

The Case for a National Coach and Bus Investment Strategy

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Buses and coaches are now the only modes of transport without a long term investment strategy¹. The railways have five year control periods governed by a “High Level Output Specification” from the Government; there is also a five year Road Investment Strategy, which although it mainly relates to strategic roads increasingly includes funding for local road maintenance and potentially a “Major Road Network”. There is also a Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS) and long term strategies for airports and ports are in preparation.

These strategies have not come about by accident – they represent a recognition that those involved in transport need long term certainty to enable planning and investment. The strategies also set a direction of travel (literally and metaphorically) in relation to these modes of transport that frame policy across Government. These apply also to buses and coaches – which in fact account for more journeys annually than either rail or cycling.

There are two specific arguments for buses and coaches to have a long term investment strategy. Firstly, there is the need to reduce emissions from buses and coaches, to contribute to improving local air quality and the UK’s climate change commitments. Second, a strategy can contribute to reversing the decline in bus use and maximising the value buses and coaches can bring to local economies, tourism and social inclusion.

Content of a National Coach and Bus Investment Strategy

A strategy for the coach and bus industry should have two main aims:

- 1) **“Road to zero”**: creating a clear route towards zero emission buses and coaches, especially in urban areas. There is a strong case for this within the Government’s industrial and clean air strategies. At present, there is no long term Government funding for low or zero emission buses and coaches. Instead, there have been successive calls for bids within the “Green Bus Fund” and a new “Ultra-Low Emission Bus Scheme”. These have provided funding for particular operators and fleets to buy new or retrofit older buses to reduce emissions, but have not created a long term investment framework. This is important for manufacturers of buses and coaches and their suppliers, as well as for operators and local authorities. The UK has three main manufacturers of buses as well as a strong supply network; as with other motor vehicle sectors they can see the cost and weight of batteries falling and the range increasing, but without long term commitments for investment in zero/low emission vehicles they can’t make a case for taking advantage of these. There is also a need to invest in electrification infrastructure for bus and coach operations (for example at depots and bus stations). A National Coach and Bus Investment strategy could set targets for reducing bus

¹ The strategy discussed in this briefing would mainly apply to England; the “Road to Zero” element would probably apply to England and Wales.

and coach emissions, and for the introduction of low/zero emission vehicles to meet these emissions targets. It can then draw together public support, including funding and regulation, for such vehicles and their infrastructure.

- 2) **Increasing the use of buses and coaches:** The strategy could set a target for reversing the decline in bus use and for increasing the use of buses and of coaches. This would mirror the Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS), which in some ways is an appropriate model for a Coach and Bus Strategy, in that cycling and walking are largely local responsibilities so any national strategy has had to be careful in avoiding overt interference in local decision making. That said, there are three elements of the CWIS which could be followed for coaches and buses:
- a. **Pulling together central Government spending and regulation on buses and coaches,** to enable all relevant Government spending and action to contribute to the long term targets. It could also make the case for extra Government funding, for example to support transport in rural areas.
 - b. **Local Investment Plans:** Local Cycling and Walking Investment Plans (LCWIPs) have been funded by the Government, with guidance to help local authorities prepare them (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-cycling-and-walking-infrastructure-plans-technical-guidance-and-tools>). Local Coach and Bus Plans could be promoted in the same way, and would also provide a natural follow up to the Bus Services Act. They could set out a range of ways to increase coach and bus use in the shorter and longer term, for example in designing new developments to make them bus friendly or providing access and parking for coaches in tourist areas. These plans could provide a good context for the use by local authorities of Bus Services Act powers for partnerships and franchising.
 - c. **Supporting policy-making across Government:** the CWIS has acted as a framework for other Government policies within and outside the Department for Transport – for example Highways England has produced a cycling strategy, while the new draft National Planning Policy Framework has strengthened support for cycling and walking in the planning system. Examples where support for buses and coaches would be helpful could include Highways England strategies and funding, as well as the cross-Government loneliness strategy and also the promotion of tourism and access to the countryside

Valuing buses and coaches across Government: towards “total transport”

A further possible use for a National Coach and Bus Investment Strategy would be to pull together the sometime substantial funding for buses and coaches from different public services. There is significant spending by local and national Government on home-school transport, non-emergency patient transport, social services transport (e.g. older people to daycare centres) and also bespoke transport for staff in a wide range of public services including prisons and hospitals. Pilots of a “total transport” approach at a local level showed some opportunities for drawing these together and

reducing the overall costs of transport services to the public sector while improving services². A Coach and Bus Investment Strategy could be used to develop this approach, e.g. through local transport commissioning groups as was developed in the Northamptonshire total transport pilot, or also through pooling transport funding nationally between different departments.

New technology

It may be suggested that a “Coach and Bus Investment Strategy” is old-fashioned given the impact of new technology providers such as Uber and on-demand transport such as Arriva Click, Chariot, Slide etc. However, there is consensus that conventional buses and coaches will continue to have an important role in transport, even if their services may change (new providers such as Lyft have reinvented bus services as part of their mobility offer). A national strategy could be used to set out how coaches and buses can be supplemented by and integrated with the new shared transport sector and be part of door-to-door travel and “mobility as a service” propositions.

Conclusion

Buses and coaches are the most used forms of public transport in the UK, but have no long term policy and funding support from the Government. We believe that a National Coach and Bus Investment Strategy could improve services by bringing together funding and policies relating to buses and coaches and setting a long term vision and framework for low emission, high quality, affordable and attractive bus and coach services.

Campaign for Better Transport’s vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

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² <http://www.ciht.org.uk/en/wra/events/events-listing.cfm/total-transport-pilot-event>