

this month

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A clear route for better buses?

surveyor



It feels like we have been here before with bus regulation. That is because we have. Twice. The new Bus Services Bill is the third piece of legislation since 2000 and could be the last chance to get things right before the public lose their patience.

The Bill, which will give local authorities powers to improve bus services, brings a necessary focus to an area of transport that has been neglected for a long time.

This will hopefully not only bring back some consistency to bus services in parts of the country but also possibly be the catalyst for development of smart ticketing and transport integration.

The fact that this is happening at the same time as many devolution bids are passing through government is also a good thing. Devolution will mean transport in certain areas could be managed in a very different way and having buses at the heart of that planning from the outset can only be a good thing.

One thing that should be on the checklist however – as well as the obvious focus on cities and towns – is making sure that bus services in rural areas get the investment and attention they need. They have been the areas hardest hit by funding cuts recently and need urgent attention if we are to move towards better integration of our transport services and win the battle to convince the public to leave their cars at home and use public transport more often.

More investment in public transport – and other sustainable modes – will also play a large part in tackling issues such as congestion and air quality, as minister Robert Goodwill recently acknowledged.

But there will always be a question mark over funding itself where public transport is concerned. A plan for long-term funding of bus services has to be brought in or councils will find themselves with nothing to implement off the back of these new powers.

It will also be interesting to see how the Government takes on the challenge it has cautiously set itself with the new Bill. It guarantees franchising powers only to combined authorities with elected mayors (plus Cornwall) but offers other transport authorities franchising powers 'on a case-by-case basis'. It says this would be granted 'where the capability and track-record of the authority concerned is sufficiently strong'. Once again there appears not only to be a lack of clarity around how this would be measured but also an air of uncertainty around giving councils these powers. It seems unfair that councils should be judged on 'track records'. There may be many reasons why public transport hasn't worked in a region before and probably a big reason for that is lack of funding, which can hardly be laid at the doors of councils.

Devolution should be giving local authorities more freedom to develop services their way but unless the Government has the confidence to fully let go of the reins, devolution is in grave danger of creating more uncertainty when it comes to managing transport and highways than ever before.

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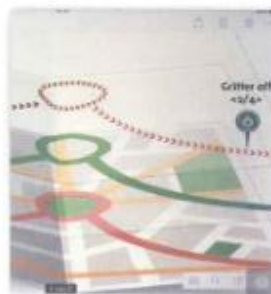
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