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promoting quality public transport.....

Transport Committee
 House of Commons
 London SW1A 0AA

29th March 2022

Dear Committee Members,

National Bus Strategy One Year On

1. TravelWatch NorthWest is an independent Community Interest Company representing all public transport users in North West England. We are pleased to give our views to this inquiry. We largely confine our comments to our region.

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

2. Government policy has become mired firstly in the Covid19 pandemic and latterly rising fuel prices which has given rise to many challenges as follows -

- *The severity of the decline in passenger journeys*
- *Encouragement to work from home*
- *Changes to lifestyle with hybrid working*
- *Residual fear of travelling by public transport*
- *Driver shortage as the pandemic restrictions were lifted*
- *Rising fuel costs*

3. Passenger journeys are only slowly increasing. There are varied reasons for this which include changes to lifestyles caused by the pandemic, with more people deciding hybrid working is preferable to a whole week in the office; keeping up with the changes to timetables, as operators respond to the returning number of passengers alongside driver shortages and a residual fear by some of using public transport.

4. The pandemic caused a backlog of HGV and PSV training and the Government introduced measures to improve the situation. Bus driving remains an industry where pay is at a disadvantage compared with the haulage industry.

5. The rapid rise in the cost of fuel is a major concern to the bus industry. The Government needs to take this into account when arranging continued support for the industry.

6. Bus companies need to be more proactive in not only encouraging “lost” passengers but in attracting new ones. Accurate real time information at bus stops and next stop information on buses would help prospective passengers’ confidence in using buses. Clearer information about point to point fares would also help.

Progress against the ambitions and targets set out in the national bus strategy including the effectiveness, pace and priority of the strategy’s implementation

7. From our standpoint progress has been slow with little to be seen on the ground. We understand that promised funding from the government to regenerate bus services as set out in the strategy has already been watered down.

Innovation in the sector, including examples of new methods that have been trialled successfully

8. We have no contribution to make here.

Bus funding over the short and long term

9. The Buses Better Back (BBB) policy gave Local Authority’s (LAs) the opportunity for a change of direction for their local bus services by introducing either a franchised system or an enhanced partnership (EP). The timescale to prepare the Bus Strategic Improvement Plan (BSIP) was tight. It gave LAs the opportunity for “blue sky” thinking to improve and enhance their local services. However, no detailed funding guidance was proffered thus giving an opportunity for imaginative and innovative thinking. Much time and effort by council members and officers was expended to produce the BSIPs by the 31st October 2021. It must have been a huge disappointment when the partial pausing of the scheme was announced which halted the implementation date of 1st April 2022.

10. As referred to above funding for the strategy has been diluted. The funding delay and subsequent stop gap financing measure until October 2022 does not auger well for the success of what could have been from the bold approach when the BBB was launched three years ago. Priorities within the new system during implementation would have been part of the plan but the current position increases the burden of those keeping the services running amidst inconsistent funding. Timely decisions need to be made if there is to be an effective implementation of the BBB policy. Alongside the funding for the implementation of the franchises and enhanced partnership, long term funding needs to be agreed without a lengthy delay.

11. LAs need to be fully in control of deciding their own financial priorities within their BSIP. This will allow funding to be used to best effect accounting for local needs. A degree of ring-fencing financial support would also prevent funding being syphoned to other LA budgets.

12. The present war in Ukraine and current steep rises in fuel costs have decreased the likelihood of these new arrangements being successfully implemented. The Government has supported the bus industry throughout the pandemic. However, for it to recover and thus support the national economy, long term guaranteed funding is essential.

13. We have supported Transport for Greater Manchester's bid to franchise bus services within its sphere of control and therefore would be generally supportive of more public control more widely. Privatisation of buses has not always worked in favour of the passenger and even before the pandemic services have gradually declined and fares in some areas are high. We would hope that a new LA led regime can bring improvements.

Decarbonisation of the sector and modal shift from other forms of transport.

14 We welcome the trends towards greener and electric based vehicles. Overall, we endorse the need for a shift in emphasis to greener public transport, including buses. For example to encourage the greater use of buses the introduction of a congestion or workplace parking charge would reduce traffic levels and fund local transport investment, including subsidy for bus services. There should also be greater bus priority measures across cities through bus lanes, bus gates and bus priority at junctions, to protect bus services from congestion. Cities should not get extra funding for bus services while also making them worse by forcing buses into traffic jams.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond.

JohnAMoorhouse

John Moorhouse
Company Secretary