

UPDATE ON CPCA BUS REVIEW

September 2022

Compiled by Cllr Anne Hay, Rapporteur for the Bus Reform Review
Information provided by Oliver Howarth, Bus Strategy Manager

The bus review has spread into other topics over time as new government policies have appeared, waxed and waned.

Franchising

We prepared a full Treasury Green Book report on Franchising but the independent auditor concluded that the financial risks of franchising as applied to a Covid type situation created too high a risk for a young LTA like CPCA (as we don't have many assets to balance our books). This caused Franchising to be paused. However, we are considering three options:

- a) to continue franchising with funding from the City Access Strategy in order to make it easier to replace existing bus services with new CSET/C2C services;
- b) to move away entirely from franchising and create a legally-binding Enhanced Partnership (EP) between CPCA, the bus operators and local stakeholders; or
- c) a compromise between the two – an overall EP with some franchised areas.

There are several options under active consideration. A Bus Operators Forum has been set up and has been meeting regularly in preparation for the possibility of setting up an EP.

Covid impact

Our bus services were badly damaged by Covid.

Bus patronage across COPA is still down 24% compared to pre-Covid.

Concessionary passenger journeys are down 42% and there is little sign of any improvement.

Effectively many routes are running at a large loss subsidised by the DfT. Although Government has provided two packages of support funding, the first (CBSSG) ended last year and the second (Bus Recovery Grant or BRG) ends in September 2022 from which point the Treasury expects all bus services to be self-supporting. In reality, only a part of our network will be self-supporting. Probably most Cambridge Citi services, Park & Ride, BusWay and Peterborough Citi services will support themselves, but the other bus routes linking our market towns may be at risk.

ZEBRA (Zero Emission Buses)

On a positive note we are acquiring 30 state of the art all-electric double-deckers with the cost spread between Stagecoach, DfT, CPCA and GCP. These are due to be delivered around Xmas for use on Cambridge Park & Ride services to reduce emissions in the city centre. All will be based at Stagecoach's Cowley Road bus depot; there will also be a top up charger at Babraham Park & Ride site fuelled by the new solar farm being built there.

So far as we can tell from DfT we seem to be ahead of the other Zebra bidders from around the country.

New Peterborough depot

The same ZEBRA scheme could not be rolled out to Peterborough due to the age and inconvenience of Peterborough's only bus depot and our wish to open the bidding for zero emission buses to all operators, not just Stagecoach. A proposal was approved by CPCA Board at their meeting on 27 July 2002 to spend £40k on an investigation into how best to structure ownership, operation and funding. This work will inform the development of future depots as well.

BSIP

As part of Bus Back Better, all Local Transport Authorities were required to write and submit a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) 10 months ago. We wrote an ambitious plan, involving better services connecting our market towns and widespread use of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) in rural areas; franchising of services to ensure we could build and fund new services without the incumbent bus operators having a veto; and, building on our successful ZEBRA bid, a large purchase of further zero emission buses to meet the Independent Climate Commission for Cambridgeshire (ICCC) ambitions. We were therefore very surprised to be allocated none of the BSIP funds. In fact, 60% of LTAs received no BSIP funds. Two causes have subsequently been discovered:

- 1) in DfT's view we had insufficient commitment to road charging, active travel and bus priority schemes in our area; and
- 2) the DfT subsequently applied a deprivation index score to each BSIP submitted and given our high overall growth, this meant that the money tended to be allocated in the north of England rather than to us.

We are preparing a new BSIP for submission later in the year.

New bus services

We have tried various experimental services – the diversion of the X5 via Cambridge Science Park was potentially a great success but was stymied by most of the 7000 employees there switching to working from home. An experimental orbital bus in Peterborough has failed to carry significant numbers, demonstrating that such services don't meet significant traffic flows. However, the tinging DRT service in west Huntingdonshire has shown better growth than anticipated and has reached out to a new, younger demographic of transport users – it is currently being retendered.

Latest developments

In the meantime, however, the bus industry is struggling at all levels to deal with:

- Covid-caused reductions in passenger revenues,
- the end of Bus Recovery Grant by DfT and
- the massive increase in fuel costs (about £6m pa across our area).

We consider it probable there will be significant reductions of commercial bus services this coming autumn and if this happens we will struggle to easily replace missing services. We are pressing Stagecoach for details of their intentions.