

## **Gloucestershire Local Transport Plan Consultation 2020**

### **Response from Transition Stroud Transport Group**

#### **Introduction**

Transition Stroud (TS) is a network of people and groups working on a transition to a locally-based, low-carbon lifestyle. It was set up in 2008, and is part of the Transition Towns movement.

The TS Transport Group is concerned to promote sustainable transport generally in Stroud District. However, its immediate focus is on improving bus services. We think that better bus services are essential, both for people without access to a car, and to reduce carbon emissions from road transport.

#### **Welcome High-level Objectives**

The draft Local Transport Plan 2015-2040 (LTP) is in some important respects a great improvement on its predecessor, which emphasised economic growth at the expense of other considerations, particularly the environment. We welcome in particular the recognition that it is vital to reduce carbon emissions to combat climate change; that Gloucestershire cannot continue to build new road capacity to meet projected traffic growth; and that a shift from private to public transport is required.

#### **But the lack of detail is disappointing**

However, we consider that the plan in its present form does not deliver what is needed. It is not sufficiently ambitious. It is unbalanced; for example, it examines at some length possible rail schemes with a timescale to delivery of at least 10 years, but has little to say about measures capable of delivering quick improvements. The plan sets out long-term ambitions for Gloucestershire's transport network (Table 1, page 33). However, delivery (Annex 4) is viewed almost entirely in terms of civil engineering schemes (e.g. road and cycleway improvements, transport interchanges). These schemes are simply listed with little sense of timescale or responsibility for delivery. In many cases, no means of funding them has been identified, so it is unclear whether they will ever be able to go ahead. The lack of commitment to funding any of the ideas in the LTP is a major weakness.

#### **Need to think beyond construction schemes**

Construction schemes will not by themselves achieve the objectives of the plan. Equally important is work to provide better information and to influence public perceptions and behaviour. The sections of the plan dealing with this aspect (for example, Section 9 "Communicating Travel Information" on Page 31 of Policy Document 1) emphasise the supposed potential of the **ThinkTravel** website and associated actions. We are not convinced. ThinkTravel appears to lack substance and adds little to what is available from other, better-used, web services, such as Traveline. The plan contains no discussion of how bus services might be expanded from the present low base (beyond discussion of possible "demand responsive services" - see below); or how bus operators could be helped to grow traffic on existing routes. Nor is there any discussion of possible schemes to limit car use for example in towns, as a means of encouraging a switch to public transport.

## **Little evidence of progress since last plan**

Several proposals have been carried forward virtually unchanged from the previous version of the LTP, which suggests that little progress has been made in the past three years either in implementing or in developing these proposals. Examples in the Stroud area include inter-ticketing between bus operators, and “bus stop and bus advantage improvements” between Stroud and Gloucester. Indeed, the plan contains almost nothing about progress since the original plan was adopted, or about lessons learned.

## **Lack of meaningful performance indicators and targets**

Particularly disappointing is the lack of adequate performance indicators. The overall objectives of the plan, such as reduced carbon emissions from road transport and a switch from private to public transport, are capable of being translated into numerical targets, both at a high level and at the level of individual components of the plan. However, the table setting out the “Expected Outcomes of Public and Community Transport Document” (Table A, page 6 of Policy Document 1) contains not one quantified measure. Unless quantified targets are set, it will be impossible for a future review of the plan to assess whether the plan has been a success or a failure, or to draw conclusions about what needs to change to get back on track.

## **Policy on Buses**

Public policy on buses serves two broad purposes. It aims to help people who cannot afford a car or who do not have access to one. These are typically older or disabled people, and young people such as school children and students. For many of these people, the local bus service is a vital lifeline. At the same time, policy makers are interested in promoting bus use as a way of achieving carbon reductions and reduced car use, and other desirable environmental objectives. These two sets of purposes sometimes pull in different directions. A range of practical measures are needed so that both objectives are adequately addressed.

## **Buses - the potential**

Buses are flexible. Compared with new rail or road facilities, new bus routes and facilities are low cost. It is possible to experiment with, for example, new bus routes in a way that is impossible for railways or new road schemes. Many bus improvements can be made quickly (in contrast to the long timescales of many rail schemes, transport interchange schemes etc). Buses offer possibilities for quick wins in achieving carbon reductions in changing and uncertain circumstances.

## **Buses - the problems**

The LTP analyses several of the problems well. It recognises for example that heavy traffic on roads makes buses slower and less reliable, and that many people perceive buses as unreliable, dirty and possibly unsafe.

There is a huge problem of **lack of information**. There is for example no single bus timetable booklet for the Stroud area with information about services provided by all operators. (The recent, and very welcome, Stagecoach timetable booklet unaccountably omits buses between Stroud and Cirencester via Chalford). One of the bus operators in

the Stroud area does not even have a website. There is no real-time information at any bus stop in Stroud district, of the sort which is normal in many other communities. It is not an exaggeration to say that many, probably most, people who do not travel regularly by bus have no idea when and where their local bus services operate.

### **The costs of bus travel**

There is a problem too of marginal costs in bus travel. Bus passengers fall into two groups - people with senior bus passes, for who the marginal cost of bus fares is zero; and people who pay the full bus fare. For this second group, the marginal cost of bus travel is high. It is frequently cheaper to pay for petrol and car parking than it is to take the bus. But possible future growth in bus passenger numbers will depend mainly upon attracting more fare-paying (as opposed to free pass holding) passengers.

At the same time, the marginal costs to bus operators of filling empty seats are low. However, operators appear to find it difficult to translate this fact into fare arrangements which would fill those seats without compromising existing revenue. They need encouragement and support to develop imaginative solutions. Public support arrangements for bus travel should be rethought so as to incentivise and make possible initiatives to fill empty seats on buses. It might, for example, be possible to make bus travel free for the unemployed and for full-time students and school children.

### **Demand-led bus services**

For rural areas (including large parts of Stroud district), the LTP argues that community-based 'total transport' solutions, such as demand-led minibus services and car-sharing, may be particularly suitable, and that these can target both traditional Ring-and-Ride customer groups, such as the elderly and disabled, and also students and commuters. The LTP however lacks a concrete plan to develop, promote and integrate demand-led services and to integrate them into a coherent whole-transport plan.

The LTP needs to recognise the organisational and management challenges of running a quick and reliable service, particularly if the object is to attract new passenger groups such as students and commuters. Put simply, it is more difficult to manage a network with variable routes and timetables, than one with fixed routes and timetables. If they are to be successful, "demand-led" transport solutions will need to be properly resourced and well-managed and monitored. Otherwise, they will be used only by people who have no other transport choice. They are not necessarily a cheap option.

### **Reversing the spiral of decline in bus services**

Bus services in Gloucestershire have been in decline for many years. There has been a downward spiral of higher fares and cuts in services leading to fewer passengers. Bus use around Stroud is now low. Many places around Stroud have no regular buses at all. Evening services are almost entirely absent, and Sunday services are sketchy.

But it does not have to be like this. There are numerous examples, in this country and in Europe, of places where bus services are much better than they are in Gloucestershire, and where public transport makes a real contribution to reducing carbon emissions. The challenge is to halt and then reverse the downward spiral.

## Local partnerships - a way forward

In our view, the LTP needs a process for finding and implementing ways to improve bus services in different parts of Gloucestershire. These will not be the same in all parts of the county. Locally-based mechanisms are therefore needed. These could take the form of local partnerships involving bus operators, bus users, community groups and different tiers of local government, tasked with identifying priorities for their areas. There would need to be a willingness to put at least some public funding into implementing the identified solutions.

## Immediate priorities for Stroud

- Improved services to places in and around Stroud which are currently badly served. These areas include Minchinhampton, Bisley, north and east Stroud and Wotton. It is not clear to us why there is such wide variation in the quality of bus services in different local areas. Cashes Green, for example, supports a 20-minute service, the most frequent service in the Stroud area. Why are other areas (such as the parts of Stroud served by Cotswold Green route 8) unable to support services with a similar frequency?
- Improved evening and weekend services.
- Real-time information at major bus stops.
- A single, widely-distributed bus timetable booklet covering all the bus operators in the Stroud area.
- A sustained publicity drive to gain greater public awareness and interest in our buses.
- There is an increasing number of places where bus users need to cross busy roads to get to bus stops, or where the bus stops themselves are dangerously situated. Examples are many of the bus stops along the A46 between Stroud and Nailsworth. These deter older people, and are dangerous for children using buses to go to school. In many cases, relatively simple highway improvements such as pedestrian refuges would make it easier and safer to get to bus stops. We would like “safe walking routes to bus stops” to be a priority for the Highways Department.
- The lack of integration between bus and rail services in Stroud is a long-standing problem. The LTP suggests that a new transport interchange could be built at Stroud station. However, this can only be a long-term aspiration. Some immediate improvements are needed, such as a safe and well-signposted walking route between Stroud station and Merrywalks bus station, real time information at Stroud station about available bus connections, and possibly a regular minibus service linking the station and the bus station. Stroud station itself requires significant improvements, particularly to enable access for disabled people, and people with small children or heavy luggage, across the lines between the two platforms.
- Significant numbers of people travel between Stroud and Bristol, mainly for work. Overwhelmingly, they travel by car. The bus service from Stroud to Cam and Dursley station is too slow and infrequent to be a useful alternative. The LTP examines some ideas, such a new station on the Midland line at Stonehouse, which might make rail travel to Bristol easier. These will however take many years to implement. In the meantime, the feasibility of a coach service from Stroud to Bristol (or possible to Bristol Parkway station) needs to be investigated.

## Conclusion

We think that the Local Transport Plan requires substantial revision. It needs to include detailed specific measures to achieve its overall objectives; quantified targets; and a willingness to look for solutions beyond civil engineering projects. Improved bus services are both socially desirable and offer possibilities for quick wins in reducing carbon emissions and in bringing about a switch from private to public transport. Local partnerships would be a way to identify priorities and practical measures.

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23 March 2020

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