road network. None of this means that quality bus provision is not needed, just needs to be achieved in a different way.
- i. DfT guidance-advice seems to be quiet on many functions supporting Bus patronage growth.
 - whether separation of accounts for Enhanced Partnerships from other council business including concession fares is recommended (this is a risk management issue)
 - will an Enhanced Partnership eventually be a separate legal entity
 - the number of functions for public transport that an Enhanced Partnership will need to consider adopting in total, which influences numbers of staff required.
 - LTA staff levels,
 - disbursement method within procurement rules for funding grant that is specific to an existing service,
 - determining which organisation does what for an EP (such as lower level councils)
 - advising youth on transport options once they leave high school
 - customer complaint handling centralisation (toward managing commitments in a charter for users)
 - enforcement of bus stop clearways, where enforcement is currently by other organisations including police
 - types of IT system likely required in a full LTA for public transport
 - data collection and availability (WSCC recognises DfT is making strides for more and better data to be collected and available.)
 - reference to Transport specific methods of protecting the public purse

- updating LTA processes for example in development control/monitoring for transport outputs

DfT have not been obvious about what is being done;

- to adjust mindsets and outlook of present providers of bus services toward a new co-operative operating model (aka “hearts and minds”)

For Example, a community bus within in a large village operates separately and independently of the only commercial operator serving the village, with the community bus not generally stopping at bus stops with the commercial operator’s flag-sign displayed. The DfT approach seems to downplay changes needed in mindsets of both these bus organisations to grow their patronage jointly.

- for National publicity to encourage bus use

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