



The future of mobility

*If the bus is to play a leading role in the long term future of urban mobility, we need to be **scanning the horizon now and sowing seeds of change** to ensure that a very different bus world stakes its claim to exist.*

*We shouldn't be spending time and energy implementing a retro 1980's governance model for yesterday's buses but be focused on **designing a new age of the bus looking toward 2030 and beyond.***

*This is the first of fourteen weekly articles on what different aspects of that new bus future could look like and the kind of things we need to be sowing seeds for now if we are to truly **ride the wave of future opportunity.***

*We need to **be bold if we are to shine** over the next 40 years and do more than invest in a zero emission fleet, tinker with governance and introduce the odd capped fare.*

Episode One – The Big Picture

There are those who believe that all bus operators need to do is invest in a zero-emission fleet to become entitled to claim the right to be the most environmentally sustainable supplier of urban mobility by 2050.

The World, however, doesn't always reward the 'entitled' and things do not always turn out as expected. Entitlement needs to be backed up by dedication and hard work and there is a wide range of activity required to present that zero emission operation in a guise which will **truly transform the role of the bus over the next three decades, restoring it to the pre-eminence it enjoyed in urban mobility in the early 1950's.**

Right now, that transformation looks unimaginable.

Indeed, I believe the vast majority of the bus industry workforce, including its senior management, don't even have that transformation on their radar, are totally

obsessed with the day to day challenges of the here and now and don't have the headspace to invest in the longer term.

Despite the downsides of acute urban congestion, around **70% of urban commuters in the UK remain wedded to sitting in traffic** as their preferred option with only around 7% taking the bus.

These figures vary by town and city with some of the larger cities having a lower proportion of car commuting due to the presence of urban rail options but, even then, outside London the car proportion rarely falls below 50% and only in a handful of locations.

Creating cleaner, healthier, liveable towns and cities not polluted and congested by excessive use of single occupancy private cars is transformational and the key to that transformation is positive investment in high quality bus networks.

Delivering that transformation requires **a comprehensive plan addressing seven major areas of activity.**

1. Investment in the product

Current bus networks are designed for their current volume and profile of users. They **are not geared for growth** even for their current demographic let alone the vast majority of commuters whose trip simply would not be possible on the current networks.

There needs to be a **massive overhaul in network design and capacity to open bus use up as a credible alternative to the car.**

That has been the situation for decades prior to the pandemic but, post pandemic, it is now even more the case as services are matched much closer to actual demand with little investment in growth capacity. If you do not actively invest in development capacity, over and above the here and now, you will not see any material growth in demand.

If car users are to be tempted to consider the bus as an alternative, they need to be shown a product which meets their needs. The design, delivery and development of those bus products will take skill, time and, above all, significant financial investment over and above the current substantial commitments to invest in zero emission fleet.

2. Investment of financial and political capital in car restraint and bus priority

Bus networks suitable for delivering major modal shift simply cannot be delivered without **bold, positive interventions to constrain car use and develop material bus priority** on urban streets, major 'A' roads and motorways.

This also requires financial investment and, more importantly, **determined political courage to separate the vast majority of commuters from their car.**

One of those situations where **tough love is required.**

There is growing hard evidence worldwide in cities ranging from Helsinki, Paris, Ghent, Amsterdam, Singapore and Barcelona to prove it can be done but it **requires political bravery** and technical professionalism **to take the car community through the pain barrier.**

Once achieved, there is also clear evidence of the political resistance melting away as the tough love is repaid with gratitude.

Like all addictions, **detoxing the commuter's attachment to the car requires a steely determination.** There is no simple soft way.

Politicians simply need to front it up.

With up to 70% of urban land dedicated to cars in one form or another and, on average, **a car killing one pedestrian in the UK every day of the year**, there is much to be gained even beyond the need to improve air quality and address climate change.

3. Investment in Infrastructure

Delivering a bus user experience of sufficient quality requires substantial investment in supporting infrastructure around **good quality stops, enhanced waiting environments, interchange facilities and customer facing information technology.**

The '**whole bus system**' needs to scream **frequency, speed, quality, style and reliability** to be seen as a superior experience to sitting frustrated in traffic in the car of your choice.

4. Building Alliances

Buses do not work in isolation.

Bus **operators need ongoing continuous co-operation and support from a wide range of allies** to deliver a high quality customer experience.

Those allies include local authorities, police, major employers, major retailers, other transport operators, colleges, hospitals, leisure and entertainment venues, chambers of commerce and many, many more including some who are very bespoke to particular geographic markets.

In addition to tough love with addicted car consumers, you need **a permanent charm offensive with essential allies.**

To remove friction from commuters' daily bus journeys needs co-operation and input from many other entities and, therefore, those **alliances need to be built and nurtured if the bus experience is to be optimised.**

This, too, takes time and resource.

5. Fostering an innovative and responsible competitive dynamic

To date, **three Mayoral Combined Authorities – Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and West Yorkshire – have published comprehensive 40 year Business Case Assessments of their approach to the delivery of bus services under a Franchising Mechanism through to the mid 2060's.**

None of those three Assessments seeks to truly challenge the car dominated mobility which currently prevails in their urban areas and, indeed, the **general thrust of all three Assessments is simply that they will manage the decline in bus use better through Franchising** than either through the current status quo or an Enhanced Partnership mechanism.

It will, therefore, be necessary to revisit bus governance in the context of meeting the UK's obligations to address Climate Change and reduce carbon and develop a more appropriate governance mechanism consistent with these proposals.

All **consumer products benefit from innovation and a responsible competitive dynamic** and the quality of your daily commute or routine travel will benefit every bit as much from that as your other retail or utility experiences.

More 'fit for purpose' methods for delivering that change than the 1980's retro proposal of Franchising will be reviewed in detail in future Episodes on Governance and Funding.

6. Engaging marketing, promotion and pricing

Detailed market research, careful product design, dynamic communication and promotion coupled with competitive pricing are a key part of every other retail

experience and bus network operators need to emulate the best to deliver excellent levels of customer satisfaction superior to the experience of enduring congested urban trips by car.

7. An abundant supply of professional, engaged front line staff

To deliver consistently to the scale and standards necessary requires an **abundant supply of well trained, motivated drivers, supervisors and front line customer facing support staff** both delivering the actual service and providing proactive customer support.

In a developed economy with high employment, that is challenging to deliver unless there is an **open channel of international labour to meet any natural shortages**.

The history of bus operation in the developed world shows that has always been the case and, **with a massive expansion in demand targeted, a substantial labour pool is essential**.

The ultimate imperative in facilitating this will lie with government in developing suitable immigration policies.

It is possible that, as time passes, a degree of bus operation can be delivered by autonomous vehicles but this will only apply to a very restricted proportion of the market for specialist shuttles in restricted areas.

Even by 2060, the world will not be ready for high capacity, seriously expensive buses to be out on their own on high frequency urban and interurban routes.

Where does this lead?

Bus networks where the **operators can justly be proud of each and every product delivering -**

Frequency, speed, proximity, quality, style, simplicity and reliability backed up by long term stable, sustainable investment.

When should it start?

Delivering **this degree of change in perception and experience** will be an enormous challenge for both operators and government, both local and national, and **will not come overnight**.

However, to deliver it coincident with a zero emission fleet by the mid 2030's relies on **setting out now on a mission to sow the seeds of a consistent direction of travel.**

Next week, in **Episode 2**, published here on **15 January**, we begin to explore the nature of network change required in more detail.