

Questions for bus service operators

How has your service provision altered to reflect the Covid-19 situation and restrictions?

We have followed DfT guidance on reducing and increasing service frequency based on the levels of restriction in place, ensuring we have responded to requests for additional journeys for key workers and maintaining all routes, albeit at lower frequencies. We have put measures in place to ensure social distancing on buses, and enhanced our cleaning regimes.

What measures could help your services improve punctuality? These could include improved technology, simplified charging options, and/or action from the County or Borough Councils.

The key issues are:-

- Reduced congestion as a result of reducing the supply and increasing the price of car parking
- not allowing out of town retail and commercial developments which are difficult to serve by a traditional radial bus network.
- Provision of bus priority measure such as bus lanes and gates.

What can be done to make bus use more attractive or price-competitive with alternative options, to encourage greater use of bus services? This could include easier options to buy tickets, improvements to apps etc.

The key driver of demand for passengers is overall journey time and quality of experience. This depends upon bus stops close to the origin and destination of the potential passenger's journey and crucially the frequency, speed and punctuality of the service. Local authorities have a key role to play in speeding up bus services by reducing congestion, which would allow the bus operator to provide more reliable, quicker and more frequent services, and by ensuring development occurs in such a way that it is attractive to access by bus (such as by being sited centrally).

Much work has already been done on ticket apps and contactless payments and we are introducing the first "Tap On" card based scheme in East Anglia in Norwich at Easter.

What measures can be taken to further improve the environmental sustainability/performance of vehicles used?

Buses have a 15-18 year life. New buses carry the latest technology. Some retrofitting of revised exhaust systems can improve performance.

Electric vehicles are now developed so that they are suitable for urban operations, but remain enormously more expensive to purchase. If they are to be adopted then a network like that in Colchester would require extensive public subsidy (whether provided by public or private sector) unless passenger volume was significantly increased and/or congestion significantly reduced.

Are you able to share any thoughts and aspirations for your plans for the next 10-20 years of bus service provision?

We are part of the Go-Ahead Group which has committed to phasing out diesel buses by 2035, already having the largest fleet of electric buses in London which is funded by TfL. We believe that clean public transport is vital to the health, well-being and economic opportunity of our towns and cities and want to play our part in sharing expertise with stakeholders to make the transition to a carbon free operation where every journey is taken care of.

Points, questions and themes which the Panel may raise at the meeting

Policy Planning and Strategic Issues

- How do bus services fit into wider plans for modal shift away from cars and to public transport, cycling, walking and other sustainable transport options?

Part of active travel

- Taking a holistic view of the transport system. How do the County strategies on public transport/bus use fit within the sustainable transport strategy and overarching Transport Strategy?

We wish to support the county strategies by providing as many commercial services as possible

- How can bus service providers be more involved in the process for designing the Local Plan, and interact with local developments, to ensure services develop to match new communities.

By engagement through the Blueprint forum, but ultimately decision makers need to understand the implications of not accommodating buses

- The potential use, in the medium-term, of transport hubs to allow motorists to drive or cycle, park, then use bus services to journey into Colchester.

Will have no attraction unless parking reduced

- Discussion of ways to potentially improve use of Park & Ride system. E.g., charge per car [not per passenger] and 'park & drop' system to ferry shopping back to car park.

Good ideas – why were they not part of the P&R tender?

- Impacts on inequality which can be achieved through a comprehensive, accessible and affordable public transport system.

Plenty of evidence for this – could provide from Group

- Concerns for service providers, especially given the effect of the Covid-19 situation and restrictions.

The bus service has been supported by central government with CBSSG since March 2020. If passenger numbers do not return to pre-pandemic levels then services will be reduced in frequency. There is a need for a positive marketing campaign to reverse the damaging perception of public transport established last year and for interim revenue funding whilst the level of demand for commercial services is established.

Ticketing

- Issues of cost of tickets, compared to alternative options such as parking or taxis.
Parking is too cheap; group bus fares are too expensive; taxis are using easy technology with low paid workers.
- Use of contactless payment and whether this has produced any change in the demographics of service users.

It has increased usage marginally

- Whether it would be possible for a one-stop-shop app and/or ticket system to be developed to offer tickets covering a range of different transport services/options, potentially including rail and e-scooter travel. Could this also include a 'booking' system for car sharing?

We have tried to look at this at Group level – called MaaS – Mobility as a Service, but it is enormously complex to administer. A more cost effective method is to offer good signposting to other services. Various schemes like this have been tried around the country and none have lasted long due to complexity of operation and limited uptake.

Volume change is possible from simple journeys into urban centres, make that work and there is money available for other things as part of a virtuous cycle of growth.

- Are 'one-touch' scannable passes possible, to reduce payment times and improve punctuality.
That is what the App offers and ENCTS. We are trialling TapOn with credit cards on a flat fare route in Norwich at Easter and this may be possible to expand.

Punctuality and Increasing Usership

- Services
- What are the driving factors where service unreliability and unpunctuality are experienced?

Congestion

- How is punctuality measured and what constitutes a late-running bus?

OTC 6 minute window

- What new Tech options are there which could improve punctuality, ease of use and passenger numbers.

Bus priorities

- Have the service providers conducted any research or sought best-practice ideas to seek to increase service use by the public?

Yes, plenty of good examples from our other operating companies

- What incentivisation options are there to entice potential passengers? E.g., discounts on use of service, or work with Colchester BID/businesses for passengers to enjoy benefits from local firms?

We are working to offer some discounts through the BID, but the main issue is frequency, punctuality and convenience which are all influenced by congestion.

- What plans are there for continued improvements in environmental standards of vehicles?
We would like ECC to specify minimum standards as part of local bus tenders, otherwise the winners will always be those with the worst vehicles.