

Transport Briefing: West Midlands Bus Service Improvement Plan Principles

September 2021

Background

This briefing provides details on the Principles of the emerging the West Midlands Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) under the National Bus Strategy (NBS) for England to deliver better bus services and for passengers.

This paper is a supplement to the main WMCA Board paper on the BSIP, presented on 17th September 2021.

Principle areas of delivery covered by the BSIP and what is proposed for the West Midlands

- Intensive services and investment on key corridors, with routes that are easier to understand, alongside demand-responsive and socially necessary transport, and integrated service patterns with other modes
- Significant increases in bus priority
- Lower and simpler fares
- Seamless, integrated local ticketing between operators and modes
- Local bus network presented as a single system, with clear passenger information
- Modern buses and decarbonisation
- Excellent customer service and passenger charter
- Safer and more secure bus travel

Intensive services and investment on key corridors, with routes that are easier to understand, alongside demand-responsive and socially necessary transport, and integrated service patterns with other modes

2.1 The West Midlands bus network is comprehensive, 12,200 bus stops are served to provide 96% of the built-up area within 400m of bus stop with a weekday daytime service. The big challenge is that a clear passenger friendly core network has not been defined and adopted. There are gaps in geographic coverage of the turn-up-and-go core network, especially in the Black Country; and some evening and weekend frequencies are low.

2.2 A key priority within the BSIP from April 2022 will be to ensure that there is support to maintain the existing network to aid the economic recovery of the region post covid, provide stability for passengers and then build on this to encourage greater modal shift as requested in the NBS. It is estimated that during the first year of the BSIP the West Midlands bus network will require between £23m and £51m to maintain the vast majority of the pre-Covid network, and the additional enhancements to grow evening and Sunday frequencies will come on top of this.

2.3 The BSIP will define the extensive turn up and go core network, made up of the key routes connecting the main strategic and local centres; with improvements to weekend and some morning and evening frequencies in local areas. Underpinning the core network will be a series of local services which provide additional essential links for communities to their local commercial centres, and the core public transport network. Enhancing service frequencies and operating hours on the local network will ensure that bus becomes more viable alternative for those residents who rely on it and seek to encourage more residents to choose to use it. The key network principles are set out in the following table.

2.4 The estimated cost through the BSIP to improve bus service provision is subject to on-going appraisal but is expected to be in the region of approximately £105 million over the first 2 years.

2.5 We will explore bringing the on-road management of the bus network, using a comprehensive Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) system and driver communication into a single, centrally managed place. This will allow combined coordination of services directly between operators so that decisions can be made collectively for the betterment of the

passenger rather than independently with limited visibility of the wider network. Such coordination will build upon measures already utilised by TfWM on Highways and other modes through the Regional

Transport Coordination Centre, already supported and staffed by local bus operators. The estimated cost for the improved network management functions is £5.25 million.

Core Network (turn up and go)	Monday to Saturday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 mins between 0500 to 0700 • 10 mins between 0700 to 1830 • 15 mins between 1830 to 2330 	Sunday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 mins 0630 to 0830 • 10 mins 0830 to 1700 • 15 mins 1700 to 2200
Local Network	Monday to Saturday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 mins between 0630 to 0800 • 20 mins between 0800 to 1830 • 30 mins between 1830 to 2300 	Sunday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60 mins 0700 to 0900 • 30 mins 0900 to 1700 • 60 mins 1700 to 2200
Supporting Network	We will ensure that the supported services continue to develop under the same principles of the core and local networks for access to employment, education and other activities and to become a viable alternative to the private car.	
Demand Responsive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Midlands Ring & Ride • West Midlands on Demand • Community Transport • Linked Provision <p>We will consider how each individual service can be brought together to complement each other, reduce the administrative overheads, and make more efficient use of the available resource. Additionally, we will consider how this resource can be used to provide a more flexible and sustainable solution for socially necessary supporting services, rather than traditional fixed route services, which doesn't meet customers' evolving needs.</p>	
Integration	The bus network will be enhanced to ensure that bus services are timed to meet light and heavy rail with a focus on meeting the specific times of first and last trains. In some cases, this will require the extension of the operational day for some services but within the principles as defined for enhancing the local bus networks.	

Significant increases in bus priority

2.6 TfWM need to explore retaining the current 86% of the core bus routes that average AM peak speeds of 18 km per hour or better, compared to 47% in 2019 pre-covid. There is also a need to recognise that for many trips longer than 4 miles in the West Midlands, these average speeds are too low for a bus network. This must involve greater bus priority and an increase of the current 53km of bus lanes; a larger bus rapid transit network and more bus lanes where there is congestion and space along high frequency routes (as stated in the NBS); whilst integrating our Local Walking and Cycling Plans where complementary and improving physical

access to inaccessible transport interchanges (i.e. Olton Station).

2.7 The BSIP proposes over a 110km of new bus lanes, expansion of the bus rapid transit (BRT) network, more cross-city region bus priority and investment to speed up buses and improve reliability on more services as part of the core network through targeted junction and corridor interventions. The estimated total cost of this significant increase in bus priority across the region is £630 million. This will be prioritised in the BSIP up to 2025, with BRT expansion, cross-city region bus priority and key interventions on the core network through a



£200 million investment, implemented through enhanced delivery approaches.

Lower and simpler fares

2.8 The recent reduction in fares is hugely positive, however single fares are still significantly higher in the West Midlands than they are in London and as such demand has suffered. Furthermore, each operator offers an array of ticket types across a multitude of validity periods, and this coupled with multi-operator and multi-modal tickets means there are thousands of tickets types to choose from and it takes a high level of expertise to ensure the right ticket is purchased. This is a recognised barrier for customers who are put off by the complexity.

2.9 In order to provide a vastly simplified and improved fare offer for customers, TfWM proposes to reduce the price of the nBus ticketing range to that of its current National Express counterpart (thus removing the price premium) and then to remove all other ticket types from the customer offer so that the only product range available is nBus. This would reduce the ticketing range from thousands to tens making it much easier for the customer to understand which ticket is best for them. It is also proposed that the price of single and return tickets are aligned across operators so that they too are simple and easy for customers to understand. It is also proposed that TfWM take over the provision of ticketing retail including B to B and engagement with Government. With a single nBus ticketing range, it is also proposed that circa 0.5% of all future nBus revenue is ring-fenced for marketing investment managed by TfWM. The estimated costs to develop and deliver this single nBus ticketing range and improved fare offers for customers in the first 3 years of the BSIP is £0.75 million.

Seamless, integrated local ticketing between operators and modes

2.10 Every bus operator can now accept a contactless payment card as payment for fares and National Express deliver best value capping for customers that just use their services. However, customers who wish to use their contactless card to pay for journeys on more than one operator or another mode can pay up to double the fare as there is no interoperability between ticket machines. TfWM has designed a broker to resolve this issue and is working to secure the £20 million needed to deliver it through the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS); providing seamless, integrated local ticketing between operators and modes in the West Midlands, with opportunities for other regions to join and provide additional benefits for passengers.

Local bus network presented as a single system, with clear passenger information

2.11 Our ambition for clear passenger information and brand, across our assets are:

- All buses and waiting areas to be presented as one single integrated transport system under the West Midlands Transport brand, but with strong local identity
- Higher-quality, accurate information, accessible to new/infrequent users, inclusive
- Enhanced multi-modal and onward travel information at bus stations, transport interchanges and key travel hubs
- Improved and timely information on un/planned disruption, through the Regional Transport Coordination Centre
- Marketing and promotion of bus travel as a reliable and greener car alternative
- New ways of presenting information to support the ambition of the core network; 'Next fastest service to', expected arrival times (Real Journey Times), new larger service number displays

- Reduced number of timetable changes.

The estimated costs associated with improving the bus brand, assets and passenger information is £39.8 million.

Modern buses and decarbonisation

- 2.12 The bus fleet needs to achieve a minimum 100% Euro VI (or better) standard, as part of a transition to zero emission. Investment in new zero emission buses provides an opportunity to attract new users; (a fully loaded double deck bus can take 75 cars off the road) helping to reduce congestion and further reduce the impact of transport on the environment.
- 2.13 By 2030, with funding support, it is aimed to have nearly 90% of the 2,000 strong bus fleet zero emission. National Express West Midlands has set its own ambition to be zero emission by 2030. WMCA will transition the subsidised bus services to zero emission by the same 2030 timeframe, for another 200 zero emission buses, coupled with Coventry's all-electric bus operations by 2025. This will leave the remaining buses in the region with a target date of 2037, subject to operator agreement. Through the 'live' BSIP, TfWM will work with operators to identify the required financial support, to accelerate this programme to make all buses in the West Midlands zero-emission by 2030, whilst delivering zero emission corridors serving the most affected areas of air quality. The current estimated total cost of the transition to zero emission is £1.1 billion. This doesn't include any costs for extra vehicles that may be required to provide increased service frequency and coverage. In the first year of the BSIP, an additional £2 million will be required to achieve a minimum 100% Euro VI across the fleet, alongside £105 million to deliver more zero emission buses in the first 3 years of BSIP.

Excellent customer service and passenger charter

- 2.14 The West Midlands Bus Alliance published its first Customer Charter in May 2019. The Charter has been adopted by operators in the region and promises to focus on delivering a high quality, safe, reliable, cleaner, green and accessible local bus network. The Charter also describes how Bus Alliance partners will act, through a responsible, honest, listening and informative approach to our customers. The existing Charter was developed collaboratively with bus operators and Transport Focus and demonstrates our experience so far in developing customer promises that stakeholders collectively agree and sign up to.
- 2.15 To develop further our 'customer excellence' we will give passengers a stronger voice; develop a new Bus Passenger Charter and standards with tangible outcomes customers can expect to experience when using the bus; and provide mechanisms for redress to ensure standards are upheld. We will ensure our Charter is easy to understand, accessible in alternative formats and available. It will include the objective of first contact resolution wherever possible; passenger engagement opportunities; and redress and escalation arrangements. The estimated cost of a new Charter through the BSIP is £250,000 with ongoing costs for monitoring and performance of £10,000 per annum. No cost provision has been made at this stage for potential payments of compensation to passengers.

Safer and more secure bus travel

- 2.16 Customer satisfaction with personal safety needs improving to levels achieved in high bus use cities such as Nottingham and Brighton, for at stop and on bus elements. Our current customer satisfaction levels for safety are 10 percentage points lower than these comparable cities. We know that this



is a significant barrier to modal shift, with DfT figures suggesting 11.5% more journeys would be made if passengers felt safer.

- 2.17 There are several key deliverables that will begin to create that further step change in improving passenger perception of safety, aligned to our Safer Travel Plan. These include our new Bus Byelaws to tackle anti-social behaviour on buses; better personal security information; increased visibility of staff on the network; improved and increased CCTV on-board; a greater focus on groups who may be vulnerable to crime or have a lower perception of personal safety; increased training for better passenger safety on-board; improved waiting environments (linking with projects such as 'step together'); support for staff; and working to increase powers available to tackle crime and anti-social behaviours. The estimated cost through the BSIP is £360,000 per annum.