



Strategic Transport Leadership Board

13 May 2022

Agenda Item 7

Regional Bus Strategy

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Agree to publish the Regional Bus Strategy (Annex 1).**
- b) Agree to develop a delivery framework with local authority partners and bus operators, based upon the actions within the Regional Bus Strategy and 'Bus Back Better' support commission.**
- c) To note the creation of a regional bus forum within the 'Bus Back Better' support commission.**

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. This paper provides an update to members on the draft Regional Bus Strategy, detailing the wider societal benefits of bus provision and the key part the strategy can play in the delivery of the regional transport strategy.

2. Key points to note

- 2.1. Bus transport has a significant role to play in improving the regional transport system, unlocking economic opportunities, reducing inequalities, and levelling up.
- 2.2. The Regional Bus Strategy looks to set a consistent regional vision and approach to bus travel, while also identifying opportunities to improve cross-boundary bus movements.
- 2.3. The challenges faced by local areas to deliver bus service improvements has been put into sharp focus following the bus service improvement plan funding announcements: only four out of 12 authorities in the region were successful in securing BSIP funding.
- 2.4. EEH has secured additional in year funding from DfT to identify the support needed to assist all its local transport authorities to either deliver their BSIPs or provide extra support to those which did not receive any BSIP funding.
- 2.5. Other work being carried out by EEH to support partners includes creating a regional bus forum to share knowledge and best practice; liaising with DfT over the national 'bus centre of excellence'; engaging with the demand responsive sector; and developing a delivery framework based upon the actions of both the national and regional bus strategies.

3. Context

- 3.1. As the regional transport strategy sets out, bus transport not only has a significant role to play in transport terms but can act to address inequality in the wider economy by connecting people to places, jobs, education, and public services, for example:

- Circa 3.5 million people in the UK travel to work by bus¹.
- Every £1 spent on investment in local bus priorities can deliver up to £7 of net economic benefit².
- Buses are the primary mode of access to city centres, responsible for facilitating 29% of all city centre expenditure³.

3.2. There is a clear relationship between investment in bus services and improved outcomes across many differing agendas including health, education, income and more recently levelling up.

3.3. When considering transport investment, the significant social benefits of buses is a key factor in any decision making, for example studies show that a 10% improvement in local bus service connectivity is associated with a 3.6% reduction in deprivation from least to most deprived areas ⁴.

3.4. In March 2021, the government published 'Bus Back Better, the National Bus Strategy for England' which set out the vision and opportunity to deliver better bus services through the reform of how services are planned and delivered. The strategy acknowledged the years of decline in bus patronage and offered considerable funding (committing £3bn of investment over five years, this was reduced to approximately £1.4bn) in return for a reinvigorated, collaborative approach between local transport authorities (LTAs) and operators to the delivery of bus services.

3.5. Each LTA developed a bus service improvement plan (BSIP), setting out the approach to transforming bus services in each area. Four LTAs within the region have now been successful in securing a share of this funding, however, eight did not receive any allocation and have been left with a shortfall in support for improved bus service and infrastructure, see Table 1.

3.6. Within the context of the publication of the National Bus Strategy and with the support of partners, EEH commissioned Atkins to undertake the development of an overarching vision and strategy for bus and coach travel within the region, underpinned by using mobile network data to evidence journey movement across the region. The draft strategy has been considered and approved by previous meetings of the Transport Officer Group. However, after additional feedback from both officers and the EEH Bus Operators Association (BOA), the mobile network data in the strategy has now been reworked by Atkins. The result of this has been some change to the quantum of movements between origin and destination pairings.

3.7. Table 1: Level of BSIP funding received by EEH LTAs

England's Economic Heartland LTAs	BSIP Funding Allocation
Bedford Borough Council	£0
Buckinghamshire Council	£0
Cambridgeshire County Council	£0
Central Bedfordshire Council	£3.7m
Hertfordshire County Council	£29.7m
Luton Borough Council	£19.1m
Milton Keynes Council	£0

¹ <https://greenertransportsolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-Value-of-the-Bus-to-Society-FINAL.pdf>

² <https://greenertransportsolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-Value-of-the-Bus-to-Society-FINAL.pdf>

³ <https://greenertransportsolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-Value-of-the-Bus-to-Society-FINAL.pdf>

⁴ <https://greenertransportsolutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-Value-of-the-Bus-to-Society-FINAL.pdf>

North Northamptonshire Council	£0
Oxfordshire County Council	£12.7m
Swindon Borough Council	£0
Peterborough City Council	£0
West Northamptonshire Council	£0

4. The purpose of the Regional Bus Strategy

- 4.1. While much of the future development of the bus and coach network will be on a place-specific basis for each local transport authority, there is a need for a consistent regional vision and approach that defines 'what good looks like'. This will support provision of consistently high-quality services across the Heartland and give current and future users more confidence in the public transport 'offer'.
- 4.2. Origin-destination pairs with existing high travel demand but poor public transport connections are of concern, with suppressed demand for non-car journey opportunities restricting regional growth and development. This is relevant for the many of the travel needs that cross local authority boundaries, such as when residents live in one authority's area and work in another. A particular role of the bus strategy is to identify cross-boundary flows and set out a framework within which the authorities can work with EEH and operator partners to address them.
- 4.3. In the region, the proportion of the workplace population travelling to work by car is higher than the national average (67% compared to 60%). In addition, people in the region are more likely to live further from their place of work than the national average meaning that many journeys made to work are likely to be long distance car journeys.
- 4.4. Conversely, more than half of all car journeys in the region cover distances under five miles. Short journeys by car, particularly in urban areas, result in congestion on the local road network impacting bus journeys. For example, Professor David Begg⁵ has estimated that over the last 50 years, bus journey times in the UK have risen by almost 50% in the more congested urban areas. This is an average of a 1% increase in bus journey times per annum.
- 4.5. Poor interchange facilities are also a common issue within the region, which create an inconvenience for passengers and make bus travel less attractive.
- 4.6. EEH is committed to achieving net zero carbon of the region's transport system by 2050, this can be only achieved by replacing old busses with low and zero emissions vehicles. However, current experience with the Zero Emission Regional Bus Area schemes, where the DfT is part-funding the cost difference between zero emission and diesel buses, shows that getting positive business cases for investment is still challenging.

5. The challenges facing the regional bus network

- 5.1. EEH's local authority partners identified several key challenges within the regional bus network. This strategy looks to address these issues, including:
 - Bus journey times are increasing due to congestion, and some are not competitive with car journey times making them an unattractive alternative to travelling by private car.
 - There are gaps in the bus network where factors influence bus service provision, to the detriment of those wanting to make longer-distance connections.

⁵ Professor David Begg (2016) 'The Impact of Congestion on Bus Passengers' (<https://www.cpt-uk.org/media/swmhxwwe/prof-david-begg-the-impact-of-congestion-on-bus-passengers-digital-final-1.pdf>)



- There are numerous 'travel exclusion hotspots': places that are not well served by bus services, with changes in travel habits and employment mobility making it more difficult for bus services to sustainably serve the range of destinations demanded.
- Fares and payment methods are complicated and make it difficult for potential passengers to work out their best fare option and acceptable methods of paying.
- There is sometimes a gap between what bus operators offer and what bus users need.
- The bus network is not considered an option for many people, due to both lack of services available to them and the poor reputation of bus travel.
- The forecast scale of population growth, hence, travel demand, means that large-scale growth in the bus market will be needed to sustainably achieve the growth ambitions of the region.
- Much more needs to be done to tackle the climate challenge including encouraging modal shift to bus and ensuring that buses are as green as possible.
- Sustained funding is required to support network stabilisation, providing a solid basis on which future network growth can occur.

5.2. Furthermore, as part of the strategy, journey movements across the region were identified using mobile phone data. The analysts indicated that there are gaps in the bus network and uncompetitive journey times are apparent between some of the region's settlements and major employment sites, such as Millbrook Technology Park and Cranfield. This lack of an attractive public transport alternative for these movements means that public transport use for these journeys is likely to be limited, contributing to network congestion and car emissions.

6. Ambitions and Interventions of the Regional Bus Strategy – potential delivery framework

6.1. In response to the challenges faced, the strategy sets out a series of recommendations for EEH to explore and take forward in partnership with LTAs and the EEH Bus Operators Association, these include:

- **More frequent and reliable bus services.**
 - Continuing from the key demand corridors identified from the data analysis, ongoing data-led reviews of the network will identify ambitions regarding improving coverage and filling gaps.
 - Working collaboratively on cross-boundary services and operational matters to allow investment priorities to be determined where they support regional objectives.
 - Exploring opportunities for demand responsive services - lessons can be learned from existing initiatives, such as those awarded funding through the Rural Mobility Fund in March 2021, the two in Buckinghamshire and one in Hertfordshire.
 - The experience gained from within the region of Luton to Dunstable and Cambridgeshire busways) schemes provides strong evidence for regional rapid transport opportunities, which should be further explored.
- **Improvements to planning and integration with other modes.**
 - As identified in the movement data analysis, many high-volume movements are served directly by bus, with fewer links purely served by rail. This is particularly apparent where movements are along axes not aligned to the principally London-focussed rail network.
 - EEH is keen to support the continued data-led review of the bus network to identify where cross-boundary services can be simplified and where specific investments, such as interchange hubs, will benefit operations across a wider area.

- **Improvements to fares and ticketing**
 - Recognising some of the complexities of fares, particularly when distance-based and across longer routes or multiple operators or modes, new communications techniques and promises regarding fare capping to prevent over-charging should be explored.
- **Improvements to bus passenger experience**
 - Building on the outcomes and recommendations of EEH's First/Last Mile International Best Practice Review (2019), collaboration should be supported between authorities on interurban corridors to give sensible interchange where needed and speed up end-to-end interurban journey times by using mobility hubs to achieve improved local connectivity.
- **Improvements to passenger engagement**
 - EEH to explore options for the introduction of passenger charters across the region, but care will be required to make sure they align to support regional bus opportunities.
- **Decarbonisation of the transport network**
 - EEH should continue to make the case to the DfT for additional funding across the region to support accelerated ambitions for a fully decarbonised public transport network well in advance of national target dates.
- **Best practice**
 - Examples elsewhere of where enhanced bus networks have been successful such as Lincolnshire InterConnect, will be adopted by EEH. Evidence does show that its only by working collaboratively between authorities and bus operators will a robust and long-term regional bus service be achieved.

7. Bus Back Better Support Commission

7.1. EEH has secured additional in year funding from DfT, to identify the support needed to assist all its LTAs (both successful /unsuccessful BSIP funded) in the delivery their BSIPs, implementation their enhanced bus partnerships and for EEH to provide extra support to those LTAs who did not receive any BSIP funding. The agreed commission is split into three stages:

1. Triage – This involves an initial stakeholder exercise, where all the LTAs/ bus operators will be engaged (via a workshop) to understand and identify for example the most challenging aspects of the BSIP delivery or lessons learnt from the BSIP bidding process. Following this a questionnaire will be used to capture any remaining information seeking LTAs/bus operators' views on any further help required to implement their BSIPs or better delivery of bus services.

2. Prioritisation - An evaluation and prioritisation of these views/proposals of support from workshops and questionnaire analysis will be undertaken, the results of which will be fed back to the LTAs/bus operators and method statements (a concise delivery plan specifying the 'What' 'How' 'When and 'By Whom' for project implementation) for each of the proposals will be developed.

3. Implementation - This stage comprises the implementation of an agreed work programme, including:

- The creation of a regional bus forum to enable the sharing of knowledge and best practice and the identification of areas for joint working and liaison with the DfT.
- Developing technical work packages (including the drafting of an evidence base and background research) at regional scale, particularly in relation to those areas which present barriers to effective BSIP implementation.
- Specific localised assistance for the LTAs, this can be in the form of business case development, route planning or the design of complementary bus infrastructure.

8. Bus Centre of Excellence

- 8.1. The DfT is also setting up a Bus Centre of Excellence, run by a professional training institution with a focus on providing LTAs and bus operators with training and qualifications to build staff capability within the sector. Where necessary, EEH will work with the commissioning consultant, to liaise with the DfT and the appointed institution to provide feedback and make suggestions as to the training provided.

9. Emerging DRT solutions

- 9.1. EEH recently met with demand responsive travel (DRT) mobility operator Via who are already working with several our authority partners – both planning better bus services and infrastructure and delivering “on the ground” services. Via are keen to work with EEH and partners to investigate opportunities to further support the integration of DRT style services as part of the BSIP/ Bus Back Better work.
- 9.2. EEH will invite Via to present their approach to the Transport Officer Group meeting later this year.

10. A Delivery Framework

- 10.1. A delivery framework based upon the actions from both the Regional Bus Strategy and the additional ‘Bus Back Better’ commission is being developed. EEH will be seeking further input and agreement from the LTAs and bus operators as to roles and responsibilities, timescales and funding provision for the actions suggested.

Trevor Brennan

Project Lead

May 2022

List of Annexes

- 1. Regional Bus Strategy**

