



# Minister considers Welsh Better Bus Fund

Welsh infrastructure secretary Ken Skates says that he is open to the idea of creating a Better Bus Fund that would target green bus investment

## INVESTMENT

► Welsh infrastructure secretary Ken Skates said this week that he is open to creating a Better Bus Fund for Wales, where all buses are still powered by conventional diesel propulsion. However, no capital for such a fund has yet been confirmed.

Skates was invited to sit in the cab of an electric bus at the Welsh Bus Summit in Wrexham on Monday “I was amazed by it,” he told *Passenger Transport*. “In terms of the contribution to a low-carbon economy and society these buses are going to be crucial.

“They cost more than a diesel

{bus] but when you factor in the potential for fines under our obligations to cut greenhouse gases operating electric buses could be, in the long run, cost effective.”

Asked about copying the capital grants which have supported investment in alternative-fuelled buses in England and Scotland, he said: “This will be examined closely I’m open to the idea of not just a Green Bus Fund but what could be called a Better Bus Fund, so that we’ve got vehicles that are up to date in terms of emissions and accessibility It’s something that we’re looking at.

“We need to learn from the {UK government’s] Green Bus Fund and its successor and understand why no Welsh bus companies were able to draw down support from those funds.” The UK government’s funding rounds have been open to English applicants only, except for the latest £30111 from the Office for Low Emission vehicles for which Welsh and English bids were invited in 2015, but all Welsh bids were rejected.

Skates was applauded by Giles Fearnley managing director of FirstGroup’s UK Bus division, and other delegates for convening the first Welsh Bus Summit as part of

his five-point plan to support the bus industry after the demise of three established Welsh operators last summer.

During his keynote speech, Skates said: “We invest more than £500m on behalf of the taxpayer each year to operate our bus and rail services. It’s clear to me that we don’t get sufficient value for the money we put in. That is changing.” The Welsh Government was now procuring a new rail franchise, to commence in October 2018, and developing its Metro investment programmes for better public transport in South-east and North-east Wales.

“We have a once in a generation opportunity to shape a world-class future for our transport network. We need to ask, what do we want for the future of our public transport system? Where do we see the bus network in that vision? I see the bus industry playing a vital role.”

He said the vision should include rural areas. “The quality of services delivered in rural parts of Wales should be no less favourable than those in the Metro or more urbanised parts of the country”

Clive Barnard, of the Welsh Government’s Business Wales support service, told delegates that since Skates announced the five-point plan in November, Business Wales had been sounding out bus companies to touch base and ask some basic questions about the help which Business Wales could provide. One possible solution to the difficulties of sustaining public transport in deep rural areas was a social enterprise, functioning on a local basis.

“Every town in Wales has a different need. Because of that, we can’t come up with a national solution,” he said. “There are potential solutions that will be trialled over the next year or so.” ■