

TITLE OF REPORT: **West Gateshead Bus Alliance**

REPORT OF: **Paul Dowling, Strategic Director, Communities and Environment**

Purpose of the Report

1. This report seeks approval for the extension of joint working with Nexus and bus operators to the west of Gateshead with the establishment of the West Gateshead Bus Alliance.

Background

2. The Sustainable Communities Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertook a review of public transport services in the borough during the autumn of 2005. During the evidence gathering sessions for the review, Go North East put forward a proposal to establish a voluntary quality partnership agreement between Go North East, Nexus and the Council, which would cover all aspects of the delivery of local bus services.
3. A two-year pilot East Gateshead Quality Bus Partnership was approved by Cabinet on 29th January 2008. That agreement expired on 30th May 2010 and a five-year extension of the Partnership was approved by Cabinet on 20th July 2010.
4. A further five-year extension of the joint working arrangements in East Gateshead was approved by Cabinet in on 17th September 2017. The new agreement widened the geographical coverage of the re-branded East Gateshead Bus Alliance as well as updating and expanding the terms of the agreement.
5. The September 2017 Cabinet report also approved the establishment of an equivalent Alliance for western Gateshead.

The Proposal

6. The experience of joint working has generally been positive.
 - The level of consultation on service changes has been improved. Where changes have proved unpopular, even after consultation, the Stakeholder Board has provided a forum for concerns to be raised directly with Go North East and Nexus at a senior level.
 - While fare increases are never popular, the commercial information shared with Stakeholder Board members has allowed a much greater level of understanding about the cost pressures faced by the operator
 - This level of understanding across a range of issues has led to a position of greater trust between the Council and Go North East that has proved to be

more productive than what has often been a more adversarial relationship in the past.

7. Following the adoption of the new agreement for East Gateshead, drafting of an equivalent agreement for a West Gateshead Bus Alliance commenced. A draft has been agreed between all three parties and is presented here for approval (as Appendix 2). Other operators were invited to join the Alliance but declined, although they have indicated a willingness to discuss issues with the alliance on an ad-hoc basis.
8. The West Gateshead agreement covers the five years to 30th September 2023 and while it retains the successful features of the East Gateshead agreement it is also enhanced through commitments to reviews of both the bus network and bus stop infrastructure within the Alliance area.

Recommendations

9. It is recommended that Cabinet:
 - (i) approves the Voluntary Agreement for the West Gateshead Bus Alliance through to 30th September 2023, as set out in Appendix 2; and
 - (ii) authorises the Service Director, Development Transport and Public Protection to make any necessary minor changes to this Agreement, following consultation with the Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport before formal signing.

For the following reason:

To support a sustainable transport system capable of supporting the borough's environmental, social and economic objectives.

Policy Context

1. Bus Alliances in principle, and the West Gateshead Bus Alliance specifically, are in line with the Sustainable Community Strategy, Vision 2030, supporting goals for: The proposal is also consistent with the Council's strategic approach of making Gateshead a place where everyone thrives.

Background

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The Proposal

6. In looking to extend the joint working to western Gateshead, experience suggested that one single body covering the whole of the borough would be too unwieldy to have the local focus that has served eastern Gateshead well. The best solution would therefore be offered by splitting the borough in two to give an extended East Gateshead agreement and an entirely new West Gateshead agreement. A Members Briefing outlining that proposal was sent to all Councillors on 2nd December 2016.
7. Following the adoption of the new agreement for East Gateshead, drafting of an equivalent agreement for a West Gateshead Bus Alliance commenced. A draft has been agreed between all three parties and is presented here for approval (as Appendix 2). Other operators were invited to join the Alliance but declined, although they have indicated a willingness to discuss issues with the Alliance on an ad-hoc basis.
8. The West Gateshead agreement covers the five years to 30th September 2023 and while it retains the successful features of the East Gateshead agreement it is also enhanced in some areas. The main features of the agreement are:

- A Stakeholder Board will oversee the delivery of the Alliance and monitor performance. The revised composition of the Board is three Gateshead Council representatives (reflecting the extended geographical area of the Partnership), one NECA Transport North East Committee (TNEC) Member, one Nexus officer and five Go North East Representatives.
- The basic concept of the agreement is to maintain as stable a network as possible, but a network review focussing on improving accessibility will be undertaken within six months of the start of the Alliance.
- Service changes will be made on agreed dates and subject to agreed consultation procedures (involving the community and local Councillors), although
- Changes to fare levels will be limited to only reflect direct increases in costs and the Stakeholder Board would be consulted on any proposals. Go North East and Nexus will continue to look at innovative fares and ticketing options.
- The fleet operating services will be modern, low emission, floor easy access buses with on bus CCTV, audio visual next stop announcements and wi-fi.
- Punctuality and reliability targets will be monitored against a penalty regime for failure to perform. The penalty payments contribute towards the Service Improvement Fund, which is used to provide benefits to passengers. The Stakeholder Board will continue to oversee the monitoring of performance.
- A marketing sub-group of the Stakeholder Board will develop and oversee an annual marketing plan for the Alliance.
- Gateshead Council will, within budget constraints, implement a programme of bus priority, infrastructure works, clearway enforcement and bus lane enforcement.
- Nexus will maintain and improve shelters, interchanges and information. The Alliance will also undertake a review of existing shelter infrastructure.

Discussion

9. The July 2010 Cabinet report outlined the potential to extend the partnership approach to the whole of Gateshead at that time, but that opportunity was not followed through at the time due to the development of the now abandoned Quality Contract Scheme (QCS) for Tyne & Wear. Proposals for a QCS were formally dropped by NECA in 2016. New legislation for bus franchising (providing similar powers to a QCS) came forward in 2017 through the Bus Services Act. All authorities may pursue franchising, although the process is simplified for areas with an elected mayor and may still prove to be a long drawn-out process for those without. NECA is in the process of considering the most appropriate way forward.
10. Although the Voluntary Agreement approach does not offer the control over the bus network, fares etc that franchising would, it should be noted that this route offers the best chance for continued improvement in bus services within the Borough in the short/medium term.

Consultation

11. The Cabinet Members for Environment and Transport, Economy and Housing have been consulted.

Alternative Options

12. There are no alternatives available that offer the potential benefits of the proposed arrangement in the short to medium term.

Implications of Recommended Options

13. Resources:

- a) **Financial Implications** – The Strategic Director, Corporate Resources confirms that as part of the proposed extension of joint working, the Council will continue to endeavour to improve highway conditions for bus operations and these infrastructure works will be included in the Council's capital programme as part of the LTP allocation.
- b) **Human Resources Implications** – There are no human resources implications.
- c) **Property Implications** – There are no property implications.

14. **Risk Management Implications** – There are no risk management implications.

15. **Equality and Diversity Implications** – The proposals will assist in reducing social exclusion by improving access for the young, elderly, unemployed/low waged and people with disabilities.

16. **Crime and Disorder Implications** – There are no crime and disorder implications.

17. **Health Implications** – The Alliances aim to enhance bus services which in turn facilitate access to services and facilities that enhance people's health and wellbeing.

18. **Sustainability Implications** – The proposals are an important element in providing the basis for a sustainable transport system capable of supporting the Borough's environmental, social and economic objectives in a sustainable fashion. They seek to reduce car dependence, thereby contributing to important sustainability aims, such as the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

19. **Human Rights Implications** – There are no human rights implications.

20. **Area/Ward Implications** – Blaydon, Chopwell and Rowlands Gill, Crawcrook and Greenside, Dunston and Teams, Dunston Hill and Whickham East, Ryton, Crookhill and Stella, Whickham North, Whickham South and Sunniside and Winlaton and High Spen wards will be affected.

Background Information

21. Further background information is contained in:

- report to Cabinet on 29th January 2008 on East Gateshead Quality Bus Partnership
- report to Cabinet on 20th July 2010 on East Gateshead Quality Bus Partnership
- report to Cabinet on 17th September 2017 on Gateshead Bus Alliances