

TITLE OF REPORT: **Progress Update on Development/Extension of
Quality Bus Partnerships**

REPORT OF: **Strategic Director, Communities & Environment**

Summary

This report updates the Committee on the extension of joint working with Nexus and bus operators to the whole of Gateshead. This includes the development of a revised agreement and relaunch for the East Gateshead Quality Bus Partnership as the East Gateshead Bus Alliance, and progress on a parallel agreement for West Gateshead.

Background

1. 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.
2. 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. The work of the Partnership continued despite the lapse of the formal agreement in March 2015 but in 2016 the Stakeholder Board that guides the work of the Partnership resolved that it should be returned to a more formal basis.

Proposals

3. The July 2010 Cabinet report also outlined the potential to extend the partnership approach to the whole of Gateshead, but that opportunity was not followed through at the time due to the development of the now abandoned Quality Contract Scheme for Tyne & Wear. Fortunately, the need to redraft the East Gateshead agreement also offered an opportunity to re-examine the potential to expand the coverage of the arrangements.
4. Given experience of the existing arrangements, officers felt that one single body covering the whole of the borough would be too unwieldy to have the local focus that had served the existing Partnership 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 (plans are included as Appendix 1 of this report).

5. A Members Briefing outlining that proposal was sent to all Councillors on 2nd December 2016. No objections were received and the drafting of both agreements commenced.
6. The redrafting also allowed the tidying up of some minor technicalities. Under the Local Transport Act 2008, any new agreement would be a 'Voluntary Agreement' rather than a Partnership, which has a more formal/prescribed status. Recognising that, and given the increased focus on Partnerships brought about by the Bus Services Act 2017, it appeared appropriate to avoid any confusion by rebranding the new agreement as a 'Bus Alliance'.
7. The new agreement for East Gateshead was agreed by Cabinet on 19th September and commenced on 1st October 2017.

New Agreement for East Gateshead

8. The new agreement covers the five years to 30th September 2022 and while it retains the successful features of the previous agreement, there are also some revisions and enhancements. The main features of the agreement are:
 - A Stakeholder Board will continue to 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.
 - Service changes will be made on agreed dates and subject to agreed consultation procedures (involving the community and local Councillors), although the basic concept of the agreement is to maintain as stable a network as possible.
 - 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. There are also commitments on improving the engine emission standards of the fleet.
 - Punctuality and reliability targets will continue to 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.

Extension to West Gateshead

9. The draft of a sister agreement for a West Gateshead Bus Alliance will be presented to Cabinet in due course. It is likely that the agreement will largely mirror the format and principles of its East Gateshead counterpart, while reflecting local detail in relation to services, future infrastructure works etc. In addition, all parties are keen to ensure that these agreements continue to evolve; reflecting best practice and new approaches.
10. As with the East Gateshead, the agreement will be between the Council, Go North East and Nexus, but other operators will have the opportunity to feed into the business of the Alliance.
11. Officers have met to consider the potential scope of an agreement, and are looking to prepare an initial draft of the document before the end of February, with the Alliance commencing later this year.

Conclusion

12. 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.

Recommendations

13. It is recommended that the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee
 - Consider whether sufficient progress has been made to date.