

Cities in Crisis Four Years On !

In 2017, Matt Shepherd of Oxera and I wrote a piece about how the twin evils of congestion and poor air quality were choking the UK's greatest cities and how the newly enacted Bus Services Act could be used by Metro Mayors to find a solution to those twin crises.

Now, four years later, as the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic adds a challenging new dimension to the crisis, it seems a good time to take stock of what impact our Metro Mayors have had on saving their cities from their long standing love affair with the private car.

The Act was initially conceived as the vehicle to enable the Mayor of Greater Manchester to take control of the city's bus network through a franchising process but evolved toward a wider purpose in reforming the governance around buses in all of the Mayoral authorities.

All were given enabling powers to take bus networks under full public control through franchised contracts and all were also given alternative powers to enter into radical, enhanced public / private sector partnerships to boost bus use and create modal shift from the private car.

Now, four years on, the Mayor of Greater Manchester has taken steps toward taking control of the city's bus network and consulted on a plan which will increase public expenditure, transfer commercial risk from the private to the public sector but do very little other than tinker around the edges of the status quo in terms of reversing the dominance of the private car in the city.

Across the country, Metro Mayors have consulted their communities on buses but we have yet to see an exciting, radical plan to transform mobility at scale and give the residents of our greatest cities a true alternative choice of travel lifestyle.

Yes, the Bus Services Act is about reform and governance but that reform and governance must have a mission and a purpose beyond whether buses are controlled by PLC's or politicians and planners.

It should be about the substance.

And the substance is to take a long hard look at the bus market and its environment and completely rethink its future in a 21st Century context.

The first half of the 20th Century saw the market share of the bus grow and the second half saw it decimated by the private car.

If it is to grow in the 21st Century, the bus industry, and the politicians who see its social and economic value, need to think hard about the consumer market it serves.

The bus, on its own, is a very niche product – even in the biggest cities. It has limited clout and, effectively, only meets the needs of *some* of the people *some* of the time.

No one is going to give up their car to ride on the 57 bus because the 57 bus doesn't take them everywhere they want to go.

You will only give up your car for an alternative product that meets your needs *all* of the time and the opportunity to develop that kind of product, with buses as its heart, exists in this century in a way in which it didn't in the last.

Today in a world of apps, big data, artificial intelligence, machine learning, Uber, Amazon, Tesla and Google, there is an opportunity to create a mobility revolution that can only be brought about by the bus industry working in partnership with others to build a new future as part of a bigger mobility industry.

And, interestingly, the Bus Services Act, and its approach to governance and reform, is a key enabler of the revolution required especially when coupled with the Government's COVID Recovery Plan and newly published Bus Strategy.

The Act creates the governance, the 21st century technology provides the vision and the Bus Strategy provides the impetus and some of the funding required.

So, how does a Metro Mayor ride the wave of the Bus Services Act, new developments in technology and a Government with a new found commitment to the bus to deliver on a true mobility alternative to the private car and begin to rid their city of the twin evils of congestion and poor air quality ?

1. Clear the Streets

Clear the city's streets of roadside parking to open up space for people to walk, to cycle and to provide reserved rights of way both for clean buses and autonomous shuttles as well as create more pleasant green space and amenities.

Something becoming fashionable amongst major cities around the World including Paris and, most recently, Barcelona.

2. Mandate Environmentally Friendly Car Parking Charges

Set parking charges for cars in city centres, in both public and private car parks, at levels which reflect the economic and environmental damage they cause. It is time to highlight how socially unacceptable mass commuting in a single occupant car truly is !

3. Develop High Quality High Frequency Commuter Rail Corridors

Cater for mass radial commuter movements into the City Centre efficiently and effectively with rail infrastructure where available.

4. Develop High Quality High Frequency Bus Corridors

Follow the model being developed in Dublin, Ireland, through 'Bus Connects' - a series of radial bus corridors with high quality infrastructure and radical bus priority measures to deliver fast journey times and high quality interchange points to maximize their catchment area to efficiently and effectively cater for mass commuter movements.

5. Develop bus based feeder routes to the Interchanges

Connect the Radial Bus Corridors to nearby residential and commercial areas, hospitals and other demand attractors through high quality feeder buses with seamless, high quality interchanges.

6. Develop Park and Ride Sites

Connect both the Radial Bus and Rail Corridors to an even wider catchment area through Park and Ride Sites located at either Commuter Rail Stations or Bus Corridor Interchanges

7. Go Electric or Hydrogen on bus power

Mandate, and grant aid, the conversion of the entire city bus fleet from diesel to electric or hydrogen power over an accelerated timescale.

Recognise that, in the short run, this will require substantial capital funding from both the public and private sectors and, in the longer run, operators will enjoy higher passenger revenues and lower operating costs and the public will enjoy cleaner air.

8. Develop App Based Demand Responsive People Carriers

Replace low frequency conventional bus services outside the city centre with dynamically routed demand responsive ride sharing people carriers booked through an app.

9. Provide Autonomous Shuttles

Use space freed up from on street car parking to provide reserved, protected rights of way for autonomous city centre shuttles and develop similar shuttles to link hospitals and other commercial sites to the public transport network

10. Procure a high tech pricing, payment and ticketing solution

Provide contactless, digital, integrated payment and ticketing for all transport modes on a single open platform with personalized, account based ticketing including monthly subscription options for various levels of public transport access.

11. Provide High Quality Digital Journey Planning

Link a high quality multi modal journey planner to the pricing, payment and ticketing app and revised networks to deliver Mobility as a Service across the city.

12. Utilize Big Data, Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

Engage with a data partner to power decision making by all parties, including operators and customers, across the whole mobility environment and providing open data for commercial app suppliers to maximize demand for public transport and enhance customer satisfaction

13. Provide infrastructure for City Car Clubs

Make provision for strategically placed 'hire by the hour' cars across the city and public transport network for those journeys which, simply, need a car!

This entire integrated package is the kind of vision required to finally stop the growth of private car use, and its associated evils in the UK's greatest cities, in its tracks, clean the air, refresh the streets and create the more welcoming and pleasant cities the Mayor and the people can be proud of.

What does it take to deliver ?

The Report by the National Audit Office entitled 'Improving Local Bus Services in England outside London' published on 2 October 2020 gave a very succinct and intelligent assessment of what needs to be done to optimize the use of the Bus Services Act 2017 and secure a successful outcome for the Government's new Bus Strategy and £3BN investment in buses over the next decade.

It requires –

Governance

This Vision could, technically, be delivered entirely by the Public Sector working with the Private Sector serving as contractors.

Alternatively, it could be delivered as a Mobility Partnership, potentially chaired and lead by the Mayor, with full input from both the public and private sector - the public sector focused on delivering the policy framework, the infrastructure and 'kick start' funding of £3bn and the private sector focused on service delivery, marketing, customer service and additional capital investment for a long term commercial return through substantial patronage growth and operating cost efficiencies.

The Bus Services Act provides the core vehicle for what will be a predominantly bus based model delivered through franchising or delivered through a wide ranging enhanced public / private sector partnership.

It will take bold imagination, leadership and commercial negotiation skills to bring the Partners together to deliver on the social, environmental and commercial objectives involved.

That will require the resources of the Transport Authorities involved to be bolstered with appropriate expertise to work in this area as much of their management resource has disappeared in the years of austerity.

Projects of this scale require good planning, negotiation and ongoing governance

Funding

The whole Vision can be funded by a combination of commercial revenue flows, private sector capital and local authority and national government grant and support.

Those funding streams will need to be well understood and analysed to ensure that where, for example, the public sector funds high levels of bus priority and infrastructure, the commercial bus operators who benefit in higher revenues divert an appropriate proportion of those revenues to meet the capital and revenue costs involved.

Innovative thinking will be required to make a powerful business case to national government to continue funding elements of the Vision where there are substantial and measurable social, economic, health and environmental benefits.

Again, this requires expertise to build the commercial and public business cases for investment and ongoing expertise in ensuring that the costs and benefits are fairly shared between the public sector, private sector and consumers.

Execution

This is a challenging and ambitious medium to long term agenda which will require highly skilled execution and stakeholder management to bring it all together in a cohesive, co-ordinated, effective way.

Turning this high level Vision into reality on the ground will take planning, time, investment, stakeholder engagement, public support, political leadership, a strong business case and a strong executive management team at its heart.

Conclusion

Our great cities have been in crisis for many years and that crisis has been exacerbated by the COVID 19 pandemic vastly increasing public debt and all but destroying, in the short to medium term, the commercial business model which underpins urban bus networks in every city across the country outside London.

Growing back what we had before on the wasteland created by COVID 19 would be a true waste of an opportunity.

Let us see something different than congested streets and choking air quality as those cities and bus operators recover and build a mobility solution which is commercially and environmentally sustainable and, ultimately, popular with a new generation of people for whom owning a car is no longer a necessity.