

## Interim position on a potential national bus strategy

### Introduction

By their very nature buses are essentially locally. They also serve very different types of places - from busy city centres to rural communities. We believe therefore that decisions about bus services are best taken locally in the light of local circumstances and aspirations.

We do not therefore see a role for a national bus strategy (or national infrastructure statement) in directing transport authorities implicitly or explicitly on the approach they should take on their own bus strategies, priorities and how they choose to achieve their objectives. In particular in relation to the use of the powers contained in the Bus Services Act 2017.

It should also be recognised that the infrastructure that bus services use is by and large local roads which are rarely for the exclusive use of buses. Local transport authorities have to balance competing legitimate claims on that road space including for segregated active travel, freight and logistics (and deliveries), trams, taxis and PHVs as well as cars and motorbikes. All this at a time when more road space is being taken out in city centres to improve the urban realm and create more space for people rather than for vehicles.

At the same time we recognise that a national bus strategy (or national infrastructure statement on buses) could have benefits.

### Where a national bus strategy could help not hinder

In our view these would be areas of bus policy that rightly sit at the national level.

These include:

- A national strategy for **improving bus safety**. There is a lack of data, analysis and overarching strategy for tackling deaths, accidents and injuries on buses, or caused by buses outside London. There is an also an increasingly stark contrast between the systematic data driven approach to improving bus safety in London and its absence outside London.
- A national strategy for the **greening of the UK bus fleet**. At present the greening of bus fleets is being carried forward on an ad hoc basis and subject to short term bursts of competition funding. Given the increasing focus on

tackling air quality there is a danger of unintended consequences with buses being withdrawn in city centres in favour of car use where buses fall short on emission standards, and of displacement of dirtier buses away from clean air zones to areas which still have significant air quality challenges. The stop-start and ad hoc approach to investment in greening the bus fleet also has ramifications for the efficiency and viability of the supply chain.

- A national **research and development strategy** for the bus sector. Senior figures within the bus industry have highlighted the very low levels of R and D in the sector and the tendency for decisions to be driven by ‘gut instinct’.
- **Minimum national customer protection standards**. At present the basics of consumer protection and information outside London are very patchy including on consistent complaints and appeals practices, compensation and information on service performance and fares. The open data provisions of the Bus Services Act on fares will go some way to address this but will still leave passengers outside London well short of a basic level of consistent consumer protection which in any way parallels that which exists for rail everywhere or for bus passengers in London.
- **Reform of the current complex and inadequate central government funding streams for bus services**. This reform should be based on enhanced overall funding support for bus services (which reflects the very wide cross sector benefits that public support for bus services brings) and distributed through a simpler mechanism to transport authorities on a devolved basis (although ring fenced to bus).
- **Ensuring better integration between bus services and other modes** (including physical interchange, timetable coordination and ticketing coordination) through the Government’s direct and indirect influence over the national rail network (including over Network Rail and rail franchising).

We also recognise that a national bus strategy could have the less tangible and immediate benefit of giving greater focus and attention to the bus - in the same way, that up to a point, the cycling and walking infrastructure strategy gave more attention to cycling and walking.

There could also be benefits in setting overall **national aspirations for bus patronage** however we would have concerns if this translated into the setting of crude targets for individual authorities given very different local circumstances, the many factors outside local transport authority control (such as the state of the wider economy, the performance of local bus operators and the cost of alternatives to bus travel such as the car).

Similarly we would have concerns if targets were set for bus journey times as a proxy for giving buses greater priority given again the many factors which are outside the control of transport authorities, different local circumstances and the many challenges there would be in calculating this when aggregated over a complex network of bus services within any given area.