

House of Commons Public Bill Committee

Bus Services Bill

Leicestershire County Council Submission

14th March 2017

1. The Council's Position Statement

1.1 The Bus Services Bill is welcomed by Leicestershire County Council. Any provision that aims to 'expand the range of tools available' to the Council to help improve local bus services is warmly received. We also welcome the requirement for better and more accessible open data on bus services; understandable, accurate and detailed information is key to making public transport an attractive alternative to the private car. The greater focus on consultation and review with operators, stakeholders and partners, which is a theme that runs throughout the Bill, is constructive – especially the involvement of representatives of local bus users.

1.2 As an 'Enabling Bill' we are pleased that the Bill brings with it no direct financial implications for the Council. Leicestershire County Council is poorly funded in comparison with other local authorities. The Council has implemented savings of £161 million since austerity started, and there is a requirement to save an additional £66 million.

1.3 Whilst the Bill will not incur any direct costs to the Council, it must be recognised that to actually implement changes that will improve local bus services, investment is needed. As a rural shire authority, the Council has a greater role to play in the provision of local bus services – there is more need for support, both financially and in terms of resource, to build a usable and attractive bus network.

1.4 Without additional financial support from Central Government, the Bill only serves as a reminder of what could be done, not what can be done.

1.5 Specifically, the following are highlighted as areas for review and debate:

- We are pleased that the Bill emphasises the partnership model, and expands the options available to the Council and its operating partners; the allowance for authorities to implement bus improvement measures (as opposed to just infrastructure) is a sensible and productive inclusion within the Bill. We would request that the Secretary of State seeks to provide clear and detailed guidance on what constitutes a 'bus improvement measure'. It is worth reinforcing that without adequate financial support then the ability of the Council to implement either partnership model is limited.

- We fully support the House of Lords amendment to allow any transport authority to have access to franchising without the need for an elected mayor and therefore are pleased that the franchising option remains open to all authorities. We feel that this should be part of the final Bill that is passed through the House of Commons. We would suggest that any powers sought through this option should be accompanied by adequate funding and/or the devolution of bus subsidies.
- We are pleased to see that the restriction on local authorities starting their own municipal bus company (at arm's length) has been removed by the House of Lords. As a rural authority, where there is sometimes limited competition, it is important that Leicestershire has the ability to introduce a company to help moderate the cost of providing services if required.
- The potential to include emission standards as part of any AQP and EP scheme is an important element, and we welcome this opportunity as the authority seeks to reduce pollution from traffic, especially in urban areas.
- When considering multi-operator ticketing schemes, it needs to be recognised that a substantial amount of resourcing, in terms of both staff time as well as funding, is required to implement a smartcard scheme. Whilst the Bill does not require authorities to target a scheme, it would clearly help meet local and national aims to make bus travel simpler and more attractive. We would suggest that the Government seeks ways to help 'kick-start' schemes of this nature.
- The provision to allow the Secretary of State to make regulations requiring bus operators to provide audio-visual information on board buses is reasonable. However, there needs to be clear guidance and realistic timescales linked to the implementation of any new regulations following the Bill, and for them to be adequately funded (for both operator and authority)
- In terms of Enhanced Partnerships and bus registration powers transferring from the Traffic Commissioner to the lead local authority, it is vitally important that the costs associated with this are covered by the fees; in setting the fees for registration it needs to be acknowledged that knowledge transfer and additional resourcing are required.
- Whilst a positive provision, the development of a single repository of information to be created for bus information needs to be signposted with clear markers for who will have responsibility to collect and maintain the database.