

Greater Manchester Transport Committee

Date: 14 August 2020

Subject: School Transport: Preparations for September

Report of: Bob Morris, Chief Operating Officer

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report provides an update on the approach to planning for the return of pupils to school in September and wider transport implications.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Members are asked to note, comment as appropriate and endorse the approach to planning for September being undertaken by TfGM.

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Risk Management – not applicable

Legal Considerations – not applicable

Financial Consequences – Revenue – not applicable

Financial Consequences – Capital – not applicable

Number of attachments included in the report: not applicable

BACKGROUND PAPERS: GMTC 20200710 Transport Network Report

TRACKING/PROCESS		
Does this report relate to a major strategic decision, as set out in the GMCA Constitution?		No
EXEMPTION FROM CALL IN		
Are there any aspects in this report which means it should be considered to be exempt from call in by the relevant Scrutiny Committee on the grounds of urgency?		None
GMTC	Overview & Scrutiny Committee	
Not applicable	Not applicable	

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The implications of COVID-19 mean that the school transport as it existed before lockdown cannot be replaced in the same form. Social distancing on public transport will result in an inability to fulfil current demand requirement, with an approximate 80% reduction in available capacity. This combined with the likely pressures on budgets as a result of loss of revenue and higher tender prices mean there has been the need to urgently review the implications for planning for the 2020/21 academic school year beginning in September and beyond.
- 1.2 This paper sets out the immediate challenge of facilitating this, including work undertaken to date and the planned interventions. The paper also sets out the longer-term challenges of the delivery of both dedicated school bus services and SEN transport.

2 GOVERNMENT GUIDANCE

DfE guidance for full opening of schools

- 2.1 On 2 July, DfE released guidance on the full reopening of school from September. The guidance sets out a new framework for supporting transport to and from schools from the autumn term.
- 2.2 The guidance makes a distinction between dedicated school transport and wider public transport. Dedicated school transport refers to services that are used only to carry pupils to school. This includes statutory home to school transport but may also include some existing or new commercial travel routes, where they carry school pupils only. Wider public transport services refers to routes which are also used by the general public.
- 2.3 As pupils on dedicated school services do not mix with the general public, the standard advice for passengers on public transport to adopt a social distance of two metres from people outside their household or support bubble, or a 'one metre plus' approach where this is not possible, will not apply from the autumn term on dedicated transport.
- 2.4 In many areas, pupils normally make extensive use of the wider public transport system, particularly public buses. Government expects that public transport capacity will continue to be constrained in the autumn term. The guidance states that its use by pupils, particularly in peak times, should be kept to an absolute minimum.
- 2.5 The guidance published on 2 July states that the DfE will 'shortly publish new guidance to local authorities on providing dedicated school transport, based on the framework outlined here', however it should be noted that this guidance has not yet been published.

- 2.6 Further to this, DfT sent a letter to local authorities on 10 July recognising the potential need for specialist Travel Demand Management (TDM) in some authorities. A self-assessment process was required to be completed and returned to DfT by 22 July, setting out what we understand about demand for and supply of transport in the local area. TfGM coordinated this response in conjunction with, and on behalf of, the ten GM local authorities.

Government announcements

- 2.7 On 31 July 2020, government announced that the whole of Greater Manchester, and other parts of the north west, would face further restrictions following a rise in COVID-19 cases. Restrictions include no longer being able to meet people in private homes and gardens, and further openings scheduled for 1 August will be put on hold.
- 2.8 There are clear potential implications for reopening's planned for September and this situation will need to be closely monitored over the coming weeks.

3 IMPLICATIONS FOR GREATER MANCHESTER

- 3.1 There are estimated to be around 1.8m trips per school day in Greater Manchester associated with education¹. This makes up around 20% of trips made in GM. These are generated by school pupils, college and university students, education staff, and escorts (defined as an individual travelling with a pupil).
- 3.2 In total these education related trips comprise, approximately 350,000 car driver (plus a further 400,000 car passenger), 250,000 public transport (90% of which are bus), and 800,000 active travel (95% of which are walk).

Primary School

- 3.3 School Census (Jan 2020) indicates there are c.270,000 state-funded primary school pupils in Greater Manchester. Data from the National Travel Survey (NTS) shows that c.75% of primary school pupils travel less than 2 miles to school, and 47% less than one mile.
- 3.4 NTS data and TRADS data both highlight that more car trips are associated with primary school pupil travel than secondary. It is estimated that c.260,000 primary school pupil trips were undertaken by walking, and c.200,000 as a car passenger each school day pre-COVID. These two modes represent c.95% of all travel by primary school pupils.

Secondary School

- 3.5 There are an estimated 185,000 state-funded secondary school pupils (aged 11-16) in Greater Manchester. Data from NTS shows that c.50% of secondary school pupils travel over 2 miles to school, with 22% travelling 5 miles or more.

¹ Assumes 90% attendance for both pupils and staff, and 2 trips per person per school day.

- 3.6 Pre-COVID it is estimated that 42% of GM secondary school pupils walked to school, with 24% of trips made by secondary school pupils by bus, an estimated 81,000 trips across Greater Manchester on an average school day. NTS indicates that the vast majority of these bus journeys can be expected to be over 2 miles. A further 12,000 trips made by secondary school pupils (4% mode share) were by Metrolink.
- 3.7 TfGM fund 300 contracts for dedicated school services for secondary schools, which includes the provision of 81 Yellow School Bus (YSB) services. It is currently estimated that around 10% of school pupil bus trips take place on these dedicated services.

Colleges

- 3.8 There are approximately 65,000 16-18 year olds eligible for Our Pass, offering free bus travel within Greater Manchester. TRADS data indicates that 48% of pre-COVID education trips made by this cohort were made by bus, representing in excess of 50,000 trips on the network per day (the vast majority of which would be travelling on services available to the public).
- 3.9 Whilst bus is the dominant mode for pupils aged 16-18, 23% of trips are undertaken by walking, and a further 23% involve the use of a car (either as driver or passenger) - both of these markets are estimated to account for c. 25,000 daily trips on an average school day.

Universities

- 3.10 Greater Manchester has one of the largest student populations in Europe. There are around 100,000 students studying at five Higher Education Institutions, of which around 20,000 are international students (pre-COVID).
- 3.11 The Regional Centre (in particular the Oxford Road corridor), accounts for the vast majority of students who live within Greater Manchester. The high quality public transport and active travel provision in this area plays a part in ensuring that the student population had only a limited reliance on the private car pre-COVID.
- 3.12 Approximately 23,000 people are employed in the Higher Education sector in Greater Manchester (Business Register and Employment Survey, 2018).

4 TFGM SUPPORT

- 4.1 The DfE guidance states that the approach to school transport requires a partnership approach between local authorities, schools, trusts, dioceses and others. Schools should work closely with local authorities that have statutory responsibility for 'home to school transport' for many children, as well as a vital role in working with local transport providers to ensure sufficient bus service provision.
- 4.2 TfGM has been liaising with local authorities and operators to fully understand the implications of the return to school in September and make preparations for this.

- 4.3 TfGM has a coordinating role to play in ensuring that all stakeholders are engaged and working collectively to help manage the increased demand on the transport network from September.

Schools

- 4.4 Schools have a critical role to play in supporting collaboration between all parties - providers, local authorities, parents and pupils. The DfE guidance states that schools should work with partners to consider staggered start times to enable more journeys to take place outside of peak hours.
- 4.5 Schools should also encourage parents, staff and pupils to walk or cycle to school if at all possible. Schools may want to consider using 'walking buses' (a supervised group of children being walked to, or from, school), or working with their local authority to promote safe cycling routes.

Local Authorities

- 4.6 The Department for Transport has asked local authorities to urgently work with schools to survey parents on their typical routes to school and potential alternatives; consider a range of options for shifting demand for public transport onto other modes; and consider using traffic demand management approaches in order to ensure that children are able to attend school from the start of the autumn term.

5 INTERVENTIONS

Travel Demand Management

- 5.1 It is impossible at this time to accurately predict travel flows by mode, given multiple variables, including individuals' behaviour, changing government guidance and potential for local lockdowns. TfGM is adopting an intelligence led approach to demand management that will have a people and place focus across all ten Greater Manchester councils. TfGM will work closely with partners to identify issues and develop interventions that are targeted and outcome driven.
- 5.2 Whilst Government messaging has now changed, encouraging people back onto public transport and managing demand against 'theoretical capacity' created as a result of social distancing, is going to be an ongoing challenge.
- 5.3 Whilst people are no longer required to work from home, it is difficult to predict public transport demand due to employers taking a mixed approach to re-opening workplaces and with passenger confidence affected by the pandemic. With this in mind, it is therefore crucial that we have processes in place to ensure we can respond to challenges as they arise and be as dynamic as possible in our approach.

Bus

- 5.4 We are looking to operate a similar school network as last year, working with schools to understand demand and flexibility in school opening times.
- 5.5 It is the intention that all TfGM's school services will operate as 'dedicated school transport'; used only to carry pupils to school, which will allow the services to operate at full capacity, in line with the government's guidance. However, we are still seeking confirmation from the DfT that this assumption will remove social distancing requirements on these services.
- 5.6 Social distancing will remain on general network services and subsequently there is likely to be insufficient capacity on the network to accommodate all school flows (90% of the 250,000 daily education trips made on public transport pre-Covid were on bus, around 90% of these were on the general bus network).
- 5.7 TfGM are working with operators to identify where capacity issues are likely to be and assess where additional capacity would be targeted, should funding be secured from the DfT.
- 5.8 To help mitigate the capacity risk we will continue the message that pupils should set off earlier and allow more time to travel and to promote active travel options.
- 5.9 Yellow School Bus services will operate but are unlikely to use the pre-Covid pass system.
- 5.10 The current guidance states that 'pupil groups should apply, where possible' to dedicated school services but this is impractical and further government guidance is required and still awaited. The current assumption that the bus team are working to is that this will not apply.
- 5.11 There is also a gap in the guidance in respect of where dedicated school services serve more than one school. The current assumption is that we will continue to operate to more than one school where required. The cost of splitting the services would be in the region of £1.7 million.
- 5.12 A significant amount of work has been undertaken to date in partnership with the local authorities to better understand the challenges that are likely to be faced in September. There is ongoing and regular engagement with senior colleagues in the ten local authorities to ensure a coordinated approach, to keep them up to date with progress with preparations for September and assist with communications with schools.
- 5.13 For TfGM's school services, two new smart ticket types are proposed to be introduced:
- 10 Trip Carnet; and
 - The conversion of the existing TfGM School Weekly paper ticket to smart

- 5.14 The benefit of introducing these smart tickets is that they provide journey data which can help support understanding the use of these services to support planning, future strategy and monitoring of travel patterns.
- 5.15 There are also additional benefits for implementing a carnet style ticket which are:
- Health and safety benefit in the reduction in the number of transactions (and therefore cash handling) with the assumption that a percentage of those purchasing single/return tickets will purchase a carnet
 - Provides a flexible ticket to help support differing return to school travel patterns

Metrolink

- 5.16 Metrolink increased services on the 22 June to a 10-minute, mostly double frequency and in conjunction with the changes in guidance to 1m+ social distancing, we now have available capacity to support further growth back to the network in preparation for the return of education and commuter demand.
- 5.17 Metrolink will be extending the 10-minute frequency on Saturday evening to 8pm following analysis of data from the reopening of the leisure sector. This change will commence on the 8 August. Our service provision review is ongoing for beyond September with consideration of the commuter return, reopening of venues for special events and festive period anticipated demand.
- 5.18 Funding discussions with DfT are ongoing and will inform our plans beyond September.
- 5.19 Revenue protection and Byelaw activity has commenced in a staged approach across the network including educational days of actions with the Transport Unit. This included a series of targeted operations to increase face covering compliance at key locations in the city centre and on the Rochdale via Oldham Metrolink line between 16 and 25 July. There will continue to be targeted campaigns to support key activity across the network.
- 5.20 Promotion of cashless ticketing options was launched in June/July with promotion of contactless, Early Bird, Clipper, Metrolink App, Igo and Our Pass. We will continue this approach for safe travel messages whilst customers return to the network and this will inform the wider stakeholder and community engagement activity for September.
- 5.21 As part of our normal school and community engagement work, Metrolink is currently reviewing the normal approach to this engagement (targeted at ticketing, fare evasion and safety) and how we can work differently with these stakeholders in more targeted and alternative ways. This will be in collaboration with TfGM and other modes to ensure this activity is visible and integrated with the wider transport engagement activities and messaging to provide customers confidence to return to the network.

Rail

- 5.22 Service uplift was successfully delivered on 06 July, increasing services to approximately 85% of pre-Covid levels. Operational performance is currently above 95% PPM for Northern and TPE, with very low cancellation/CaSL figures of below 2%

- 5.23 Through industry collaboration, interventions suggested by TfGM have resulted in some earlier trains on key GM routes, along with extra station calls and service diversions to provide enhanced capacity for commuters.
- 5.24 The rail industry led by the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) and more locally by the Rail North Partnership have been discussing social distancing measures required for the next service uplift on 14 September. These discussions have highlighted a number of concerns around maintaining social distancing given the likely increases in commuters and school children on the network. One of the biggest concerns raised was social distancing between school children, given the very nature that school children are more likely to be social and congregate in groups. Therefore, with many school children likely to travel during the peak alongside commuters, it is likely that social distancing will be difficult to achieve.
- 5.25 Consultation is currently ongoing for the September uplift to increase peak time capacity and frequency on strategic GM routes, including where school demand exists. It is likely that TPE, Avanti and Cross Country services will remain broadly in line with the current services in place and, for Avanti and Cross Country, maintain their policy on mandatory advance seat reservations whilst exploring options of moving from 2m to 1m+ social distancing on-board services.
- 5.26 In order to prioritise its driver resource and focus on its busiest routes, including those used by school children, Northern has notified stakeholders that it will be temporarily removing Rose Hill/ Hyde loop services from September until December at the earliest. TfGM is currently engaging with Northern and Rail North Partnership on possible solutions and/or mitigation.
- 5.27 The focus for the next timetable uplift is to provide as much available capacity to cater for demand from known educational flows. TfGM insight and intelligence has fed in to inform TOC decisions around service uplifts and we will continue to do so. For GM purposes, this is notable around plans for enhancing services on the mid-Cheshire line.
- 5.28 Face coverings are now a legal requirement at stations and on-board trains, Northern at around 80 - 90%, higher for TPE services at Piccadilly and Airport at around 95%.

Active Travel

- 5.29 GM has seen an increase in cycling trips of 22% compared with the long-term average. This corresponds with a similar level of growth in other cities since the lockdown commenced. The typical trip length to primary and secondary school can be comfortably walked or cycled within 30 minutes.
- 5.30 As part of the Covid response measures GM made £5m available (£500,000 per council) as part of the Mayor's Cycling and Walking Challenge Fund to implement measures to enable social distancing and make walking and cycling safer. The Department for Transport then launched a £220 million Emergency Active Travel Fund for councils in England to deliver schemes to enable more walking and cycling trips that would have previously been taken by public transport.

- 5.31 The DfT bid criteria requires councils to deliver schemes that reallocate road space to walking and cycling through the provision of protected cycle lanes and point closures to significantly reduce the number of cars on a road or neighbourhood. It specifically references providing 'School Streets' which create temporary filtered streets around schools and drop off and pick up time to make it safer to walk, cycle and scoot and more convenient than driving. Several GM councils are developing these types of schemes around schools to enable active travel. Schemes will also be supported by, monitoring, marketing and complimentary activities to provide support on their use and integration with other transport.
- 5.32 GMCA was successful in phase 1 of the fund and received £3.1 million for schemes to be delivered by September. . Phase 2 has an initial allocation for GM of approximately £12.9 million to be committed by March 2021. GM councils are developing their priority schemes and working with TfGM and GMCA to form a coherent and deliverable package of schemes that meet the funding criteria and local priorities. The deadline for this application is 7 August.
- 5.33 Aligned to this successful funding bid and Greater Manchester's wider recovery objectives, TfGM's Sustainable Journeys team has developed an action plan to support the schools, colleges and universities with the physical return of students in September.
- 5.34 The plan addresses and seeks to mitigate the various transport challenges of getting Greater Manchester back to education, including potential capacity issues on public transport, safety concerns of using public transport and a potential modal shift to car (which is seen as a safe and convenient mode of transport).
- 5.35 Informed by insight and analysis from our network, and conversations with districts and schools, the plan includes interventions targeted at students, parents and staff which are focussed primarily on raising awareness of the impact of COVID-19 on the travel network and providing information on the active travel options available as an alternative to car travel and public transport.
- 5.36 These interventions include:
- the preparation of a digital travel resource pack for students and parents including maps to highlight safe walking and cycling routes;
 - a toolkit to provide schools and colleges with a range of editable material to raise awareness of the key messages when returning to education; and
 - support to further explore the opportunity to pilot School Streets in Greater Manchester (where temporary restrictions are placed on stopping and through traffic around schools at certain times of the day to provide safer and healthier environments and to encourage active travel).

Communications

- 5.37 September sees the reopening of schools, colleges and universities across Greater Manchester, as well as an associated return to work for ore parents – freed up from home schooling. From 1 August the work from home govt messaging is removed and it becomes the responsibility of the employer to determine where their staff work.
- 5.38 In addition, there has been a recent change in government messaging around both home working and the use of public transport.
- 5.39 Government and subsequently TfGM have changed its headline messaging from ‘Avoid public transport’ to ‘You can use public transport but should consider active travel’.
- 5.40 The message encouraging people to work from home has been removed – this is in line with employers adopting responsibility for safe working arrangements from 1 August.
- 5.41 TFGM, working with GM partners is planning the following activity:

Reassurance and Retime Messaging

- Multi-modal campaign activity to include messaging around building confidence (safety, cleaning, social distancing) flexible travel (and ticketing options) and avoiding morning and evening peaks (mainly evening from the insight), call to action as to where to go for safe travel information/ guidance.

Education Behaviour Change Campaign

- Focus on behaviour change from car travel to active travel for primary school parents whose children live close to schools
- Focus on behaviour change from bus travel to active travel for secondary school children due to potential capacity issues
- Bus will remain most popular mode for HE students – messaging will focus on safe travel guidance

Business Engagement Activity

- Messages to be focused on spreading the peak (supporting staggered start/finish times), active travel promotion for commuting where appropriate/ relevant
- Promote travelling to work safely by washing hands, wearing face coverings etc.

6 LONGER TERM ACTION

Development of criteria for the provision of school services

- 6.1 Given the current inconsistent approach to school bus provision, in recent years there has been a desire to implement criteria to address these inconsistencies, and to ensure that there is a clear and transparent rationale for the provision of school bus services.

- 6.2 In the current situation with reduced budgets and the need to build back better, now is an appropriate time for local authorities and TfGM to begin to work together on school transport issues, including the development of criteria to ensure that transport is provided to those who need it most. A more affordable and equitable solution is required to inform the allocation of school services, in line with a sustainable transport delivery.
- 6.3 Developing criteria (including the administration of the Yellow School Bus Scheme) will be important in order to allocate school service provision appropriately. Local authorities are requested to endorse this approach, support TfGM in the process and facilitate communication with schools.
- 6.4 It is recommended that this longer-term piece of work is undertaken for the 2021/22 academic year.

GM APPROACH TO SEN HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

- 6.5 The statutory responsibility for the provision of SEN transport lies with the Local Education Authority. At present the delivery of this transport is provided by each local authority in Greater Manchester, predominantly through the provision of minibuses and private hire services.
- 6.6 The number of children eligible for some form of SEN transport from GM local authorities is in excess of 5000.
- 6.7 The provision of transport for SEN pupils is often bespoke, with the need for specialised vehicles, well trained staff and therefore can be difficult to procure, for example where adapted vehicles are required. And as a result, SEND transport can be time consuming and complex to administer.
- 6.8 Furthermore, the cost of SEND transport for all local authorities continues to rise. The LGA reports that the percentage of councils overspending their home to school transport budgets has increased from 71% to 83%.
- 6.9 In the longer term, there have been very early discussions with local authorities to explore a review of how SEN transport is provided across GM. Currently all 10 local authorities deliver this independently and are in competition with each other for vehicles, and are running routes which transverse local authority boundaries with no coordination of this. The GM SEND Board offered 'in principle' support for a more joined up GM wide approach to the provision of SEN transport.
- 6.10 Such an approach could result in a better coordinated and more efficient system of route planning, better utilisation of vehicles, improved standards and more cost efficiency through a much bigger commission.
- 6.11 This is a much longer-term solution and will require scoping and feasibility work should all 10 local authorities be in agreement that this is an appropriate way forward. Before any work is undertaken to develop the proposal and elaborate potential models, it will be important to secure strong senior commitment from GM local authorities.

7 NEXT STEPS

- 7.1 TfGM will continue to implement the interventions outlined in section 5 and work with local authorities and operators in planning for the return of pupils to school in September.