

Stephen Hosking
Assistant Transport Planner
Major Infrastructure Projects
Slough Borough Council

24 February 2021

Dear Stephen,

Consultation on the Draft Strategic Transport Infrastructure Plan, December 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Council's draft plan. This is a joint response from both Reading Buses and our subsidiary Courtney Buses (trading as Thames Valley Buses in Slough). We welcome and strongly support the underlying policy framework which has been set out and wish to provide more detailed feedback on our aspirations and vision for the town's future as a key partner in delivering the strategy.

This plan will be fundamental to our ability to provide comprehensive, frequent, and affordable services to the residents of the Borough. The public highway is the track on which we operate, and our ability to navigate it freely without congestion determines a significant proportion of our cost base and our ability to attract customers. In broad terms, we are very supportive of the strategy, but there are some additional measures that would further support the type of bus service that is needed to meet the Borough's vision.

We wish to see firm proposals that will lead to the implementation of the following measures during the early phases of the strategy:

- Road user charging – necessary to encourage sustainable modes of transport as successfully proven in London. This would apply a charge for anti-social methods of transportation, reduce congestion and provide a funding stream for public transport. Suggest applying the charges at the Borough boundary.
- Workplace parking levy – to help support the town centre where access to public transport is straight forward, and to provide a further funding stream for public transport
- A wider range of bus priority lanes
- Action to address current highway issues
- A wider range of traffic light priority measures
- Tram style bus stop facilities on key corridors, similar to those introduced in Bristol for the Metrobus rapid transit system (see example in appendix 1)
- Ensure all bus stops are suitable for wheelchairs and buggies to obtain un-obstructed access to vehicles
- Extension of roadside real time information displays to additional stops
- Replace all speed tables on bus routes with speed cushions, with lining alongside to enable enforcement so that buses can straddle the cushions, and a review of existing speed cushions to bring them to the same standard

- Revenue funding to support enhanced frequencies on secondary bus routes, and to support the cost of reintroducing some tertiary services, both within the borough and on cross boundary routes which suffer from high traffic levels.

Our Company supports the direction and evolution of the policies outlined in the draft plan. We strongly support the sustaining and further development of proactive, long-term policies favouring public transport and deterring private vehicle use given the major challenge and negative impacts associated with car congestion identified by the Council, including economic and pollution impacts. We welcome the proposals for implementation of a wider range of bus priority lanes and measures at junctions, as well as stop and information infrastructure being upgraded.

Chapter 4 – Public Transport

We feel that the thrust of the schemes and initiatives outlined is entirely appropriate. We very much welcome the strong emphasis placed upon public transport schemes, the introduction of the Slough Mass Rapid Transport schemes, initially along the A4 corridor but also the conversion of the heavy rail link to Windsor, and the introduction of Park & Ride to deliver a step change in behaviour away from congested arterial routes. Park & Ride is a key ingredient for successful bus networks across the country, and a stepping stone from regular car use to public transport.

The new shared bus and cycle lane, which now extends for much of the length of the A4, has done a lot to separate buses from congestion, allowing them to provide a more attractive and reliable alternative to the car. The additional lanes proposed in the report will ensure these are joined up, so buses can enjoy a continuous flow, rather than being punctuated by frequent gaps in the segregated road space.

Whilst we recognise that the A4 corridor is the most pressing due to the high volumes of traffic, the areas away from this core corridor would also benefit from upgraded infrastructure reflecting areas with the highest levels of existing bus use, and to improve provide step-free access for wheelchairs and buggies. The MRT+ concept is one that has produced modal shift in areas such as Bristol and Belfast.

Future growth in car ownership could also be offset by encouraging the sustained use of public transport by young people. Our successful discounted young person travel offer “Boost” relies on significant commercial risk and could be replaced by additional revenue funding via an exempt ticketing scheme. The time when young people become able to learn to drive, and must switch to higher adult bus fares, is key to generating life-long perceptions and habits.

Chapter 5 – Walking, cycling & public realm

We also strongly support measures that improve access for pedestrians to ensure that the first/late mile of a bus user’s journey is as pleasant and safe as possible. Good lighting and CCTV should be provided at key interchanges around the Town Centre. Combined with investment in measures that allow us to provide services more efficiently, this can encourage greater use of our services, enabling us to grow revenues for reinvestment in service enhancements.

Chapter 6 – The Highway Network

The report has identified all the main congestion pinch points that we are aware of, but some additional consideration is needed in respect of future developments, especially the new Grove Academy which is situated in a narrow area that already becomes congested at certain times. The focus on this and other key congested junctions to improve traffic flow or provide bus priority measures that avoid congestion will bring real benefits to Slough, within its growing travel-to-work area and more widely. It is vital that these benefits are made clear to all key stakeholders to ensure ongoing support for the plan.

Chapter 7 – Town Centre Parking

Whilst we acknowledge that some parking is necessary, we do not quite agree with the statement in paragraph 7.1 that “providing the right amount and quality of parking has positive impacts on the attractiveness of an area...”. In many cases it has the opposite effect, encouraging people to bring private vehicles to the area instead of using more sustainable alternatives that make more efficient use of the space, and produce much less pollution. The overall point is however right that the quantity of parking needs to be tightly controlled to ensure that park & ride schemes and local bus services are not undermined.

The aim to reduce parking in the town centre is welcomed as it is supportive of the other objectives to cut overall vehicle emissions and enhance the environment. Shifting the focus to more short-term parking as also proposed may not however be commensurate in reducing overall car journeys or emissions.

We also believe that a workplace parking levy could generate substantial income streams to both help support the cost of improved public transport and highway maintenance. The workplace parking levy in Nottingham has been shown to be highly successful in generating revenue to support a secondary bus network, and in reducing overall traffic levels in the City.

COVID-19

Covid has accelerated some of the trends experienced over the last decade of increased home working and online retail. This brings changes to peak travel patterns, more part-time office commuting and reduced retail sector employment. Equally, it has highlighted that some things do need to be done in person, particularly education, and therefore some return to normality should be expected.

During lockdown have observed the benefits that can be derived from less congested streets and being able to enjoy our local environment. As things return to normal, we believe that the country’s focus will return to the environmental agenda with a much greater focus than before, having had a taste of how things could be during lockdown. The town’s return to normality needs to protect some of the benefits we have gained, ensuring that we establish new travel habits that are more sustainable than they were, rather than going back to old less sustainable ones.

To our mind this means that there is a need to focus on the early delivery of many of the items outlined in the strategy, particularly bus priority measures, given that there is currently a significant opportunity

in terms of public support for green initiatives, and the benefits that bus usage also derives to active travel for the first/last mile of a journey.

Conclusion

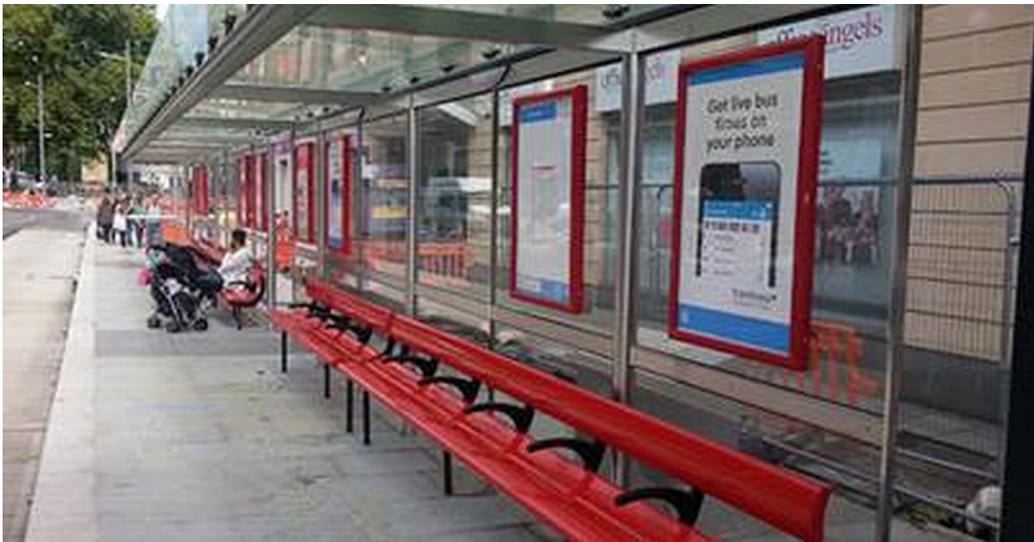
The draft strategy contains a vision and a series of key policies that we strongly support. Whilst there is more that could be done, the strategy should help achieve a more sustainable future for Slough.

Yours sincerely,

Robert Williams
Chief Executive Officer

Appendix 1 – Wish list for bus stop facilities (example from Bristol Metrobus system)

- Extended shelter with seating
- Timetable display cases and real time information displays
- New paving
- Differentiated road markings, including extended yellow bus stop box
- Extended entry exit space to ensure plenty of space for buses to stop parallel to the kerb
- Same standard at every stop along the entire route



Large urban centre stop (could be deployed at key Town Centre stops)



Standard suburban stop (could be deployed along key corridors, and any location with bus lanes)