Submission to Gloucestershire County Council's Bus Service Improvement Plans under the Bus Back Better National Strategy

Background

The Transport & Infrastructure and Bridges and Borders Sub-Group of the Forest Economic Partnership is aware that in preparation of Bus Service Improvement Plans, County Councils require engagement with business.

The Forest Economic Partnership (FEP) was launched in 2018 by the Forest of Dean District Council. Its mission is to deliver a thriving economy in the Forest of Dean District by connecting business, Councils, people, ideas and resources. Over 250 organisations/individuals participate in its quarterly stakeholder group or 3 sub-group meetings or monthly newsletter. The majority of these are business people across the 10 key business sectors in the District.

In 2021 working as part of district-based Rural Technologies' Geospatial Commission project on rural Mobility as a Service, FEP was able to commence its own research on transport needs in the district. The public versions of the research for inhabitants and businesses are found at https://fep2050.co.uk/blog/feps-first-transport-study-reports/ . Further findings of the wider project on wider global approaches to rural transport conducted by Gloucestershire University's CCRI, were submitted to the OECD Working Group on Mobility in the Periphery.

Purpose

This document summarises discussions and ideas around transport relevant to the forward vision of Gloucestershire's BSIP, that have resulted from FEP meetings for consideration.

Considerations:

1. *Recognition of starting point*

In order to deliver the fundamental changes in transport, it is important to recognise the starting point. Examples include:

   a. In the 203 square miles of the district there are no real time information displays at any of the bus stops. The actual technology baselines of the 21st century are starkly different between rural and urban areas. The opportunity is to offer Gloucestershire as an exemplar county in which to prove radical approaches, given it has 2 districts to represent each of the rural, semi-rural and urban types.
   b. There is a significant difference between the urban question of "when is the next" and the rural "is there a". Currently for rural, the easiest resolution is to not try to hard to find an answer, because there is always a car. That option will increasingly come under strain with the requirement for electric or hydrogen vehicles and the need to address net zero.
   c. Public transport use has been seriously diminished by Covid-19. This is a combination of the public messaging about not using such transport and the key demographics of higher risk groups, who are also more likely to be bus users. That negative messaging will continue to dissuade non-pupil users for some time. A positive future needs short term as well as longer term focus of behaviour or modal change.

2. *Strategy needs to deliver viable options to meet need*
   The needs of individuals have changed and evolved some distance from historic patterns. Earlier pre-Covid FEP research showed that 30% of people in the district worked from a home-base. Data from our Inhabitants Study shows that those commuting within the District, travel to many different business premise locations, not usually the closest urban centre. The underlying needs are for certainty of service and a complexity of trips, which in the future could combine scheduled bus services with demand responsive formats and realistic active travel links.

   Inhabitants expressed a desire for buses to go to more places; businesses wished to increase bus use by the employees as the closest bus stop was accessible to their premises. There is a trade-off between providing services and the number of functioning bus stops. Getting people closer to their start-point and destination would increase numbers when combined with certainty of service. It also provides the active travel choice of the pleasurable last ½ mile in summer sun or not so in winter rain.

3. *Strategy needs to include metrics that provide clarity to key stakeholders.*
   These may vary by group but broadly reflect:
   a. Customer requirements: comfort, flexibility, reliability etc
   b. Operator requirements
   c. Geographic requirements: reporting differences between rural and urban need recognising the significant statistical skew to urban performance across a rural county such as Gloucestershire.

4. *Consideration of reason for trip and varied use cases*
   There is tendency to talk about bus users as a homogenous whole. Even within the individual they are different. For example, the needs of a student using the bus for school is completely different to the same teenager using it socially. The former might leave it to the last minute and runs; the latter gives it reasonable time to arrive and knows it's uncool to run. What they do when they are going to their part-time job is moot. For older users then there are considerations around health needs and whether that is GP-based or designated specialist centres. Behaviour change research needs to be based on use cases not a singularity giving people the option to rank need according to that specific case not an overall assessment.

5. *Importance of integration of multiple kinds*
   The format of BSIP drives the respondent county to typically focus on county needs and probably those with the highest densities of population. Whatever that is proposed needs to meet a range of integration levels:
   a. Integration of services between rural and urban areas. The route maps for UK transport such as Innovate UK published in August 2021 favour technology-based approaches that would struggle in rural areas. Connected and Autonomous Vehicles work well on constrained highways but less well with the variation of the countryside. Success would not be a highly happy urban population and a disgruntled rural from the lack of viable interconnections.

b. Urban to urban integration. Examples of this would be services running from the District to Gloucester and those running to Ross and Chepstow. It would also include services that connect the four main towns not as a variation of a main route service across the district.

c. County to Western Gateway. The Western Gateway's first Ambition of three is connectivity. Within that ambition this is defined as a golden ticket to travel within the region in 1 hour. The removal of Severn Bridge tolls significantly increased the numbers of inhabitants in South of the District who commute to jobs in Bristol. Any plan needs to integrate effectively across borders.

d. Ecosystem might seem a strange integration but is essential. BSIP focuses on buses but the reality is a multi-modal system which requires interconnection of the many different forms of transport. An ecosystem approach recognises the importance of the local taxi or community transport and aims to achieve balance and sustainability to futureproof.

e. Evidence from WelTag Stage 1 Chepstow Transport study refers to the simplest solution is cross border working. Clear evidence of the need to integrate cross border. Addressing travel needs rather than political boundaries.

6. *Importance of traffic flows*

Data from the Inhabitant and Business surveys revealed significant information on the potential travel flows in the main currently unserved by public transport. Educational flows for school, college and university range from the predictable to the less so as start and end times varies. The increase in home-working both in response to covid and the previous trend to improved work-life balance makes aggregate business flows unpredictable. Of the 51 businesses surveyed there were 26 specific start and finish times but rural areas are also home to more place-based businesses where on-site attendance is necessary such as manufacturing or leisure or tourism. Effective bus services might only run when the volume dictates need.

7. *Importance of technology*

The types of solutions envisioned by Bus Back Better will be technology enabled. Integrated ticketing across providers is a non-trivial commercial, logistical and cyber-security problem. Younger generations will expect app-based solutions to drive up future users not least in their use of shared vehicles to get to the connection with a bus. A balance must be struck between the technologically possible, the likely to be employable in the short term and the need for aspiration and real change.