

Written evidence submitted by Transdev Blazefield Ltd (BUS0050)

Introduction

Transdev is a multi-national multi modal transport group headquartered in France. In the UK its local bus operations are in the North of England covering Blackburn with Darwen, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and City of York. We employ 1,400 colleagues, operate over 500 buses from 10 bases and enable nearly 40 million customer journeys each year.

We are a locally focused business, each of our businesses is locally branded, locally managed and locally focussed. We support this with a lean structure of specialists in key functions. We have high customer satisfaction, our driving colleagues regularly receive feedback about their customer service standards, friendliness and courtesy. They stand out in benchmarking surveys as better than the norm. We aggressively market our brands and have had great success in growing and developing these. We regularly survey customers formally and informally and that information drives improvements and all is reviewed and acted on.

We have very strong relationships with our local transport authorities and see our objectives closely aligned with theirs. The National Bus Strategy should help cement these relationships.

In this documents we present a succinct appraisal of the National Bus Strategy one year on from our perspective alone.

Overview

Transdev welcomed the National Bus Strategy (NBS) and felt it presented a great opportunity to move the sector forward. It was certainly clear in its intention. Broadly bus operators had been seeking more bus priority; transport authority more influence and control and the NBS set out how to do this. It is hard to argue against either aspect.

Some elements of the NBS were surprisingly prescriptive, others at very high level. There was much focus on a simple flat fare; route numbering and branding, but perhaps less focus on how to delivery priority quickly for all activity travel users including buses and cycles.

Challenges

The key challenge facing the bus industry, and almost every other one, is recovering from the impact of restrictions during the Covid 19 pandemic. We are extremely grateful for the financial support our industry has received which has allowed us to rebuild and we now work with our local authority partners to agree how networks will look in the future.

Recovery is mixed. In Lancashire on a like for like basis by March 2022 we had recovered 'commercial' customer numbers to 97% of the level witnessed in March 2019. Commercial customers are those for whom we receive a fare – i.e it excludes those who travel on English National Concessionary Travel Patterns. In this respect Lancashire benefits from a higher than normal level of school children use of service buses which has undoubtedly helped recovery. By contrast concessionary customers were at 61% of March 2019 level giving an overall recovery of 85%.

In our North Yorkshire operations commercial recovery was 91% commercial and 64% concessions; in West Yorkshire 81% and 64% respectively.

We have reached a number of conclusions based on this recovery:

- We have had much positive feedback from customers about our multi stage engagement during the pandemic and customers believe and trust us and respond well to us – even when delivering the service they expect has been very difficult recently
- Younger people have returned to bus use quicker and in higher volume. This is helped by our strong relationships with local sixth form colleges
- Commuter traffic into large cities is still depressed, our towns have recovered faster – and though we can't evidence this – we speculate that there may be more jobs in a city such as Manchester where working from home is feasible than in a town such as Burnley where retail and factory work predominates.
- Our LTAs tell us concessionary pass application rates continue to be high; in concession journeys were 66% of March 2019 numbers yet the passes scanned were 89% of the 2019 number, meaning trip rates fell by 27%

The recovery of concessions is a key challenge. Most authorities have continued to pay concessions at precovid levels. This will progressively move towards actual payments per trip during 2022/3. However if trip rates are lower than surely the concession scheme is generating fewer journeys than before. A lower 'generation factor' means reimbursement rates need to be

higher so the no better no worse off assumption is still valid. A wholesale review of the approach to reimbursement of concessionary fares is urgently required as those bus routes which have a higher proportion of concessionary travellers are likely to be at risk of cancellation.

Additionally the demographic of concessionary travellers is such that they have been at higher risk during the pandemic so it is understandable they may be more reluctant to travel again. However this then risks higher isolation; higher social exclusion and economic harm if their reduced travel correlates with reduced spend in the local economy. We are keen to explore how we can work with local authorities and other interest groups to help stimulate travel again.

NBS strategy progress

The Strategy set out challenging deadlines for completion of a Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP) and Enhanced Partnerships (EP). We all rose to the challenge and worked collaboratively on our BSIPs. We were encouraged to be ambitious – which some LTAs found hard after years of under funding – so it was a huge disappointment to find that funding was much lower than expected and as we approach six months since the BSIPs were submitted most local authorities do not know the outcomes.

It is likely that many will get no funding and those that do will not receive it until the autumn at the earliest, meaning it will be well into 2023 before any physical measures can progress.

Bus priority is the key to unlocking growth as it speeds services, reduces resources and gives an overall more reliable service to customers. The NBS focused on affordable simple fares – which is laudable but did over focus on ‘London style’ flat fares. These have many weaknesses, such as disadvantaging short journeys as it will cost the same for 2 miles as, say, 10. In some cities this will disproportionately dis-benefit the most disadvantaged. The flat fare works in London to a degree because many bus trips are short due to the Underground or Overground (which has a higher and not flat fare) acting as the main mode for longer trips. Shire areas, and some Mets, don’t have the equivalent and flat fares can therefore make longer trips uneconomic for bus operators.

We were disappointed that some LTAs didn’t feel the NBS was an opportunity to grow their socially necessary tendered service operations which are vital in some more rural areas.

Innovation

Sunday Freeway: In January and February 2022 we ran our four route Harrogate town network free of charge every Sunday with sponsorship from the local business association (Business Improvement District) this led to a 78% customer increase at a traditionally quieter time and due to the electric buses used contributed both to the retail economy and to the climate emergency. This followed on from a year long Sunday Freeway in Harrogate during 2019

£1 Evening Fares: In the North of England we introduced a flat £1 single fare after 7pm in June 2021. This compared to their usual prices which range from £2 to £8 depending on distance. This was to stimulate leisure travel at time when buses had spare capacity and our towns and cities were trying to rebuild their hospitality sectors after the last set of restrictions forced closures. Within a month this was averaging around 800 customers per day but by March 2022 around 3,500 customers are travelling on these tickets. In February 2022 customers after 7pm were 4% higher than they were in 2020 set against a typical of 15-20% decline. We have taken a 'no quibble' approach with the ticket valid even on our longer interurban trips. Customer and driver feedback has been extremely positive.

Flexible tickets: We have introduced flexible tickets following local pilots pre pandemic. Customers who wish to travel without using a time limit period ticket (eg 7 day, 28 day) can now buy 'bundles' of day tickets in five or tens with no expiry date so they can use them as quickly or slowly as they wish. We still have many customers travelling on conventional products - particularly 7 day tickets which still work out best value for a 4 or 5 day worker. Monthly subscription tickets have also become popular for those who want a fixed monthly payment without the hassle of renewing passes.

Capacity: Motivated initially by the need to communicate when buses were busy while capacity was limited, capacity tracking in apps and on real time systems is helping customers choose when to travel.

'Gifting': Through our mobile app we have a facility for parents to buy tickets and 'gift' them to their children's phones to enable them to benefit from pre purchased cash free travel without needing to purchase directly. It allows

parents as much control over travel costs as they would for school dinners or such like.

Contactless capping

Many operators have introduced contactless tap on and tap off payment with capping as a tool to encourage customers who feel put off by the traditional approach to ticketing. This has been led by operators and is evolving into a multi operator solution which is awaiting funding for roll out as part of the NBS.

Bus Funding and Net Zero

As already noted we have had a high level of support since March 2020 and this has helped sustain networks. We are encouraged by the NBS seeking better infrastructure, simpler fares and a more stable future. We have tried to tie things together. Eg in North Yorkshire, our LTA was successful with its Zebra bid and this will enable us to roll out electric buses to the rest of our network in Harrogate. Separately the BSIP included funding asks for an Infrastructure scheme focusing on the two busiest routes to address congestion hotspots and introduce a new commercial park and ride site. This has not yet been funded. Dealing with these items separately from a funding point of view risks failing to see the bigger picture. Introducing electric buses onto corridors with new Park and Ride, complementary active travel measures (such as cycle parking at bus hubs), expanded bus priority, real time information, attractive well maintained bus shelters with high quality information transforms the entire customer experience and will deliver the growth the NBS required.

Unfortunately the weakest aspect is what brings down the customer offer. State of the art electric buses may be let down by a bus stop that is dirty and damaged because the LTA cannot fund their maintenance and repair. It is important to ensure the basics are delivered. It's the very least customers expect.

Conclusion

It's a challenging time for all at the moment. The NBS so far hasn't quite lived up to its promises – we are confident with funding that it still can.

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