

19 February 2021

283 Empress Road
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Slough Strategic Transport Infrastructure Plan

Dear Stephen,

First fully embraces Slough Borough Council's Strategic Transport Infrastructure Plan objectives, and the overall aim to evolve public transport infrastructure to best serve the needs of the town through encouraging a change of course towards a future where travel by public transport, on foot or by bicycle becomes much more the norm. This is a truly inspiring and achievable vision for sustainability, and as a bus operator we welcome the opportunity to play an integral role in contributing to the success of the plan.

In support of the overall vision for Slough, we believe that a commercially successful town center is one that fully incorporates an integrated public transport network, and to facilitate this it will also be important to maintain a focus on the long-term commercial sustainability of the transport infrastructure projects themselves.

Future investment in development for Slough will require a continued focus on enabling buses to penetrate the town centre, with good access to key facilities, amenities and shopping centres, and no erosion of current bus-only access areas in the town centre. This will enable buses to facilitate economic regeneration whilst maintaining and enhancing social equality, at the same time, through investment in electrification, improving air quality and reducing carbon emissions.

The bus plays a central role in keeping the city running, not only as a means for people to get to work but also as a means to keep communities connected, enabling people to get to hospitals, go shopping and carry out basic day to day necessities.

It is also central in improving air quality and driving forward de-carbonisation In Slough. First is committed to not buying any more diesel vehicles after 2022, and continued collaboration with Slough Borough Council is a prerequisite for establishing the formula that will be pivotal to encouraging more people onto buses and public transport in general.

As well as being in full support of the ambition to treble the share of journeys made by public transport to/from and within Slough, we particularly welcome the focus on the following areas:

- To maximise the share of journeys made by sustainable modes (on foot, by bicycle and public transport)
- To improve access to employment, healthcare, education and leisure facilities by sustainable modes of travel
- To reduce carbon and other emissions from road traffic which contribute to climate change and poor air quality
- To provide the sustainable travel capacity to allow the economy to grow and enable regeneration of the town centre and growth in line with the Local Plan
- To improve safety and personal security, and the quality of travel experience
- To make public transport affordable and physically accessible to all
- To make journey times both quicker and less variable

The overall objectives set out in Chapter 3, particularly the ambition to reduce car modal share by

25% in 20 years, are supported and we would be keen to work in partnership to accelerate delivery of this.

STIP Objectives

- **Making public transport a much more attractive option for travel to and from the centre of Slough, the rest of the Borough and beyond, including Slough's neighbourhoods**
- **Providing the capacity for movement to and from the centre of Slough, in the form of a high quality, reliable, high capacity public transport network, which enables a higher scale of development**
- **Maximising the benefits of enhanced strategic public transport connectivity to London, Heathrow Airport and the wider Thames Valley**
- **Using high quality design of transport infrastructure to enhance the quality of the public realm**

In comparison to other cities across the UK, for example Norwich, York, Portsmouth where there is already a strong commitment to deliver bus priority and there is good provisioning for Park and Ride services, bus priority currently remains limited in Slough.

Extensions of current temporary bus lanes to connect with both existing and proposed bus lanes along the A4 as part of the MRT+ scheme will help streamline traffic flow for buses must remain a priority. Furthermore, controlled access to these bus lanes is fundamental to their success. The more vehicle types which are permitted to use the bus lane, worsen the opportunity for the bus to improve reliability, punctuality and overall journey time.

Additionally, enabling and increasing bus priority measures and expanding dedicated bus lanes will greatly improve public transport journey reliability, but crucial to this will be ensuring that dedicated road space for buses is maintained and remains dedicated to buses rather than being diluted by other vehicle types that will slow traffic flows and cause delays to overall journey times. Reducing bus journey times and their variability not only allows for more efficient operation, it helps deliver a service which is more attractive to users and potential users.

Planning for sufficient bus priority measures and better bus access in communities that rely most on bus transport in the Slough area will also help stimulate an increase in bus usage that will in turn drive passenger demand for increased frequencies across Slough.

Implementation of a Slough Mass Rapid Transit network 'MRT+' has real potential to support mode shift to public transport and meet the target to make journey times quicker, however, whilst dedicated and segregated bus routes can offer a strong improvements in overall bus performance and reliability, there is a need to ensure that this does not come at a high cost per passenger, require a disproportionate share of investment or take an unduly long time to deliver, leaving other parts of the existing bus and public transport network to languish. We welcome the principle that bus services other than the dedicated MRT+ routes will be able to use the infrastructure, but the overall principles of modal shift, and its attendant benefits, should drive the relative investment in MRT+ and elsewhere across the network.

Furthermore, investment in high quality passenger infrastructure, ticketing, information and accessibility, together with a high quality image, can represent better value for money and deliver greater benefits than specially designed vehicles that are expensive to buy and operate. The results achieved by the Eclipse in Hampshire and MetroBus in Bristol are better value than those from Glider in Belfast.

It is highly likely that proposals to convert the Network Rail Slough, Windsor and Eton branch line to a guided bus way may become subject to obstacles and complications that prevent construction from going ahead, but if they are achievable we would recommend that consideration be given in the proposals for full two-way bus traffic flow to maximise the benefit of this proposed bus way.

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In all cases, provision of self-enforcing bus priority (whether requiring guidance or simply with access controlled by smart intelligent signalling) maximises the benefits to bus and coach services and we strongly encourage that. If enforcement is required, it must be budgeted for at the outset to secure the ongoing benefits. The deployment of experimental traffic orders to “trial” such priority measures is also welcomed and generally makes their ultimate adoption more acceptable through the initial demonstration of their benefits.

Plans to increase spacing between stops across the proposed MRT+ network may result in reducing passenger demand if they result in creating high speed links between urban centres (e.g. Slough-Uxbridge) that by-pass stops in the communities that lie between the urban centres that already rely on existing good access to public transport. In order to encourage a stronger mode shift to public transport, we recommend that proposals for the MRT+ network support and accommodate areas or sections of routes where existing bus usage is dependent on short distance journeys between more closely dispersed stops.

We would like to develop, in partnership, an operating model that delivered the best benefits for a service network which optimised the infrastructure benefits, using current asset quantities, rather than overlaying additional limited stop services that run the risk not only of abstracting passengers from the existing, rendering them uneconomic to operate, but also could be caught behind other longer distance services that maintain frequent stops, thereby reducing or eliminating their journey time benefits.

Slough will also benefit from streamlined traffic flow for buses being factored into development plans for areas selected for housing/commercial development, where sufficient consultation with bus/public transport operators to enable planning for network development will ensure service levels can meet the needs of communities and businesses as they grow and evolve. New developments should be focussed on public transport access, requiring them to be located where they can be served without incurring significant additional costs.

Supporting growth and investment in public transport and public transport infrastructure remains essential to the future development of the town, and making section 106 funding available to bus operators as part of any town development plans will further enable bus operators to provision adequate capacity to service passenger demand as it grows.

From both a cost and environmental perspective we would advise against the use of diesel hybrid high spec Glider type vehicles. In real cost terms it is possible to procure three electric double decker buses for the price of two diesel hybrid high spec Glider type vehicles. For the same price and through public and private sectors working together it should be possible to upgrade 100% of the commercial bus fleet to zero emissions.

Passengers in the UK prefer a seat on a bus rather than standing and a double deck bus can carry twice as many seated passengers as an artic. First’s commitment to electrification is public and conversely our experience with the less environmentally diesel hybrid system illustrates lower

vehicular reliability and considerably greater operating costs, particularly for maintenance.

It might be advantageous to begin operation on the new infrastructure with conventional vehicles so as to align investment timetables between the public and private sectors in partnership, thereby requiring less grant from central government to guarantee delivery of MRT+, and we would be pleased to discuss such opportunities.

Electric buses are well suited to running in urban environments not only because of the cost and emissions benefits, but also from the types of range that they can deliver. In recognition of Slough Borough Council's objectives to support the 2040 Vision and Climate Change Strategy, we would request that Slough Borough Council also factors into STIP provisioning for funding to support bus operators in sourcing electric vehicle fleets, and implementing infrastructure that will support electric vehicles and charging facilities, that will ultimately deliver on achieving zero emissions. Providing "top up" charge facilities in the central area (including potentially the bus station) will allow the conversion of longer distance services to zero emission operation, without the additional cost of hydrogen fuel cell vehicles. But perhaps even more importantly it could allow electrification of local services that otherwise could not complete an entire day duty without re-charge, necessitating either the expense of addition of extra vehicles to the fleet, or retention of diesel longer than would otherwise be necessary.

First remains committed to working with Slough borough Council as well as other transport operators to deliver capped inter-operable multi-operator ticketing. We support the collective goal to establish an interface between MaaS and bus services to offer a range of journey options and multi-modal journeys, and look forward to working with Slough Borough Council to explore potential new technology options will be able to deliver journey plans that can be realised through mainstream platforms (contactless bank cards, operator apps etc..). It will remain important to keep both the scope and practicality of what is desirable, as well as deliverable timescales, under review.

However, in order to serve passenger demand where passengers regularly use the same transport and journey options, it will also be important to ensure that passengers retain direct access to the best suited, market-responsive pricing offers from their local operators of choice.

We do not agree that reducing bus service length and replacing conventional services with demand responsive ones will make public transport more attractive. Experience elsewhere suggests such services struggle to meet local needs sustainably. The public continue to value direct, high frequency, high volume services, operating on predictable routes utilising prioritised infrastructure. The focus should be on the infrastructure improvements which are proposed and ensuring that people can get to their destinations on services that are more attractive offering reduced and more consistent journey times. This will also make bus services more efficient to operate, improving the sustainability and making them potentially a more attractive option in terms of the total journey cost.

A key element for making buses more attractive would be for a fully working and functioning real time information system. As a bus operator, all of our vehicles are equipped to send standard data to the Local Authorities who wish to display real time information at bus stops and key interchanges. We believe the current system is probably outdated and requires replacement.

STIP Objectives

- **Making walking and cycling to and from the centre of Slough and the district centres the most attractive option for shorter journeys**

- **Creating attractive environments in which people are put first in terms of movement and use of space for interaction, creating safe, healthy and vibrant urban spaces which encourage people to live, work and relax locally**

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Active travel should complement public transport, particularly by providing links at the beginning and end of each journey. As the council looks to make additional provision for walking and cycling it will be important to ensure that attractive environments where people are put first, also extends to convenient access to, and good integration of public transport.

A key part of this will be maintaining bus traffic flows and access to the bus station, and the core town centre stops, as part of the plans for the pedestrian plaza to the south of station area. Also for additional consideration, it would be advisable to plan for expansion of the bus station to accommodate more buses and provide more space, shelter and facilities for bus passengers, and potential “top up” charging for electric buses. It might also be possible to re-route the MRT+ services to the bus station without increasing journey times, improving connection and interchange opportunities.

STIP Objectives

- **Reducing the dominance of the car as a mode of travel to, from and through the centre of Slough and on arterial roads as alternative modes become more attractive; and**
- **Minimising the impacts of roads, parking and motorised vehicles on the urban realm and on people, including improved air quality and road safety.**

First would strongly welcome an emphasis on stronger parking management and enforcement of illegal and obstructive parking, and introduction of workplace parking levies, as well as a structured approach to pricing for parking across the town centre itself and at shopping centres that will serve as an effective incentive to support a modal shift towards public transport.

Whilst we also welcome plans to incentivise last mile of travel by public transport through establishing Park and Ride sites across the Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western boundaries of Slough, there is a potential risk that the Sutton Lane Park and Ride site, due to its proximity to Heathrow Airport, could become a desirable alternative parking location for people using the airport. We would advise that usage of the Park and Ride sites is controlled and managed appropriately so as to avoid this.

The suggested removal of parking capacity in the central area, including that provided by temporary sites, is welcomed. Given the apparent under-utilisation of existing central area parking, consideration could be given to extending this policy such that more and better public realm open space could be provided by removal of unnecessary car parking, this also further reinforcing a modal shift to public transport. We note that it is stated that 14% of residents have long term disabilities that “may prevent them using public transport” (4.2.1); we would counter that those same disabilities may be better assisted through the provision of a more accessible and convenient public transport network that improves social inclusion and reduces car dependence.

We would also recommend strong planning controls, to prevent temporary derelict or open space becoming private short-term car parks.

There is undoubtedly a lot of work still to be done, in partnership, to enable transport operators to deliver on the goals of improving journey times and journey reliability to achieve the modal shift towards public transport and improvements to air quality that form the goals of STIP, and in order to achieve these goals it will be necessary to commit to further actions than are covered under the scope of these STIP measures. The draft STIP is nevertheless an exciting and promising start of the journey.

First is in full support of these planned STIP actions, and we welcome the opportunity to continue to play an active role in contributing to the development of a greener, more efficient and more attractive public transport system and infrastructure for Slough.

Yours sincerely,



Jonathan Lewis
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