

A radical new model to rescue shire buses

Bus use is declining in England's shire counties. It's time to go back to the drawing board and reinvent buses for a digitally aware world



Robert Montgomery

▶ The Bus Services Act 2017 was driven predominantly by the need to provide Greater Manchester, and other mayoral authorities, with powers to franchise their local bus networks before

evolving into a more wide ranging attempt to provide tools for local transport authorities generally to improve bus services in their areas.

It is not just in the big cities of the North that bus use is less healthy than it ought to be. Whilst the picture in the shire counties of England is more mixed, with a little bit of growth in parts of the more prosperous South and dire decline in the North, the bus market as a whole across England, Scotland and Wales is simply looking a little lacklustre and jaded.

Those symptoms can be put down to a range of short term causes - changing demographics with fewer teenagers in the population, reduced eligibility for free concessionary travel amongst the elderly, rising levels of driver licence holding by the over 60s, cuts in local authority service support budgets and, above all, highway authorities turning a blind eye to rising levels of traffic congestion in urban areas and its direct impact on increasing bus operating costs whilst reducing demand and revenue.

However, these kinds of challenges face many businesses and industries across the world and they deal successfully with them. The problem isn't short term - overall bus use has been on a long term downward trajectory since the 1950s as it has lost appeal for customers who prefer their own car.

There is, however, a fundamental business opportunity for bus operators to profit from a ride sharing solution to mobility as fewer and fewer young people learn to drive. However, to do so, they need to pay less attention to the legacies of the past and focus on reinventing themselves and their industry for the world we are now in.

I have made the case elsewhere for reinventing the city bus for the world of Apple, Google, Uber and Amazon (PT167). However, an equally radical, but different, approach is also there to be taken in the shire counties where smaller towns and cities also suffer from the twin evils of traffic congestion and poor air quality. In those cases, most of the traffic comes from further afield with congestion caused by commuters who live outside the towns and cities.

Yesterday's bus legacy now needs to be forgotten and buses in the shires completely reinvented for a digitally aware world where mobility is growing. Buses can grab their fair share of that mobility market through a radical and relevant ride sharing agenda.

What are the real problems?

Real problem number one is that most shire county bus networks are, in essence, simply scaled down versions of their successful predecessors of the 1950s.

Over time frequencies have been thinned out and fares pushed up to compensate for a more prosperous population enjoying the convenience of the car. As demand has fallen, service quality and value have fallen, too, in a depressing cycle of decline to the point where some shire bus services are populated predominantly by schoolchildren in the peak, pensioners in the off-peak and simply no service in the evenings and Sundays.

Real problem number two is that routes have become more circuitous, convoluted and slow to try to gather as many people as possible

"If buses were invented today, bus networks would not look like the ones we currently have"

onto as few service variants as possible to deliver load factors commensurate with full sized single deck or double deck buses, losing all competitiveness with the car.

Those problems are similar to those traditional British seaside resorts which cannot understand why no one visits them any more despite them continuing to provide exactly the same services as they did in their 1950s heyday.

Time has marched on and bus operators and transport authorities have failed to respond with sufficient initiative and imagination to develop competitive products relevant for the more prosperous, faster moving, digital era in which we all now live.

Yes, there are genuine short term challenges in the current market environment but they aren't the real problem. The real problem is losing the battle with the car and shedding huge volumes of market share over a 60-year period.

How do bus operators and transport authorities use the tools in the Bus Services Act to turn that tide?

Reinventing the bus in shire counties

Making buses competitive with the private car for travelling to work, the shops, the hospital, the cinema, restaurants, the pub, the station or the myriad of other reasons people go out isn't something which can be achieved by either bus operators on their own or local transport authorities on their own - making a real difference requires both to work in partnership.

Using the Enhanced Partnership powers in the Bus Services Act 2017 opens up all sorts of opportunities to put right what has gone wrong over the last 60 years.

If buses were invented today, bus networks would not look like the ones we currently have.

There would be a laser-like focus on designing a product people will happily choose to use, a product the operator can be proud of, a product which genuinely meets peoples' real needs and lessens their dependence on the car.

At the heart of a reinvented bus network in the shire counties would be a series of core trunk routes, derived from empirical demographic data, linking where people live with the places they want to go to in numbers which justify the need for, and cost of, operating full size buses.

Those services need to tick all of the following boxes:

(1.) Operated at consistent frequencies of

“I can see some traditional bus operators shaking their heads at these ‘outrageous proposals’”

- between two and six departures per hour;
- (2.) A comprehensive timetable which allows customers to travel to and from work anywhere along the line of route, go shopping anywhere along the line of route, go for a night out anywhere along the line of route, not shut down too early or open too late to remove any of the above utility;
- (3.) A timetable which operates seven days a week, 365 days a year;
- (4.) Operated by stylish, comfortable, well maintained vehicles with good heating and ventilation, free Wi-Fi and charging points equipped to transmit and receive service operational data in real time;
- (5.) Driven by well trained, customer friendly drivers empowered to give excellent customer service;
- (6.) Have a wide range of convenient, simple ticketing and payment options;
- (7.) Operate along a direct alignment which ensures that all passengers can make swift progress to their destination;
- (8.) Have good infrastructure at stopping points including shelters, seats, information on timetables, fares and up to date service status;
- (9.) Have good quality, convenient setting down and picking up points in all of the urban areas served;
- (10.) And have sufficient priority measures to ensure that the vehicles only stop or slow down to pick up or set down passengers.

The first six of these points is entirely in the control of the operator.

The seventh point is controlled partly by the operator and partly by the transport authority

The final three points are predominantly in the control of the transport authority

Hence the need for partnership!

Clearly, routes designed to this specification will only meet a proportion of the travel needs of residents in the county albeit a very significant proportion if the network is designed well.

Further steps should then be taken to optimise the utility of these routes, enhancing demand and justifying even higher frequency, by locating along the length of the route both formal and informal park and ride facilities and transfer hubs where the trunk routes can be fed by demand responsive vehicles linking them to smaller or tangential residential areas or demand attractors.

All of this will contribute to easing congestion

and improving air quality in county towns and cities especially if accompanied by sensible policies on parking management and control.

Technology has a major part to play in those steps.

Those demand responsive services should be operated by 8, 16 or 24-seat vehicles operating flexible schedules to meet travel bookings made either online or in App.

Over 85% of the population now have a smartphone and will prefer to book a bus on an App than stand in the wind and rain in hope of a bus turning up and ready to put their arm out! Would any modern customer service business really invent that form of interaction now?

App bookings would be from origin to destination with departure and arrival times provided at the time of booking and each passenger's journey fully tracked such that drivers on trunk services would know to expect a specific number of transfers at each hub and also know if, for some reason, the feeder vehicle is significantly delayed and not, therefore, to wait.

The technology behind the system would automatically adjust the delayed passenger's journey and advise them in real time of any revised arrival time.

Using ongoing data analysis, the routing and timing of the feeder vehicles can be adjusted to incorporate a mix of timetabled and demand responsive elements.

None of that technology was available when buses were first invented and current networks were designed but it can all be made available now.

Operators will need to build new operating models around demand responsive operation of smaller vehicles. And the partnership will need to develop new commercial models to distribute revenues between the operator of the trunk services, the operator of the demand responsive services and the local authority funding the bus priorities and infrastructure. Hence the need to use the Enhanced Partnership powers of the Bus Services Act.

There will be considerable inter-dependencies between operators and authorities in this structure but the prize of substantial potential patronage gain from a world where the young are increasingly shunning driving in favour of ride sharing will more than compensate.

It is but a step from this model to the widespread use of Mobility as a Service (MaaS)

DECLINING BUS USE IN ENGLAND'S 'NON-METROPOLITAN' AREAS

1982: 1,615 million journeys

2015/16: 1,266 million journeys

which could be delivered as a wide ranging mobility partnership in shire counties again using the Enhanced Partnership powers in the Bus Services Act to deliver the bus element.

Shire county networks should also be supplemented by 'crowdsourced' services on less trafficked movements. See the model of Ford-owned 'Chariot' in San Francisco, Austin and New York in the United States.

I can see some traditional bus operators shaking their heads in despair at these 'outrageous proposals' but, then, I shake my head at the constant press coverage about the death by a thousand cuts of traditional bus services across the shire counties of England. Local authorities are running out of cash to support low and declining load factor conventional buses serving small towns and villages and operators go through agonies to constantly tweak and retweak their traditional networks to square the circle of profitability and political peace!

Time for a clean sheet of paper - or should that be a set of new algorithms? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Robert Montgomery has worked in the bus industry in the UK and Ireland for 47 years, the last 34 years in senior management roles, the most recent as Managing Director of Stagecoach Group's UK Bus Division. He is currently working with partners on developing public/private sector partnerships in urban areas and with technology suppliers on enhancing the technology support available to operators.

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