

Sustainable Transport Herefordshire



The Need for a Herefordshire Bus Strategy

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1. A Better Deal for Bus Services

The news that Herefordshire Council is considering spending up to £39 million on new electric buses to improve transport links in the county is to be welcomed. This news echoes a fundamental shift in government thinking on the important role of the bus in the future UK transport system. In its guidance report 'A Better Deal for Bus Users' the government states: *'Buses play a vital role in our transport system. Responsible for around 12 million journeys a day, our buses transport more people than any other form of public transport - getting people to work, to education and to see friends and family, the everyday journeys that make up our lives'*. The report goes on to say *'That's why we are taking the lead in launching a revolution in bus services, delivering a better deal for bus users that meets the needs and demands of the travelling public. In a package worth £220 million we are committing to the UK's first-ever long-term bus strategy and funding settlement.'* (ref: a better deal for bus users.gov)

The strategy includes

- ◆ A rapid move towards the deployment of electric and low emission buses.
- ◆ The introduction of new transformational superbuss networks, the first 4 year pilot project already been introduced in Cornwall.
- ◆ A pioneer scheme for developing the first all electric bus town or city.
- ◆ Comprehensive and widespread introduction of bus priority schemes.
- ◆ Accelerating the important role buses have to play in tackling air quality issues and tackling greenhouse gas emissions.
- ◆ Improving passenger information and publicity and raising awareness of planned improvements in order to attract people to use the bus and reduce dependence on the car bus.
- ◆ Encouraging the introduction of multi operator ticketing and other fares deals.
- ◆ Providing extra money to local authorities to support socially necessary bus services and restore lost services where deemed necessary.
- ◆ Trialling on-demand services in rural and suburban areas.

All this is a pointer to the need for local authorities to develop a bus strategy for their own area following the support provided by government. Cornwall County Council, a rural county, is in front with its own 'One Public Transport' project which seeks to provide an integrated public transport system of bus and train for the county. This innovative approach has led to the government's concept of a superbuss network now being trialled in that area.

2. 1985 Bus Deregulation and Privatisation

However, any transformation of bus services still has to be planned within the framework of the 1985 Transport Act, otherwise known as bus deregulation. This act effectively privatised the bus industry with the aim of stimulating head-on competition as a way of improving bus services without government support. Most bus services were to be provided commercially by operators but those that were deemed socially necessary would be supported by the local authority by means of a competitive tendering system.

Since 1985 the industry has developed into a pseudo monopoly situation with by far the largest proportion of bus service mileage being in the hands of a number of large companies such as Stagecoach, First Group, Arriva, Go-Ahead and National Express. Whilst the urban and inter-urban profitable networks have developed under private enterprise, the fate of the local authority supported services has been somewhat different. Between 2010/11 and 2017/18 the total spend by local authorities on bus service support fell from £374.3m to £202.7m. This has meant a drastic reduction in services, particularly in rural areas and during evenings and Sundays. The social impact has been drastic.

Between 2010/11 and 2017/18 Herefordshire Council's support for local bus services declined by a staggering 70.33%. The West Midlands regional average was 41.96%. The result of this dramatic cut in support was predictable. By 2017/18 Herefordshire had fallen to fourth from the bottom in the table of local bus passenger journeys per head as published in the government's annual report of bus statistics. The bus operators, faced with the disappearance of an important element of their income, reacted as expected with wholesale withdrawal of evening and Sunday services, reductions in daytime frequencies and pruning of traditional market day services.

3. The 2017 Buses Services Act

Again, over time, this all points to the need for local authority bus strategies if the government's brave new world for buses is to have any impact. The 2017 Bus Services Act went some way to slackening the straightjacket that local authorities were subject to. The Act was introduced under the guidance of Jesse Norman MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire during his position as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Roads, Local Transport and Devolution. The Under Secretary stated in his introduction to the Act: *'The Bus Services Act 2017 presents local authorities with new powers to bring about change, and unlock the potential for the bus industry to achieve more for passengers than it does today.'*

The Act sought to strengthen the concept and introduction of Advanced Quality and Enhanced Partnerships between the local authority and bus operators. It also provided the Mayor's of combined authorities in metropolitan areas the powers of franchising bus services equivalent to those already operating in London. Apart from encouragement to cooperate, the Act did little to change the now archaic system of division of bus services into commercial and supported services.

However, the Bus Services Act also included a clause which barred councils for setting up new public bus companies to provide bus services. The then Transport Minister, Chris Grayling MP stated the he wanted to *'retain the strengths of the private sector'*. This is seen by many as undermining democracy and the powers of general competence of local authorities as displayed in the Localism Act. As stated in the press *'It is deeply ironic that in the same week the government took back control from the EU by invoking Section 50, it takes away the powers of the very organisations that are closest to the voters - local councils'*. However, thus it stands with a tighter than ever straightjacket on local authorities.

4. The Cornwall Project: Is this the Way Forward

The following is an extract from the Project Details published by Cornwall County Council:

'The One Public Transport System for Cornwall (OPTSfC) has been identified as one of the key

deliverables under the “Cornwall Devolution Deal”. The significant aim of this project is to deliver and provide a fully integrated and sustainable public transport network, following the devolution of bus powers under the Bus Services Bill which received Royal Assent in April 2017. The key drivers or objectives of the project are: 1. To provide a public transport system that integrates bus travel with rail travel, building on the intended upgrading of the mainline rail service to half hourly from 2019; 2. To provide integrated smart ticketing, fares and timetables to deliver combined travel between bus, rail and ferry services for passengers in Cornwall, and air where achievable; 3. To provide a high quality, accessible and integrated public transport network, developed to increase patronage on bus and rail and bring about an upturn in revenue income and service sustainability.’ (ref: [www.cornwall.gov.uk/one public transport system for Cornwall](http://www.cornwall.gov.uk/one-public-transport-system-for-cornwall))

Cornwall Council cabinet portfolio holder for transport Geoff Brown said:

‘We know that good public transport is important to our residents. Our priority is to make sure that these routes are safeguarded and that passengers who use the bus routes subsidised by the Council get the best possible service. Many people rely on these bus routes for work, for getting to hospital appointments and to go out to see friends and family. Rest assured that they will continue and improve under this new contract.

When awarding the new 8 year contract for delivering the subsidised bus network from April 2020, we took into account how we can increase the use of lower emission vehicles and encourage more people to use public transport in line with our commitment to tackle the climate emergency. We also looked at ticket pricing, the possibilities around increasing the frequency of buses and the quality of the vehicles - all of which will play a part in encouraging residents to use public transport and move away from using cars..’

Cornwall County Council has just announced a new 8 year contract for a package of all county council supported services, existing and enhanced. This contract has been awarded to Go Cornwall Bus, a subsidiary of national company Go-Ahead, to deliver a network of Council subsidised local bus routes which are essential to local residents but are not commercially viable. There will be new services and improvements to existing routes.

The fact that the bulk contract was awarded to one operator for 8 years is a significant and welcome departure from the current practice of offering shorter term contracts for individual services which has led to disintegration rather than integration of a network, differing fares by operator and confusion for the passenger. All factors which are a major disincentive to using the bus.

5. The Future for Herefordshire’s Bus Services

In the Hereford Times newspaper of 20 February 2020, Jesse Norman MP for Hereford & South Herefordshire gave an encouraging comment when he wrote: *‘ Specifically, the Government unveiled a £5 billion package to support bus services and cycling routes across the country. The idea is to have greener, zero-emission buses providing more frequent services, more affordable fares and more sustainable travel.’*

We hope that Herefordshire Council will be forthright in grasping the opportunities offered by government’s bus strategy in order to create a green integrated and sustainable bus network that embraces the Council’s themes of connectivity, well being and sustainability together with the need to reduce dependence on the private car and tackle emissions, air quality and climate change.

There is much to be done and the adoption of a Herefordshire Bus Strategy that incorporates

the Council, bus operators and community stakeholders would be a significant start. However, it remains to be seen whether or not the private sector can totally supply the ingredients necessary to make the strategy work. The number of private sector operators in Herefordshire has declined considerably since deregulation and even the large operator, FirstBus has pulled out when the past level of Council support has been lacking. So what happens when no operator tenders for a Council contract? In such instances and given the restrictions placed on local authorities operating services, Jesse Norman MP's vision of more frequent services, more affordable fares and more sustainable transport may turn out to be just a dream.

Sustainable Transport Herefordshire

Who Are We?

We are a small group of professionals who embrace transport and land use planning, economics, the environment and who see into the future and learn from the past.

The realisation that future transport has to change led to the formation of the **Herefordshire Sustainable Transport Group** in 2017 (HSTG).

We publish under the title of **Sustainable Transport Herefordshire**.

Our principal aim is to examine and study innovative, environmental and economic changes in transport that can be applied to Herefordshire's current transport problems. We seek to work with the local transport authority, local MPs, the Department for Transport, transport operators and community groups in planning the future.

HSTG is an Independent Group allied to Rail & Bus for Herefordshire and the Herefordshire Transport Alliance.

For a full list of our reports in PDF format contact:

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