

JONATHAN BRAY



Plenty of ambition, but ambiguity also

The National Bus Strategy sets out an attractive vision for the future of buses, but questions remain over how it will be achieved

► For years we have been arguing that passengers in our areas don't want on-street competition and private companies determining this key public service that they rely on. Instead they want single, integrated bus networks as part of wider single integrated public transport networks. The National Bus Strategy shows that argument has now been won.

It's striking too how few friends bus deregulation has these days that nobody seems to have turned up at its funeral this week to mourn its passing, and to defend Nicholas Ridley's original vision of a free and competitive market for bus services. But if deregulation as we knew it is dead then what is this creature that is replacing it?

The National Bus Strategy goes into a remarkable level of detail on what bus networks should look like in the future - from how buses routes should be numbered to how the fares should be structured and charged. In essence, it wants the kind of bus network you would get through specification via a franchise or through municipal provision. But though franchising (and perhaps municipal operation in the future) are seen as legitimate ways of achieving these goals by the strategy, in effect bus services in England are being herded to the top of an Enhanced Partnership ski slope and given a hefty push. No Enhanced Partnership by April next year - no money.

Whereas the few Enhanced Partnerships that are in place have taken years to get over

the line the government wants the whole of England to be papered over with Enhanced Partnership agreements (other than those who are on the franchise route) in a year's time. In some ways it makes sense to seek to reduce the wriggle room to spin out for years endless negotiations between local authorities and bus operators to arrive at a watered down compromise and a photocall of a fleet of new buses that have replaced some old buses,



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as if replacing old buses was some kind of miracle. But, at the same time, there has to be a danger, with these timescales, and with local government spending cuts having decimated transport planning capacity in the shires in particular, that weak and baggy Enhanced Partnerships will emerge in order to access the cash. The details that matter to passengers, and the fall out of the Enhanced Partnerships, will be spun into the future.

Enhanced Partnerships are still a product of negotiation - rather than dictation by local authorities on behalf of national government in pursuit of a precise outcome. They also still operate within a deregulated market which is overseen by the competition authorities. So just how far can we expect the Enhanced Partnership tool to deliver the kind of fully integrated single network with highly specified outcomes that the government wants all across the country?

More widely are we now entering, in theory at least, into a strange hybrid model for bus provision where those operating bus services (when the music stopped before the pandemic) get to keep operating them but under a kind of quasi licence from local government, which itself is under a kind of quasi licence from national government? And this is all within what is still nominally a free market where new entrants could burst upon the scene at any moment.

Meanwhile, the bus strategy is in danger of bias against the route one option that could deliver the outcomes it wants - which would be best achieved by writing down precisely what you and the government wants and asking companies to bid to provide it. Because if you start an Enhanced Partnership to get the funding, how easy - legally and otherwise - would it be to later ride two horses afterwards by starting the franchising process? How do you work closely with incumbent operators on an Enhanced Partnership and at the same time run a free and fair franchising process where non-incumbents are on level terms with the incumbents? It's strange too that though the document is keenly aware of the problems with timelines on franchising - and sets an ambitious timeline for Enhanced Partnerships - that there is no mention of any reforms of the 2017 legislation and any learning of the lessons from the slow take up and implementation of the powers it contains.

“We couldn’t have asked for more. But all of this will not come cheap”

Inspired by the Glider service in Belfast (pictured), the National Bus Strategy aspires to introduce five similar Bus Rapid Transit systems in England



How much?

The National Bus Strategy is not short on ambition. It wants more services serving more places for more of the time. It wants turn up and go on busy routes. It wants cheaper and simpler fares. It wants high spec green buses. It wants extensive bus priority everywhere. It wants what we want. We couldn’t have asked for more. But all of this will not come cheap when the pre-pandemic base case was that subsidy was well below what was needed to stem decline.

Keeping bus services running during the pandemic is also burning through cash at a prodigious rate - and no one knows for sure how long social distancing will remain - or whether a post-summer third wave could mean restrictions are reintroduced. We know we have the Covid-19 Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG) for now and we know we have the prime minister’s £3bn. But beyond that we don’t know too much, including what the quantum of overall funding will be available for bus, how it will be distributed or what the total price tag would be for all the goodies the government wants. This doesn’t make it easy for anyone to plan ahead to deliver on both

the ambitions and timescales that government has set. On the plus side, with Boris Johnson right behind a policy which has pledged to transform bus services, however much the Treasury sucks its teeth about the price tag, it will be difficult for them now to undermine the prime minister by cutting the bus industry off at the knees.

Beyond the headlines

There are some pretty hefty aspirations loitering in the odd paragraph here and there (all with their own price tags). Check these out for starters...

- ▶ Five Glider schemes. I’m a big fan of Glider (and also good to see Northern Ireland get some attention for the good stuff it does on bus), but Glider works because it was very well thought through for the specific corridors it operates on and because the money was spent to ensure its quality from start to finish. Gliders in England will need to do the same if they are to work anywhere near as well.
- ▶ A review of the eligibility for free bus travel for disabled people.
- ▶ Through fares for any journey involving bus, rail and light rail (that’s some aspiration!).

The dog that didn’t bark

The lack of any reference to addressing the antediluvian ‘system’ of oversight and regulation of bus safety outside London is a big hole in the bus strategy. How can it be right that for bus and rail in London the analysis and data is there on safety risks and accidents (and is being systematically addressed), but nothing close to this exists for buses outside London? There is a glimmer of hope though in the review of the public service registration standards - which could be used to require reporting and data on accidents and risk.

So, to borrow some lines from the late great Eric Morecambe, the National Bus Strategy has all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order. But with some positive thinking... ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.