

Baroness Vere
Department for Transport

Via Email

10 May 2021

Dear Baroness Vere,

The Heathrow Area Transport Forum (HATF) warmly welcomes the publication of the new National Bus Strategy (NBS), which is a potentially transformative new focus on the sector.

Heathrow Area Forum, Special Interest Group - Exploring the potential for collaboration.

HATF, supported by the Heathrow Strategic Planning Group (HSPG), recently convened a special interest group which includes relevant local authorities, Heathrow Airport Limited (HAL), Transport for London (TfL) and representatives from the Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT) to explore if, and how best, our 'sub-region' could respond collectively to the new strategy.

Why the NBS really matters to the local economy and Covid recovery

Key background points noted by participants were:

- All local authorities around the airport, and the airport itself, are committed to increasing the mode share for bus as a key way of delivering on the UK's decarbonisation ambitions, reducing congestion and maximising access to airport opportunities as a vital element in tackling economic deprivation.
- The dramatic economic impact of the pandemic on the subregion is becoming ever more clear. The latest report from Oxford Economics (April 2021) estimates that the west London workforce alone shed 21,600 jobs in 2020, a 1.9% contraction, and anticipate the loss of a further 27,000 jobs this year. Further job losses are anticipated in authorities laying to the west of the airport, outside of the GLA area.
- Job losses have generally been highly concentrated in lower-skilled sectors, hitting lower social economic groups much harder. These groups are disproportionately represented in the airport workforce. Providing easy and affordable access to employment opportunities via sustainable modes for these groups is key to building back better and securing a complete recovery.
- Heathrow airport, a key driver of the UK economy, cannot operate efficiently without an effective local bus network. Pre-covid buses carry nearly 1 in 5 colleagues, with 32 bus routes serving the airport from 14 adjacent local authority areas.
- Thinking beyond specifically airport related trips, there is also huge potential in Heathrow developing as an important 'hub on the ground' – a first class integrated transport hub where a huge range of onward connections can be accessed by public transport via one interchange to reach a wide range of destinations across the sub-region. Buses have a key role to play in realising that vision, and particularly in ensuring access to those opportunities for local residents

who are most impacted by the negative externalities of aviation activity (noise, poor air quality, traffic congestion, etc).

We concluded that there is potential for an exemplar approach in local collaboration to respond to the ambition of the new strategy in the Heathrow area. However, a number of challenges to achieving this were also identified.

Current Barriers to collaboration on the NBS

The downturn in aviation demand during the past year, and for the foreseeable future, has diminished the capacity of HAL and its ability to act in a coordinating role. The unique administrative geography of the airport, straddling as it does the Greater London Authority boundary, also presents issues in responding to the strategy in a holistic way that makes sense for the whole of its functional economic zone and travel to work area. Collaboration in this area therefore means working across the full range of shire councils, unitary authorities, London councils, HAL, TfL and a multiplicity of operators running a mix of regulated and deregulated services, including both commercial and contracted bus routes.

This complexity, compounded by the lack of resources for sub-regional coordination and the tight timelines set out in the strategy, will, without DfT support, stymie the scope of a coordinated response and therefore lead to an opportunity for transformative improvements being missed.

How the DfT could support this unique collaboration.

It was noted in the letter of 15 March that your Department may look to allocate further resource to support the capacity of partnerships aiming to develop ambitious bus improvement plans, once there was better understanding of the take up of funding announced so far. At our meeting this offer was identified as a potential way of providing the resources necessary to overcome the challenges we face and deliver a groundbreaking level of co-ordination in responding to the NBS in the Heathrow area.

To explore this further, we'd like to meet with your officials to discuss how best HATF (including HAL and our local authority partners represented by HSPG) could work in partnership with the Department to develop a genuinely transformative sub-regional bus improvement plan that takes full advantage of the opportunities presented in your new strategy.

This would be a very welcome step for the Heathrow area local economy which has suffered an extensively damaging 15 months so far.

Yours sincerely,



Val Shawcross CBE
Independent Chair, Heathrow Area Transport Forum