

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE GREATER MANCHESTER
BUS SERVICES SUB-COMMITTEE
HELD ON FRIDAY 1 OCTOBER 2021 AT 10:30AM AT MANCHESTER TOWN HALL**

PRESENT:

Councillor Jackie Harris
Councillor John Leech
Councillor Phil Burke
Councillor Roger Jones
Councillor David Meller
Councillor Barrie Holland
Councillor Nathan Evans
Councillor Mark Aldred

Bury Council
Manchester City Council
Rochdale Council
Salford Council
Stockport Council
Tameside Council
Trafford Council
Wigan Council

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Nicola Ward
Stephen Rhodes
Nick Roberts

Howard Hartley
Catherine Towey

Governance & Scrutiny, GMCA
Customer Director, TfGM
Head of Services & Commercial
Development, TfGM
Head of Facilities Management, TfGM
Senior Service Account Manager, TfGM

OPERATORS IN ATTENDANCE:

Matt Rawlinson
Guy Warren
Nigel Featham
Ben Jarvis

Diamond
First
Go North West
Stagecoach

GMTBSC 01/21 APOLOGIES

Resolved /-

That apologies be noted and received from Councillors Barry Warner, Warren Bray and Kevin Peel.

GMTBSC 02/21 CHAIRS ANNOUNCEMENTS AND URGENT BUSINESS

Resolved /-

There were no chairs announcements or items of urgent business.

GMTBSC 03/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Resolved /-

There were no declarations of interest.

GMTBC 04/21 MINUTES OF THE GM TRANSPORT BUS SERVICES SUB COMMITTEE MEETING HELD 6 AUGUST 2021

Resolved /-

That the minutes of the GM Transport Bus Services Sub Committee meeting held 6 August 2021 be approved as a correct record.

GMTBSC 05/21 BUS PERFORMANCE REPORT

Catherine Towey, Senior Service Account Manager took members through a report which detailed the performance of the bus network during the period from August 2020 and July 2021 with a particular focus on subsidised services. The report looked specifically at a period of time within the covid pandemic and as services were reduced, punctuality and reliability performance indicators were positive, however, more recently these measures had declined as congestion had become more evident on the network.

The data used to inform the report was based on observations, but it was noted that as more operators were installing real time feeds, more accurate, automatically collated data could be used in future reports.

In relation to funding, it was confirmed that the Covid Bus Operators Grant scheme had now ended, with over £100m distributed through TfGM to operators across GM. This had now been replaced with the Bus Recovery Grant scheme which would be accessible from 1 September 2021 until 5 April 2022 for all eligible commercial services.

Throughout this period, the fleet profile had not significantly changed, however work was underway across all operators to prepare for the introduction of the Clean Air Zone in 2022 and ensure that all vehicles were Euro 6 compliant. The Department for Transport had also introduced a specific retrofitting fund to ensure that all vehicles could reduce their emissions.

In relation to the Clean Air Zone, members asked whether GM was confident in its ability to meet the targets despite current worsening CO₂ emission levels. Officers explained how with the support of the two Government funds, Clean Bus Fund to retrofit vehicles and Placement Fund to replace ineligible vehicles they were confident GM would be prepared for the introduction of the Clean Air Zone in April 2022. Operators reported that in relation to the retrofitting of vehicles, they were using an external supplier to fit, however any maintenance responsibilities would fall to them.

Within the report, members noticed that there were quite a high number of contract breaches and asked whether there were sanctions for these and whether they would impact their ability to tender for services in the future. It was reported that the seemingly high figure in the report was as a result of a suspension of contract breach sanctions during the pandemic, however overall operators were very good at responding to contract breaches and paying the incremental fine depending on the type of breach. There were four distinct categories including not wearing the correct uniform, not accepting passengers with concessions etc. The current procurement process for future tenders although robust, did not take into account performance of breaches of contracts in relation to the subsidised

network.

Members questioned whether retrofitting a vehicle allowed it the same miles per gallon as previously. Operators confirmed that there was a very small percentage reduction as a result of retrofitting a vehicle.

The Committee were pleased to see an upward trend in operational performance, however, were concerned that with an increase of traffic on the network congestion could further impact current levels of performance.

Resolved /-

1. That the report be noted.
2. That further details of the type of contract breaches be included in future reports.

GMTBSC 06/21 UPDATE FROM OPERATORS

The Chair invited all bus operators in attendance to provide a short verbal update to the Committee.

First reported patronage levels of 70% compared to pre-covid levels which had remained stable over August and had experienced a slight uplift in September as schools returned and there was a further uplift in leisure travel. As traffic levels had begun to increase there had also been an increase in congestion and support to address pinch points was welcomed from TfGM and Local Authorities. There was significant concern regarding the current national bus driver staffing shortages but First reported at present they were able to balance resources. In relation to face covering compliance, although they were now optional, anecdotally only 30% of passengers were choosing to wear one.

Go North West reported that there were still some incidents of contracting covid within the workforce, resulting in some staff being required to isolate, however, full service levels were still in operation. There had been a number of fare measures introduced to encourage passengers back to the network including £1 fares after 7pm and a three-day ticket bundle for people returning to the office on a hybrid basis. Patronage levels were reported as 78% pre covid levels which was a move forward from previous weeks and the fleet was on track to be ready for the introduction of the Clean Air Zone requirements. In relation to driver shortages, Go North West reported that they were 15 drivers down from staffing levels in June but were attempting to recruit and upskill to fill any gaps.

Stagecoach reported patronage levels of circa 70-75% compared to those pre-covid which was encouraging but still a way off target. Service levels were close 100% which had resulted in some resourcing issues as staff absence was high and there remained a shortage of 70 (out of 1800) drivers. Punctuality of services had improved throughout the pandemic but taken a slight decline over the last couple of weeks as the network had become busier. 250 of their vehicles were already Euro 6 compliant and there were plans to retrofit another 450 in advance of the Clean Air Zone being introduced.

Rotala reported that staffing levels had not been helped by a recent letter from DfT to all HGV license holders encouraging them back to the haulage industry as many were currently bus drivers. This had resulted in further bus driver shortages across the industry. Patronage levels were circa 70% and the £1 evening fare offer had reportedly worked well.

Of the 240 fleet, 150 were Euro 6 compliant in relation to emissions, and there was a planned retrofit for the remaining vehicles.

In relation to driver shortages, members asked whether operators had noticed staff being poached by the HGV industry. It was reported that some staff had taken HGV contracts, but that due to a general staffing issue across the bus sector staff were also transferring between operators at a higher rate than normal. However, those drivers who had been trained by an operator were contractually obligated to remain for two years, otherwise their training costs would have to be recovered.

Members asked whether an agreement had been reached regarding the closure of Deansgate and options for Blackfriars Street. Operators reported that they were in regular conversation with the relevant Local Authorities, and they had shared their preferred option. There remained concern in relation to any further changes to New Bailey Street and Bridge Street as these were currently helping to mitigate the impact of the closure of Deansgate.

Members asked whether it was accurate that bus drivers were currently balloting for strike action. It was confirmed by Stagecoach that union ballots were underway for the next couple of weeks and that it was hoped a resolution could be found before there was any potential impact to the network.

In relation to the vantage service, members asked whether there was a pattern to patronage levels as it had been anecdotally reported that weekend passenger numbers were virtually back to pre-covid levels. First responded that overall patronage levels on the vantage service was between 70-75% with significant variations across some sectors of the market. For example, there had been a reduction in the sale of weekly products, evidencing new working patterns but this data was being monitored regularly to help understand the current market.

In summary, operators reported how patronage levels were on a positive trajectory, however, were still way short of ensuring a viable business that was not totally reliant on Government funding. The Bus Recovery Grant Scheme had been confirmed until March 2022, however there was significant concern as to the levels of demand not increasing substantially by that point.

Resolved /-

1. That the verbal updates from Stagecoach, Go North West, Diamond and First be noted.
2. That the issue of driver shortages and contributing factors be specifically noted and members be updated on the initiatives in place to address these shortages at the next meeting.

GMTBSC 07/21 BUS STATIONS AND INTERCHANGES

Howard Hartley, Head of Facilities Management TfGM took the Committee through a presentation which provided an update on the operation and management of bus stations, interchanges and on street infrastructure. In particular members were updated on plans for Stockport Interchange, the newly acquired Horwich Parkway station and initiatives including Kickstart and the Safe Place Scheme. TfGM now managed 15 Travelshops, the majority of sales being made through Shudehill which was manned for 7 days a week. It was noted that there had been a move away from weekly products through recent ticket sales information to

predominantly daily ticket products.

Members were positive about the temporary bus station that was in place whilst the development at Stockport Interchange took place and asked operators for their feedback on the facility. Stagecoach reported that there had been some initial hiccups with the new facility but nothing significant and that patronage figures would be able to evidence its success going forward.

In relation to real time electric displays at bus shelters, officers reported that this remained the ambition for GM, however as technology had advanced such systems had begun to be installed in the new interchange facilities that it was hoped could be rolled out across the network in due course.

Members were keen to ensure that any service interruption or delay was communicated as quickly and efficiently with passengers. Officers reported that now the technology was available to support real time passenger information these data streams were now already in use by a number of operators and service changes were reported through apps and interchange information boards. In support of this, staff were also deployed where possible to assist with large queues or dealing with re-direction of passengers following a service change.

The Kickstart Scheme which provided paid work experience for young people on Universal Credit was commended by members, officers confirmed that the criteria for applications to the programme had been set by the DWP and included a maximum age of 23 years.

Members noted that some bus shelters were owned and managed by TfGM, whereas others were managed by JC Decaux. It was questioned as to which provided the best value for money and confirmed that JC Decaux had met their contract obligations to provide 3,497 of the 4,403 bus shelters in GM, but that any new ones were offered to them in the first instance as it proved more cost effective for them to manage the assets.

Resolved /

That the report be noted.

GMTBSC 08/21 CHANGES TO THE BUS NETWORK AND REVIEW OF SUBSIDISED BUS SERVICES BUDGET

Nick Roberts, Head of Services & Commercial Development, TfGM took Members through the latest forthcoming changes to the bus network report.

Annex A

In relation to the service 533, members questioned the logic as to the re-timing of the timetable to a 20-minute service. Diamond reported that this had been done to ensure the service was in line with the timings of the other commercial service 507.

Annex B and Annex C

In relation to Partington Local Link in the Dunham Massey area, there had been a number of changes as a result to issue with the canal over-bridge on Woodhouse Lane which were included in the report.

Resolved /-

1. That the changes to the commercial network set out in Annex A of the report be noted.
2. That it be agreed that no action is taken in respect of changes or de-registered commercial services set out in Annex A of the report.
3. That the action taken in respect of the service change set out in Annex B of the report be noted.
4. That the proposed changes to general subsidised services set out in Annex C of the report be agreed.

GMTBSC 09/21 GMTC WORK PROGRAMME

Resolved /-

1. That the proposed work programme for the GM Transport Committee and its Sub Committees be noted.
2. That it be requested that the Road Safety report scheduled to be considered by the Committee in October includes reference to Local Authority schemes and the impact that their installation has had on road safety incidents.

GMTBSC 10/21 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Resolved /-

That it be noted that the GMTC Bus Services Sub Committee would next meet on the 19 November 2021.

GMTBSC 11/21 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

Resolved /-

That, under section 100 (A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public should be excluded from the meeting for the following items on business on the grounds that this involved the likely disclosure of exempt information, as set out in the relevant paragraphs of Part 1, Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

GMTBSC 12/21 CHANGES TO THE BUS NETWORK AND REVIEW OF SUBSIDISED BUS SERVICES BUDGET

Resolved /-

That the financial implications of forthcoming changes to the bus network be noted.

