

Bus Service Improvement Plan

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Background

Our Bus Service Improvement Plan sets out how we want to see the bus network across Bedford Borough develop in the coming years. The Plan covers the entire Bedford Borough area and all bus services across the area and into neighbouring areas.

The BSIP has been developed by Bedford Borough Council in collaboration with local bus operators, through the well-established Bedford Bus Partnership, which has met regularly since its formation in 2021. As well as the three bus operators providing services across the area, Bedford Borough officers and the Council's Portfolio Holder, the group includes officers from Luton Borough and Central Bedfordshire Councils and representatives of Bedford Area Bus Users' Society (BABUS) and Bedford an Inclusive Town (BIT).

Bedford Borough

Bedford Borough is a unitary authority with a population of 185,200 people. This has grown by 17.6% since 2011 (compared to 6.6% for England as a whole). The age profile has remained largely unchanged over the last 10 years, seeing just a slight increase in those aged 50-64 and 65-74. 9.7% of the population identified as having some form of disability.

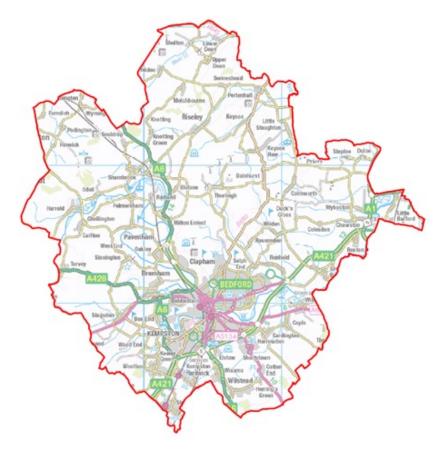
About two thirds of the population live within the urban area of Bedford and Kempston. The villages of Biddenham and Elstow now largely sit within the urban context, as development continues on the fringes of the town. Just outside the urban area are a number of large villages – Wootton, Bromham, Oakley, Clapham, Wilstead and Shortstown. Beyond that, particularly to the north, is a rural hinterland.

The town of Bedford is an important focus for employment, facilities and services.
This includes the hospital, further education college and University of Bedfordshire.

In 2021, 59.7% of people aged over 16 (excluding full time students) were in employment, slightly higher than the overall figure for the East of England as a whole (57.3%).

For those in work, 31% indicated that they mainly worked from home in 2021. 52% of workers mainly travelled by car to work, whilst 2% travelled by bus.

Of the total 74,953 households in Bedford Borough, 13,632 (18%) had no car.



Introduction

Whilst Bedford Borough is a wonderful place to live, its diverse and wide-spread village network makes travel into our urban centres difficult. With one third of the population of 186,000 living in 43 villages, bus services are a vital part of the connectivity, not only in and out of the Borough, but also the vital links throughout our Borough.

It has always been a challenge for operators to make the commerciality of servicing the villages stack up. This is where the Borough Council has stepped in to encourage better and more reliable services with route support and concessionary reimbursements.

As a small unitary authority, we have a tight Council Tax return but still give support to operators of £3.7m per annum. This year is one of reviewing and working closely with operators to reset services as we all recognise the changed working patterns following the pandemic and the working from home increases year-on-year. We also need to – hopefully – consider the impact of an additional 8 million visitors per annum if the Universal Theme Park gets the go ahead here in our Borough. We are exploring new areas of operation with demand response transport (DRT) and using some of the Council minibus fleet more flexibly could add an operational dimension to improve services throughout the village network.

We are grateful for the support given by policy advisors from the DfT and have taken advantage of the network contacts they have provided so that we can mirror best practices and identify and incorporate different approaches to improving services.

There is a real desire from the administration to make major inroads into our current bus service offerings despite the budget challenges we face. Working with our closest neighbouring authorities Central Bedfordshire Council and Luton Borough Council is also helping us to recognise and review cross-boundary connectivity options.

We have a team from me the mayor, and all those working directly on public transport that is determined to improve services, to ensure our residents living in our villages and those across our urban town centres have better access and connectivity, and to work collaboratively with our operators and neighbouring authorities.

Tom Wootton

Elected Mayor of Bedford Borough

TOM WOOTTO,



Our Bus Vision

The BSIP reflects the local ambition for bus services in response to the National Bus Strategy objectives set out below.

National Bus Strategy Objectives

- **More frequent**, with turn-up-and-go services on major routes and feeder or demand-responsive services to lower-density places.
- Faster and more reliable, with bus priority wherever necessary and where there is room.
- **Cheaper**, with more low, flat fares in towns and cities, lower point-to-point fares elsewhere, and more daily price capping everywhere.
- **More comprehensive**, with overprovision on a few corridors reduced to boost provision elsewhere and better services in the evenings and weekends, not necessarily with conventional buses.
- **Easier to understand**, with simpler routes, common numbering, coordinated timetable change dates, good publicity, and comprehensive, accurate information online.
- **Easier to use**, with common tickets, passes and daily capping across all operators, simpler fares, contactless payment and protection of bus stations.
- **Better integrated with other modes and each other**, including more bus-rail interchange and integration and inter-bus transfers.
- Better to ride in, with comfortable, high-specification, modern buses.
- **Greener**, zero emission buses (zero emissions of carbon at the tailpipe).
- Accessible and inclusive network, by design, not only bus vehicles but bus stations, bus stops, and access routes to bus stops.
- Innovative, harnessing entrepreneurship to constantly strive for a better product.
- A safe mode of transport which is seen as safe, addressing issues of personal safety and security on board and at stops as well as driver and vehicle safety standards.



Our Vision

"Our vision is for Bedford's bus services to be an attractive means of travel for all"

This will be achieved through three main objectives:

- Maintain the current network and all that it has to offer, using that as a foundation for development and growth.
- Make services more attractive by getting the basics right, in terms of levels of service, reliability, information and customer service.
- Allow the bus network to achieve its potential through efficient planning, building on success and partnership working.
- Ensure buses are central to, and reflected in, wider initiatives, plans and strategies for Bedford Borough and the wider Region.

Our BSIP sets the future path for how we want to see bus services develop in support of a number of wider policies and strategies.

A new Local Transport Plan for Bedford is currently under development. This BSIP will be included within that Plan. The current LTP vision is to create a transport system in which walking, cycling and public transport are the natural choices of travel for the majority of journeys because they are affordable, healthy, convenient and safe alternatives to the private car.

The Together Bedford Borough – Corporate Plan 2022-2026 has the following vision:

"We want Bedford Borough to thrive as a place, that people are proud of, want to live in and move to. To do this we need a growing and strong local economy and an active response to climate change. From this foundation our residents will be able to thrive and realise their potential, supporting and celebrating our diverse and inclusive communities."

The Plan includes a goal to develop places, including transport links that benefit the environment and the local economy to support more and better jobs for local residents. It also notes the crosscutting themes of tackling the climate change emergency and people's wellbeing. In response, a strategic priority is to develop a more sustainable transport and infrastructure network.

The Bedford Economic Prosperity Plan 2023-2028 adds further weight to the importance of bus services, particularly in respect of sustaining the vitality of our town centres, with an objective to deliver a modern integrated transport and digital structure.

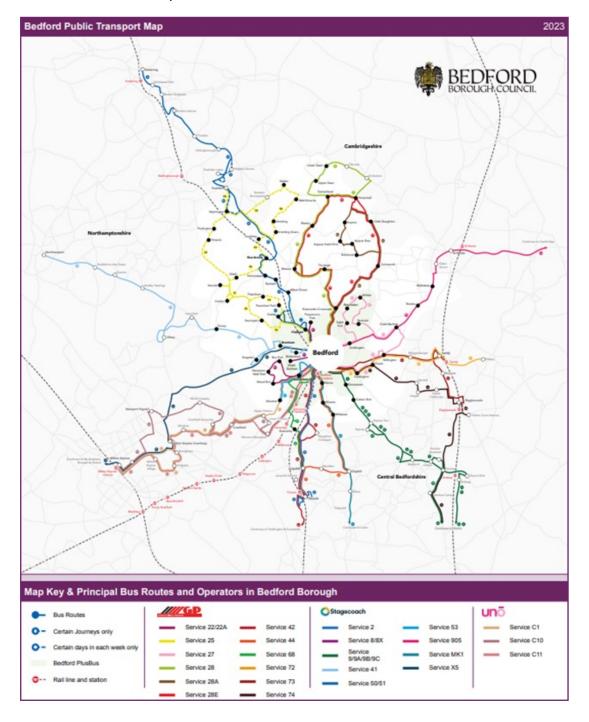
Current Offer to Bus Passengers

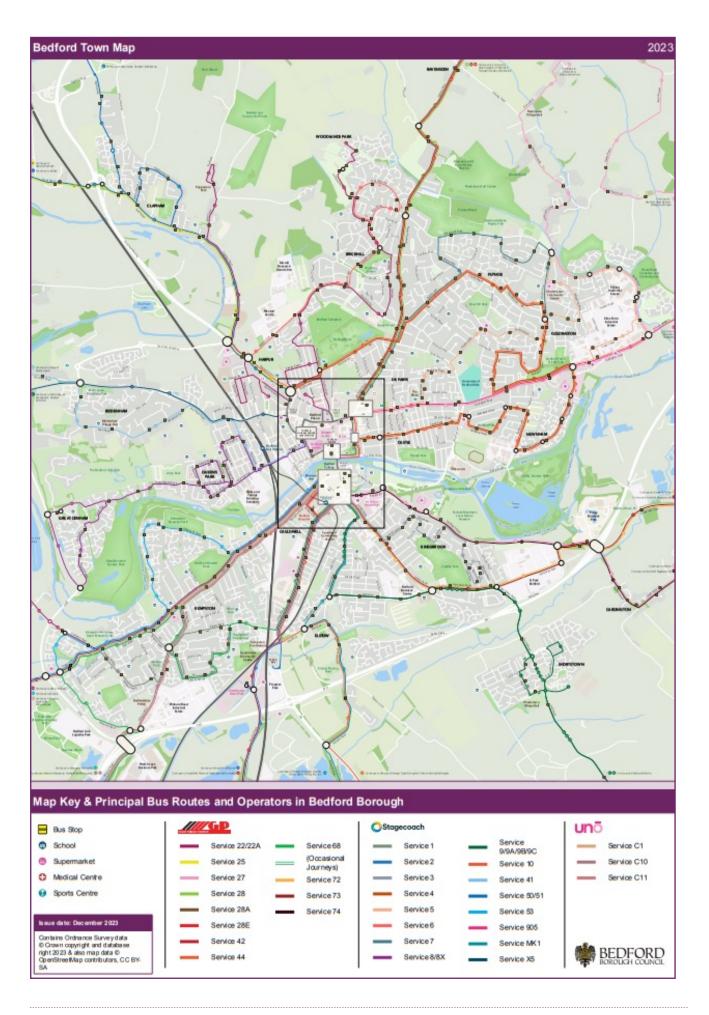
Bus Network

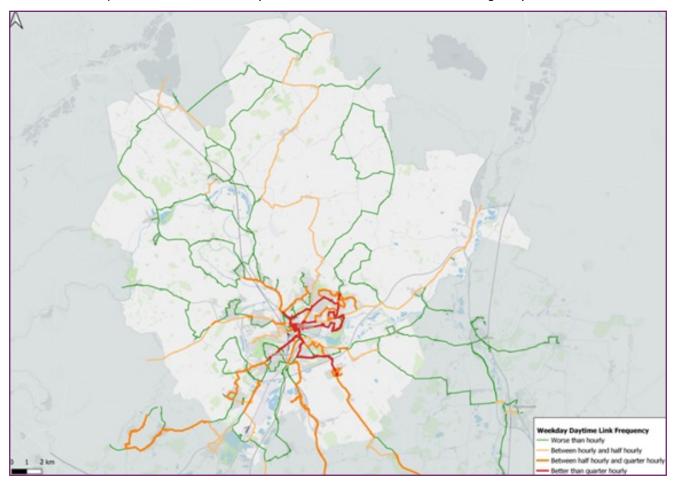
Bedford has a comprehensive network of bus services that operate across its urban and rural areas on Monday to Saturday during the day, illustrated in the two accompanying maps. There is some provision on main inter-urban corridors and in the town during evenings and Sundays.

Main services on the network are run on a commercial basis without subsidy. Many of the rural bus services are wholly funded by, and run under contract to, Bedford Borough Council. Some services have been enhanced using section 106 funding from new housing developments.

A Park & Ride service operates between Elstow and Bedford town centre.







The overall frequencies of bus service provision are shown in the following map.

Community Transport

The Borough Council funds the provision of a door-to-door service for people who are unable to use conventional bus services.

The Villager Community Minibus, based in Sharnbrook, operates under a section 22 permit, offering a number of timetabled shopper services from the surrounding villages to different destinations. Other community buses operate into Bedford from villages in Central Bedfordshire.

Fares and Ticketing

Operators each offer (on-bus and via app) their own range of ticket products, including single, day and season tickets (as well as ticket bundles that can be used over a period of time). However, use of season tickets is currently lower than it would otherwise be, due to the Government's £2 fare cap on single fares.

Discounts are available to young people – under 16 on Uno and Grant Palmer and under 19 on Stagecoach. Uno also offers discounts to Cranfield University students.

Tickets are available for different sizes of groups of people travelling together (3 or 5 on Stagecoach; 4 on Uno; adult and two children on Grant Palmer).

Stagecoach and Uno participate in the Bedford PlusBus ticket, offering add-on bus travel to rail tickets. All three operators sell and accept multi-operator 'Cygnet' day tickets.

All three operators participate in a multi-operator day ticket (Cygnet).

In addition to standard free travel for older and disabled people (English National Concessionary Travel Scheme) after 09:30 Monday to Friday and all-day Saturday and Sunday, concessionary pass holders may travel before 09:30 for £1.

Infrastructure

All bus services run by the three operators converge on the bus station in Bedford town centre.

Across the Borough there are 1118 bus stops, managed by the Council.

Passenger Information

Passenger information is available via the operators' websites. Real time displays are maintained at 63 stops within Bedford town.

Timetable information displays are maintained jointly by the Council and operators, with each taking a lead in particular areas or corridors. A partnership arrangement with Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) is used to produce bus stop information displays, with CBC managing the data and generating the outputs for the displays and Bedford Borough Council printing the displays ready.

QR codes are displayed at 167 stops, which can be scanned to display real time information on smartphones.

Budget for Bus Service Provision

During challenging times, the Council has maintained its budgets for the provision of bus services, as set out in the following table:

Aspect of Provision	Details	2022	2/23	2023/24		
		Capital	Revenue	Capital	Revenue	
Bus Service Support	-	507,410.00	859,760.00	£508,300.00	£958,870.00	
Concessionary Travel	Reimbursement to Bus Operators	£0.00	2,832,450.00	£0.00	2,232,450.00	
Infrastructure	Integrated Transport Plan Funding	£122,600.00	£700.00	£10,000	£600	
	Total	£630,010.00	£3,692,910.00	£518,300.00	£3,191,920	

What do People think about Buses?

To inform the original BSIP, an on-line survey in 2021 helped gather views on local bus services. There were 823 responses – 38% of these lived in the urban area of Bedford and 56% from the wide Borough area. 45% of respondents were concessionary travel pass holders. 62% of respondents used buses at least once per week (18% using buses most days).

Levels of satisfaction with different attributes of the bus service were varied:

Attribute of Service	% of respondents satisfied
Availability of bus routes	61%
Frequency of services	50%
Times that buses run	47%
Cost of bus travel	40%
Overall view of service	53%

People were asked to suggest any improvements to service they would like to see. More frequent buses was top, followed by improved reliability and lower cost.

A further, more extensive, public engagement survey in early 2024 saw responses from 2,490 people, 50% of whom were regular bus users (using the bus at least once per week). 35% of respondents were concessionary pass holders. Findings were similar to those in the 2021 survey.

Amongst bus users, 28.5% of respondents thought that buses met a lot of their travel needs. However, 30.6% thought that their needs were not met very well by buses.

The main purpose for using the bus was for shopping (37.5%), followed by work (28%). 9.7% used the bus for travelling to education.

People were generally satisfied with the friendliness of bus drivers (73%) and the value for money of bus travel (72%). However, only 35% were satisfied with information provision.

Bus and non-bus users were asked what improvements they would most like to see to services. Both indicated greater reliability and more frequent buses as the top two improvements. However, proportions of those suggesting each differed. Cost of travel was more important to non-users.



Improvements that people would like to see

Bus Users		Non-Bus Users			
Improvement	Respondents suggesting this	Improvement	Respondents suggesting this		
More reliable	74.8%	More reliable	59.6%		
More often	56.0%	More often	47.8%		
Earlier/later buses + Sunday	30.5%	Better value fares	27.8%		
Real time information	21.3%	Earlier/later buses + Sunday	23.4%		
Better value fares	15.3%	Faster journey times	18.3%		

Over 80% of users and non-users suggested that they would use buses more if their suggested three improvements were made.

Overall, there was strong support for buses. 97.6% of all respondents considered that buses were relevant to today's society. The greatest reason for buses was to provide transport for people who didn't have access to a car (47.4%). However, 14.9% of respondents considered the bus was important to offer an alternative to the car (14.9%) or in helping to reduce congestion (10.9%).

Bedford Borough Council also participates in the annual National Highways and Transportation, which provides further insights into perceptions of local bus services. As this is undertaken across a representative sample of residents, the majority of respondents are not regular bus users. Satisfaction levels with all aspects of public transport in Bedford in 2023 were in line with averages across England, although most had seen slight reductions in satisfaction compared with the previous year. The only attribute to see an increase (+10%) was bus fares, probably due to the Government's £2 fare cap.

Summary Assessment of Current Position

Positives	Negatives
 Enhanced Partnership in place BSIP+ funding Political support for buses Budget for supported services maintained s106 monies secured for bus services Multi-operator ticket (Cygnet) Collaboration with CBC/LBC Initiatives (e.g. QR codes at bus stops) Survey - views of bus users and non-users Bus stop audit undertaken NHT survey - average satisfaction levels Events planning (e.g. River Festival 2024) Roadworks coordination and management Town Deal package of improvements in the town centre and Bedford/Kempston Town Centres Delivery Plan (Regeneration) Data analysis by Stagecoach 	 Original BSIP didn't secure DfT funding Patronage levels still struggling (particularly concession holders) Service reliability issues and cancellations Image (e.g. Bedford bus station) Inconsistent information provision Inadequate resources to maintain infrastructure and information Free car parking in certain Council car parks at certain times

Improvement Programme - Improvements made since 2021

Cooperation

There has been a growing understanding of the importance of partnership and cooperation to the future development of bus services. Over the last year this has been bolstered in a number of ways:

- Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Transport at meetings of the Bedford Bus Partnership.
- Stagecoach arranged a 'Behind the Bus' event for elected members to visit its depot and to learn more about the organisation and operation of bus services.
- An awayday, involving bus operators and officers and elected members of Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton Borough Councils, led by Bedford Borough Council's Portfolio Holder. This provided the chance to understand the challenges and opportunities for bus services, to identify common themes, and to consider future ways forward for bus services across the wider area.

Service Levels and Network Coverage

Whilst bus use has been increasing over the last two years, overall it remains significantly down on pre-Covid levels, particularly amongst concessionary travel pass holders. The £2 fare cap, adopted by all three operators in the Borough, has encouraged use and highlights the benefits of a simple, understandable flat fare offer.

However, rising costs have put pressure on the viability of some bus services. In 2023/24 BSIP+ monies have been used to help maintain services that might otherwise have been reduced or withdrawn. It is intended to continue this support in 2024/25 with the aim of these services becoming increasingly viable.

BSIP+ monies have also been used to improve the Bedford Park & Ride service. Again, support will continue in 2024/25 whilst the service establishes itself and more people look to use it.

Section 106 funding has enabled significant improvements in service 68 between Stewartby and Bedford.



Fares and Ticketing

All three operators are participating in the Government's £2 fare cap scheme.

Grant Palmer's buses are equipped with tap-on tap-off readers, which provide automatic capping of fares on a zonal basis.

Waiting and Interchange Facilities

During the last year, an audit of all bus stops across the Borough was completed. This recorded details of all bus stops and the facilities at each, along with their current condition. The resultant database provides information to help determine which stops should be prioritised for improvement.

An improvement programme will be embarked upon in 2024/25, with monies from the Council's Integrated Transport capital programme allocated for this purpose. Operators are keen to see resources focused on core routes, to create a noticeable improvement that will translate into increased patronage.

Bus Information

In 2023, QR codes were displayed at main stops in the town and villages, which can be scanned to provide stop-specific real time information.

Grant Palmer has invested in publicity and marketing over the last year, producing enhanced timetable displays on its main routes into Bedford from the south.

Bus Passenger Experience

Much effort has been put into improving reliability by all three operators. All have now stabilised the position of driver recruitment and retention through training initiatives and improved pay and conditions. Stagecoach lost 50 drivers in 2021, but this was down to 19 in 2023. Over the same period, there was a 71% reduction in lost mileage. Whilst punctuality is still an issue, due to roadworks and congestion, vehicle tracking data suggests an improvement from 93.8% to 95.2% over the same period.

Roadworks Coordination

The Public Transport Team has worked hard to build good relationships with Highways colleagues who seek to coordinate and manage roadworks and road closures. This ensures that any roadworks that might impact on bus services can be considered well in advance and, where necessary, mitigating actions taken, such as arranging alternative shuttle buses to serve communities where route diversions have been put in place.

The procedures and processes used in Bedford Borough have been highlighted as national best practice, and were subject of a presentation on the DfT's Bus Forum for Local Transport Authorities. Equally, a number of other authorities have been keen to learn more about the approach in Bedford.

Improvements during 2024/25

Service Levels and Network Coverage

The focus this year is to maintain a stable network and good reliability to build confidence in the bus network and encourage usage. This will include continued improvement in provision and coverage of information, ticketing products and passenger waiting infrastructure.

With the continued aim of maintaining the network, whilst encouraging more use, it is intended to continue supporting services with BSIP+ funding in 2024/25, with the aim of these services becoming increasingly viable.

BSIP+ monies will also continue to be used to support the improved Park & Ride offer, whilst the service establishes itself and more people look to use it.

Bedford's bus network has remained largely unchanged for many years, and reflects historic travel demands. Usage by concessionary travel pass holders still remains much lower than it was before the pandemic. Whilst new demands are not catered for very well. Operators understand that they need to explore new potential markets if services are going to remain commercially viable. Likewise, the Borough sees the need to reconsider the priorities for the future supported bus network.

Stagecoach is undertaking an analysis of its current network, drawing on a range of data sources, to consider how it should develop its network. This data is being shared with the Council's officers to help facilitate wider thinking across the entire network, including the supported elements.

Furthermore, all contracts for supported local bus services, including much of the rural network, are due to be retendered this year. Consideration is being given to current patterns of use to determine appropriate future services and to understand where best to direct the Council's funding resources.

Fares and Ticketing

Fares and ticketing products will continue to be refined and developed, particularly if the Government's £2 fare cap ends in December.

Stagecoach has introduced QR readers onto its buses, making it possible to read other tickets, which provides more flexibility in developing products.

It is intended to revise the existing Cygnet multi-operator ticket to create two zones, which will provide more choice for users and better pricing.

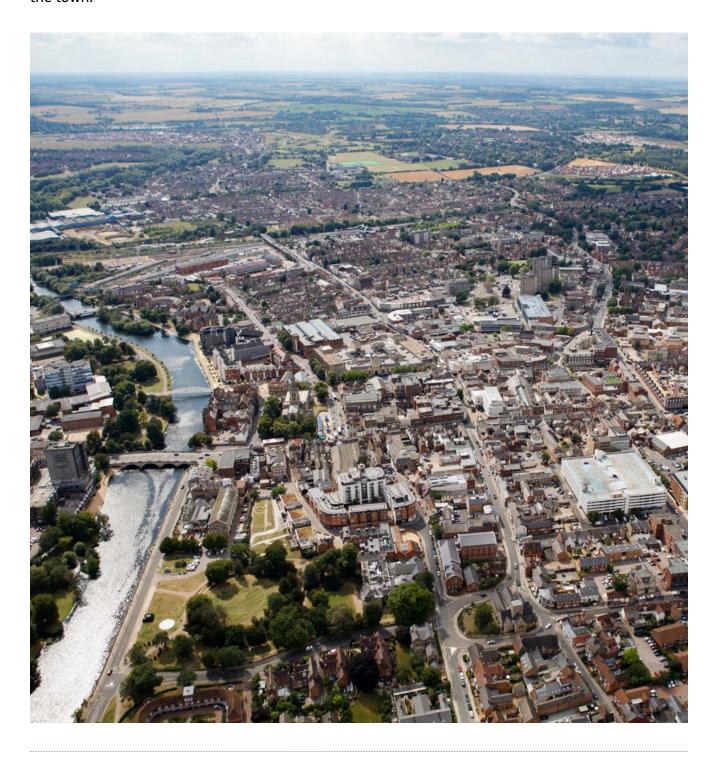
Waiting Infrastructure and Interchange Facilities

Following the bus stop audit undertaken last year, a bus stop improvement programme is being developed, prioritising where investment will be made. Improvements to a number of stops and shelters will be made this year.

Town Centres Delivery Programme

An ambitious programme of investment is underway to regenerate Bedford and Kempston town centres as vibrant hubs for the Borough. The vision is to create town centres that people are proud to live in and excited to visit. As bus services and town centres function well together, this programme should offer good opportunities to improve the standing of bus services in town centres and to increase bus use.

Specifically, within the programme are plans to reduce congestion and encourage sustainable travel options, along with greater focus on the importance of Bedford Bus Station, with improved maintenance and cleaning and a desire for it to be an attractive and safe place at the heart of the town.



Ambitions and Proposals - Priorities for 2025/26 - 2028/29

Service Level and Network Coverage

As a result of the current demand analysis being undertaken, together with significant planned land development south and west of Bedford, some remodelling of the bus network will take place.

The next 10 years will see massive commercial and housing developments (Land South of Bedford), where new infrastructure, including potential bus only roads, will be created. Furthermore, within this area will be a new railway station on the Midland Main Line and revamped stations on East West Rail at Kempston Hardwick and Bedford St. John's, along with the creation of a number of mobility hubs. Connectivity between the various areas will be important, as well as facilitating interchange between modes. It is intended to introduce an orbital bus service on a 20-minute frequency to link these places up. The route taken will evolve over time as new developments are built.

Bus operators are keen to focus improvements on existing services, as these are most likely to see patronage growth. Therefore, it is intended that future funding, if available, would allow some kickstart initiatives, whereby frequency enhancements could be funded for 2-3 years, gradually reducing in line with passenger and revenue growth until commercially sustainable.

Aligned to increased demand for travel on Sunday and for leisure and recreation, there is a desire to see the introduction of more Sunday services or enhancement of existing ones on key routes. This would also support the Town Centres Delivery Programme.

Some supported services have low levels of use and we are keen to investigate the potential for demand responsive transport (DRT) to better serve some areas, as well as looking at how it could provide feeder services or timed work shuttles to large employment sites. Therefore, as funding becomes available consideration will be given to how and where DRT might offer an appropriate solution.

Bus Priority

Congestion in Bedford does cause delays for buses. Whilst there are some bus lanes to assist buses in places, there are further opportunities to assist buses. A new signalised junction at the entrance and exit to the bus station will be introduced in the next year. This will detect buses to speed up their exit from the bus station.

There are many signalised junctions in Bedford and Kempston, where some priority to buses might be afforded. However, work is needed to understand the feasibility of this and to assess the potential impacts. Therefore, subject to funding, we would like to carry out that feasibility work.

Bus operators have identified various hotspots where delays can occur for buses. These might include inconsiderate parking, loading and unloading or road alignments. We will collate and prioritise these hotspots in order to have a programme of works that could be pursued when funding becomes available.

Fares and Ticketing

There is clearly concern from operators about the likely impacts on patronage if and when the Government's £2 fare cap comes to an end. It is clear that the simplicity of the £2 fare has made travel easy for people. Therefore, we would like to see a continuation of the scheme. If, however, it does end, if funding was available, we would look to introduce a local fare cap scheme, in order that the benefits of low flat fare travel can continue.

Waiting and Interchange Facilities

The importance of good quality waiting facilities in helping to promote bus travel is well recognised. Therefore, when funding is available, we would like to accelerate our bus stop improvement programme to be able to upgrade and maintain more stops more quickly, achieving a common high standard.

With new rail stations and East West Rail, we are keen to promote better bus/rail interchange. One opportunity might be to open up a western access to Bedford Midland station. Therefore, it is the intention to investigate this further. With funding, a full feasibility study could be undertaken to look at the feasibility of this and the benefits that might be achieved and constraints that will need to be addressed.

If there are opportunities for significant capital funding, then we would be keen to look at significant upgrades of the facilities at the Park and Ride site along with potential redevelopment of Bedford bus station.

Bus Information and Network Identity

In order to promote bus use, particularly in support of those initiatives highlighted above, it would be the intention to instigate a comprehensive Use the Bus marketing campaign.

Bus Passenger Experience

Building on the best practice model for dealing with roadworks and road closures that Bedford already has in place, we would like to develop and improve current practices and processes further, in order to mitigate impacts on bus services. This would include employing dedicated staff to manage and coordinate actions.

Bus Fleet

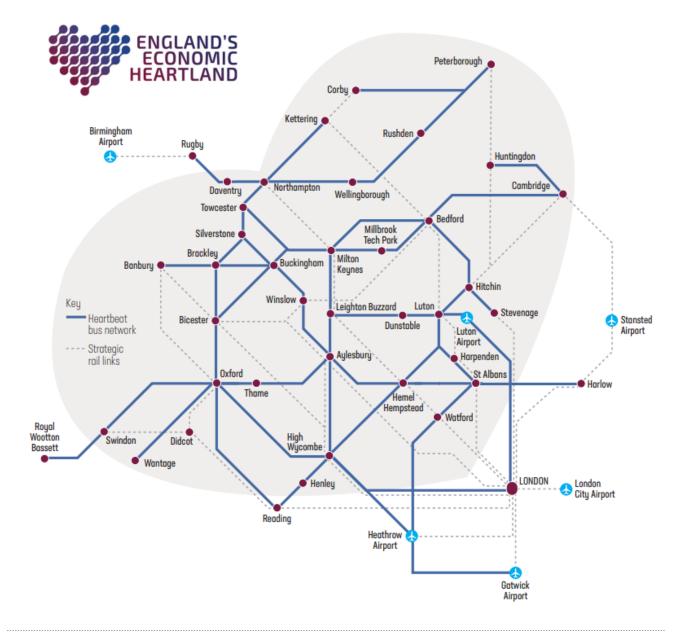
There are currently no zero emission buses operating in Bedford. Therefore, if future funding opportunities occur, we would like to look at converting a significant part of the Bedford fleet to electric. Not only will this help to decarbonise the fleet and reduce emissions, it will improve ride quality for passengers and provide an improved journey experience, in support of the other enhancements outlined above.

Accessibility and Inclusion

The needs of disabled people are represented on the Bedford Bus Partnership by Bedford Inclusive Town (BIT). The Partnership is keen to ensure that all public transport improvements and developments achieve excellent standards in terms of access and inclusivity. Therefore, we want to develop a Disabled User Requirements Specification (DURS) from the perspective of people with disabilities and impairments that will inform all elements of future service provision, including journey planning, getting to/from the bus stop, getting on/off the bus, and the on-board experience.

Regional Bus Network

Buses can play a wider role in providing connectivity across the wider region. This is already evident through the network of bus services that exist between Bedford and Milton Keynes, Oxford, Cambridge, Stevenage and Luton. There is scope to develop this further and therefore we will work with England's Economic Heartland (sub-regional transport body) to develop and implement a regional bus service network concept called 'Heartbeat'. The service looks to increase the frequency on either key existing route to 30 minutes or less, as well as suggesting new routes between locations in better connect the region by bus.



Targets, Performance Monitoring and Reporting

KPIs	Actual					Target	
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2029/30
Journey Time (from Bus Open Data)	30.13	27.38	31.47	32.74			
Reliability (VIX data – real time information)	81%	83.17%	N/A	N/A			
Bus Passenger Journeys (DfT Bus Statistics)	5.7m	5.2m	1.5m	3.1m	3.7m	N/A	
Bus Passenger Journeys per Head of Population (DfT Bus Statistics)	33.3	29.8	8.8	16.6	19.9	N/A	



Finding out more

If you would like further information about us and our services, please telephone, email or write to us at our address below.

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Per Informazione তথ্যের জন্য



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