
Meeting: Scrutiny Committee

Subject: Bus Back Better Strategy

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Meeting Date: 4 November 2021

1. Purpose of the Report:

- 1.1 To inform an open discussion at the next Scrutiny Committee meeting on the "Bus Back Better" strategy published by DfT in March 2021.

2. Recommendations:

- 2.1 That Scrutiny Committee considers the content of this report.
- 2.2 The Scrutiny Committee notes the activities currently being undertaken to support LTAs and the forthcoming research on social exclusion.
- 2.3 That Scrutiny Committee notes that the DfT has offered additional funding to STBs to provide more support to LTAs, and TfN's initial plans for further activity in this area.
- 2.4 That Scrutiny Committee comments on other areas where TfN could support this important agenda.

3. Main Issues:

- 3.1 At the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee in July 2021, the Committee agreed to consider the role that TfN can play in supporting local transport authorities (LTAs) to improve the quality of bus services in the North of England.
- 3.2 TfN's remit is focused on the identification and recommendation of pan-Northern strategic transport interventions, but both the Strategic Transport Plan and Northern Transport Charter emphasise the need to ensure that local, regional and national transport networks are integrated for the benefit of all transport users. The Strategic Transport Plan sets out the respective roles of TfN and LTAs as follows:
- 3.2.1 TfN's role is to set out the case and priorities for connecting different economic clusters, ports, and airports across the whole of the North. TfN's 'blue print' for road and rail investment will enhance strategic

pan-Northern connectivity, complementing local transport investment to improve the 'whole journey'.

- 3.2.2 The LTA role is managing and investing in local transport networks within economic clusters, such as investment in local roads, cycling, walking, and buses, and in some cases light rail.
- 3.3 The STP confirms that TfN will support LTAs to explore the opportunities to deliver more sustainable and efficient local transport networks. This means targeting short trips that could be undertaken by public transport, cycling or walking, thereby reducing localised congestion, improving the environment, and supporting an improved transport system at a local and pan-Northern level.
- 3.4 This is because delivering transformational, inclusive economic growth will require complementary and supporting investment at a local as well as a pan-Northern level to ensure that a 'whole journey' and 'total network' approach to improving transport is followed. The benefits of wider pan Northern investment will be constrained if measures to improve the offer of local public transport networks are not explored, particularly for serving new housing and employment locations, and for deprived areas of the North.
- 3.5 Taking a 'whole journey' approach will not only support transformational economic growth and carbon reduction objectives, it will have significant social benefits, by reducing severance and connecting local communities with employment and other services in local areas and across the North.
- 3.6 Current TfN activities in support of this agenda include:
- The Economic Recovery Plan developed in 2020 to identify which local and pan Northern schemes are needed to shape the economic recovery. This was submitted to DfT and TfN is in active discussion with the DfT Acceleration Unit.
 - The transport related social exclusion (TRSE) research is due to report in November, and will provide the first pan Northern evidence base on the impacts of limited access to transport on access to employment, key services, and community life. Initial results from the first stage qualitative research are included as an Appendix in Section 8.
 - TfN is developing a policy position on multi modal hubs with partners, which includes how TfN can support a more integrated approach at local level and provide technical and analytical support.
 - The Northern Powerhouse Rail programmes is working with LTAs to ensure that station development and enhancement for NPR is

integrated with local connectivity plans and strategies at an early stage of design and development.

- TfN's Major Road Network (MRN) Regional Evidence Base identified local interventions on the MRN including investment in improving facilities for public transport and active travel modes. TfN is monitoring progress and promoting business case development of 17 LTA sponsored MRN schemes.
- The Clean Mobility Visions project will develop a toolkit of evidence-based policies to support Local Authorities to achieve modal shift away from private car use – including through enhanced bus services. This is in support of TfN's Decarbonisation Strategy.

4. Bus back better

4.1 On 15 March 2021 the Government published its *Bus Back Better: national bus strategy for England* vision, which underpins a national bus strategy for England and outlines ambitious reform of how bus services are planned and delivered. The strategy aims to deliver better bus services for passengers across England, through ambitious and far-reaching reform of how services are planned and delivered. The objective of the strategy is to make buses:

- more frequent
- more reliable
- easier to understand and use
- better co-ordinated
- cheaper

4.2 The strategy is seen as an important part of the levelling-up agenda and recognises that "where commercial bus companies and local transport authorities work closely together buses are the easiest, cheapest and quickest way to improve transport." Importantly, Bus Back Better also recognises that in lower-density, often rural areas, more innovative solutions may be required, and commits to supporting new forms of provision, such as demand responsive travel in smaller vehicles.

4.3 *Bus Back Better* sets out the intended approach to franchising and partnerships at local level. Franchising powers are only available automatically to Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) but can be provided to other Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) through secondary legislation. In the Strategy, Government has said it will support any LTA which wishes to access franchising powers, and which has the capability and intention to use them at pace to deliver improvements for passengers.

4.4 All LTAs not in the statutory process of franchising are expected to commit to establishing Enhanced Partnerships. An Enhanced

Partnership is a statutory arrangement under the 2017 Bus Services Act which can specify, for example, timetables and multi-operator ticketing, and allows the LTA to take over the role of registering bus services from the Traffic Commissioners. The government is suggesting that enhanced partnerships may be the preferred end state for the majority of LTAs, though others will proceed to franchising.

- 4.5 To benefit from the funding in the strategy, LTAs setting up enhanced partnerships are expected to implement bus priority schemes and draw up ambitious Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs). At time of writing LTAs across the North of England are in the process of finalising and agreeing BSIPs.

5. Strengthening TfN support for BSIPs

- 5.1 DfT has recently asked all Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs) to consider whether STBs could play a useful role in helping LTAs and Operators to implement their Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) and to develop their Enhanced Partnerships (EPs) by establishing Bus Forums (where these do not already exist in the region) bringing together LAs, operators, business stakeholders and passenger representatives. Additional funding is being made available in the 2021/22 financial year for activities that can help LTAs who are not MCAs (who have access to alternative funding sources). DfT are currently unable to commit to providing funding in future financial years until the Spending Review has reported and budgets for STBs agreed.
- 5.2 In response, TfN has consulted on initial proposals to help strengthen the evidence base, support partners to deliver on the commitments in Bus Back Better and develop an effective intra-regional bus network. There is strong support at local level for TfN to do more for local areas to improve bus services across the North, including:
- Developing strategies for cross border bus services and network development. Integration of bus timetable data into the TfN Analytical Framework and new evidence on accessibility and inter-regional /cross-border trips.
 - Analytical support to non-MCA areas on implementation of Bus Service Improvement Plans.
 - More active support for scheme development at local level, with a number of LTA identifying “park and ride” schemes as a particular priority.
 - Supporting all LTAs with a round table on best practice following the submission of BSIPs this autumn. That would include agreeing the next steps on inclusive growth and connectivity, following the transport related social exclusion research due to be completed in November.

- Developing a digital mobility hub/centre of expertise for the North of England, operating within the context of BSIPs and supporting partner work on digital mobility, fares and smart ticketing.

5.3 We await confirmation from DfT as to the scale of funding available for these short-term activities. Should we be able to undertake all this additional activity, we would suggest a key role for Scrutiny Committee in developing these proposals and working with LTAs on this important agenda. Subject to our funding settlement for 2022/23, our intention would be to seek Board agreement to embed this activity into the next TfN Business Plan due to be agreed in March 2022.

6. Corporate Considerations:

Financial Implications

6.1 The activity set out in paragraph 5.2 is dependent on additional funding being received from DfT. Any further work would need to be considered as part of the Business Planning process for 2022/23.

Resource Implications

6.2 The resource implications as a result of this paper will need to be fully worked through and addressed as part of the forthcoming business planning cycle aligned to available funding.

Legal Implications

6.3 Legal implications are included within the report.

Risk Management and Key Issues

6.4

Environmental Implications

6.5 This report does not constitute or influence a plan or programme which sets the framework for future development consents of projects listed in the EIA Directive and therefore does stimulate the need for SEA or EIA.

6.6 The improvement of the regions bus services, supports the aims and objectives of TfN's Draft Decarbonisation Strategy.

Equality and Diversity

6.7 Equality and diversity issues are covered in the report.

Consultations

6.8 A consultation has not been undertaken at this stage.

7. Background Papers

7.1 None

8. Appendices

8.1 **Summary of findings from *Transport-related social exclusion in the North of England: A qualitative study of TRSE-affected communities***

Background: Between March and October 2021, TfN's Economics & Research team conducted qualitative research on transport-related social exclusion (TRSE). This project used an online survey of elected officials and officers from Local Authorities across the north of England, and of third sector organisations working with communities affected by poverty and deprivation, to gather qualitative insights into 120 communities affected by TRSE. As summarised below, the impacts of the decline of bus services over the last decade emerged as the key transport theme within this project.

Defining TRSE: TRSE exists where an individual or community has limited access to transport, in a context where a high level of mobility is needed to access employment, education, key services, and family and community life. TRSE is multidimensional, and can be caused by a lack of reliable public transport services, cost constraints, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, time pressures, and limited accessibility of infrastructure.

In the areas studied, the critical differentiating factor in exposure to TRSE is between those with relatively unconstrained access to private cars, and those who are primarily or exclusively reliant on public transport to access key services, education, and employment. The demographic and socioeconomic concentrations of TRSE stem primarily from the extent to which factors such as age and low-income impact car access. Underlying this, the respondents describe a public transport system that does not provide reliable, accessible, and affordable access to the destinations required for full social participation.

Impacts on different population groups: TRSE is particularly acute for those on low incomes and in insecure work, for those with disabilities and long-term health conditions that require regular access to healthcare services, and for those with caring responsibilities because their travel requirements diverge from traditional commuter peaks. This means that, even in cases where the public transport services that serve an area are sufficient for those travelling at peak times, these

demographic and socioeconomic groups can nonetheless be significantly affected.

The limited availability and frequency of local bus services, and the cost of tickets, is the primary cause of TRSE: Respondents across area types describe that bus services have declined significantly over the last decade, and in many areas fall below the minimum level required for access to education, employment, key services, and community life. For those with no reliable alternative to these services, this results in social exclusion. The respondents describe these impacts as most acute for younger people entering the labour market for the first time, those in insecure and low paid work who travel to peripheral areas outside of peak times, and for those with disabilities and long-term health conditions who rely on bus services to access healthcare.

The respondents' perceptions of declining bus services are consistent with DfT datasets: DfT datasets indicate that, across the North, there were approximately 193,000,000 (-18.3%) fewer local bus journeys made in 2018/19 than a decade earlier,¹ that local bus miles declined by approximately 83,000,000 (-36.6%),² and that net annual support paid by central and local government for local bus services declined by £41.8 million (-25.7%).³ These data are consistent with the impacts described by the respondents.

The COVID-19 pandemic formed a key part of the context in which this research was undertaken. However, the respondents are divided on the impacts of the pandemic on TRSE. For some, the pandemic is characterised as a period of declining public transport services, leaving those with no alternative but to travel with more costly and complex journeys, contributing to TRSE. For others, the combination of a lack of a viable public transport service before the pandemic and the increasing availability of digital services has meant that transport became a less significant factor in social exclusion.

The reversal of what are widely seen as significant declines in the frequency and availability of bus services, and the expansion of services beyond this, is by far the most common solution to TRSE recommended by the respondents. To be effective, this must include regular and reliable provision outside of peak periods, and a greater number of neighbourhood and radial routes. Respondents also highlight the need for better integration across operators and areas,

¹ DfT BUS0108

² DfT BUS0206a

³ DfT BUS0505a

and integration with improved rail connections. This is both to reduce the cost of taking multiple bus services – often with different operators and across area boundaries – and to prevent delays with one element of a trip having significant knock-on effects.

Alongside this qualitative research project, TfN has also commissioned mixed-methods research on TRSE. This project has used an online survey, focus groups and interviews with members of the public, and interviews with transport stakeholders to examine the nature, extent, determinants and impacts of TRSE across diverse place and population contexts in the North. This project is due for completion at the end of November 2021, with publication of results expected in January 2022.

Glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used (if applicable)

Please include any technical abbreviations and acronyms used in the report in this section. (Please see examples below.) This will provide an easy reference point for the reader for any abbreviations and acronyms that are used in the report.

- a) BSIP – Bus Service Improvement Plan
- b) LTA – Local Transport Authority
- c) MRN – Major Road Network
- d) TRSE – Transport related social exclusion