

Why investing in small town and rural public transport will help clean the air in the UK's major cities



This picture is of the M56 motorway on the outskirts of Manchester as **commuters pour into the city** in their **single occupancy cars** in the morning peak.

That traffic will go on to **bully and squeeze its way onto the narrower**

streets of the city polluting, poisoning and cluttering as it goes. It would be possible to constrain some of those 'killing machines', more politely known as 'cars', by congestion charging or other forms of road pricing but those measures, alone, will not be enough.

To meet climate change targets, the **volume of car use needs to fall by over 20%** and, if the ongoing desire for mobility into and out of cities also continues to rise, that will **require major levels of modal shift.**

Most of those cars on the M56 don't come from other cities but from **smaller communities in Cheshire, Staffordshire, Lancashire and North Wales** whose **public transport options have been systematically decimated by the rise of the car since the 1950's** and the damage that has done to bus speeds, operating costs and fares and all of that **exacerbated by the 'austerity' cuts of the Cameron/Osborne years** which hit hard on bus support.

If we are to deliver on our net zero commitments, we not only need to free the city streets to allow urban buses to do their mass transit job, we **need to address the level of car use in small towns and rural areas** and reduce the temptation to bring them into the city to add to urban traffic congestion and air pollution.

We need to see **private sector lead investment in two areas of bus activity in small town and rural areas** appropriately supported, both in kind and cash, by the public sector.

Firstly, we hear a lot right now about changed travel patterns following the Pandemic which has seen the life support withdrawn from some bus services which were already performing poorly before 2019 **BUT life is about both expiry and renewal, about births and deaths and that applies as much to the bus industry as any other component of humanity.**

Yes, the weak and the aged will, eventually, die and we face up to that and the bus industry is grasping that particular nettle right now but there is **not a lot of sign of it proactively grasping the opportunities presented by the need to cut car use by over 20% and developing the new products needed to ride that wave.**

That will not happen by magic. That change requires positive action.

Those **former car trips will not neatly fit into today's bus networks – both in terms of capacity and geography.** We will not only need more bus capacity but different route patterns and types of route and, currently, the industry seems obsessed, in addition to humanely killing the dead wood, with cutting networks to match the drivers available and finding its way to 100% zero emission fleets whilst **there is a huge amount to be done on future product development.**

There is a very strong business case for developing new bus products to commercially provide for that 20%+ modal shift and that needs to begin now.

There are, in some areas, **strong long distance interurban bus routes providing commuter, shopping and leisure access to healthy market towns and major cities** but not enough to deal with the required modal shift. The stronger ones can be **traced back to bold marketing moves by individual visionary operators who built them from zero, investing up front in fleet, staff and patience whilst the revenue slowly grew to be greater than the costs.** Consider the **Oxford Tube**, the **36** in North Yorkshire and the **South West Falcon** to name a few.

We need a new generation of brave, imaginative investment in building longer distance commuter, shopping and leisure services fit for **an age when riding a 'killing machine' boldly into town will simply attract an ASBO !**

The **design, delivery and development of those services is down to the private sector** which will reap the rewards as they mature but the public sector needs to back up those investments by delivering an excellent operating environment.

Secondly, if we want to curb car use, we **need to ensure that small town and rural residents can access shops, schools, health facilities, local employment, entertainment and sports facilities conveniently by bus.**

That requires a **core level of local bus networks** supplemented **by an appropriate level of DDRT** operations and that whole package can be delivered most efficiently by the private sector with some specific targeted support from the public sector in both kind and cash.

Delivering Target Zero and it's associated modal shift needs action and investment now.

The future vision of the bus industry enjoying a new golden era as the love affair with the private car begins to die won't happen by magic.

It will require **businesses bold enough, brave enough and imaginative enough to design those new products and invest in their start up costs** to reap the rewards as they mature. Note the deployment of the word 'invest' and not 'beg'.

Most importantly, **the provision of the capacity, the frequency and reliability MUST come first and the demand FOLLOW. The other way round simply does not work ! The future will NOT be demand led. *The demand will have to be created through a mixture of car constraint measures and excellent marketing and product design and delivery by operators.***

Finally, we **need the public sector to support those private sector investments with a consistently good bus operating environment to ensure those buses can do their job without being constrained by congestion.** There are also aspects of the local rural requirements which will need a degree of public support both in kind, in terms of infrastructure, and in cash to support weak but necessary links which cannot, in the long term, fund themselves commercially.

Ideally, the bulk of that public investment will be in pump priming

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