Guidance: communicating changes to local bus services COVID-19 Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG)

Introduction

Following the Government's advice to the public to avoid non-essential travel and to work from home where possible, the Senior Traffic Commissioner issued Statutory Direction and Statutory Guidance which modify the bus registration process during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department for Transport (DfT) has also issued advice to local authorities on how the 28-day notification period may be reduced.

In these unusual circumstances, it is particularly important that passengers are kept informed of service alterations in a timely fashion. The Government has asked Transport Focus to set out guidance on how best to do this.

As Government communications have made clear, all bus operators who receive the COVID-19 Bus Services Support Grant will be expected to run up to 50 per cent of scheduled commercial mileage and to engage with the relevant local transport authorities to determine what bus services should be operated, when and on which routes.

This guidance is aimed at operators of local bus services, and local transport authorities. Whoever has responsibility for information provision, the operator and local authority should work together to ensure that the relevant organisation can fulfil the guidelines set out below and meet their individual responsibilities.

The guidance is designed to represent best practice. We acknowledge that in these extraordinary circumstances it may not always be possible to meet these high standards. For example, there may be occasions where changes to timetables have to be made at short notice to ensure safety and meet passengers' needs and it will not be possible to meet all the information guidelines set out in this document before the change is implemented. Nevertheless, all organisations should strive to adhere to as much of this guidance as possible.

While operators and local authorities may wish to revisit how they have communicated past changes to ensure they have the right approach going forward, the primary focus of this document is on future changes.

We are grateful to all of those who commented on the first version of this guidance and provided us with examples of how they have been communicating changes. Given the fast-changing environment in which we are all currently having to operate, we wanted to publish this guidance at the earliest opportunity. However, we see the guidance as a living document and hope to include examples of best practice in future versions.

Identifying your target audiences

The absolute priority is to ensure that the right information about the changes is communicated as quickly as possible. But the messages also need to be targeted at those who need to receive them.

Start by identifying your target audiences and their various needs.

Bus operators should recognise that changes may impact differently on different types of passengers, for example the education sector or those holding concessionary passes who are now able to use them on services operating before 9.30am on weekdays. Operators are encouraged to work with local authorities to identify their target audiences, to ensure that messages are appropriate.

Most passengers travelling by bus during this period are likely to be making regular journeys on familiar services at particular times of day. Some younger people rely on social media, while older people may be more used to seeking out information in printed form. People with particular disabilities may require information to be provided in different formats. A successful communication strategy for local bus service changes is likely to involve the use of a range of communication channels appropriate to each audience.

Research into passenger information needs on bus service changes

Transport Focus previously conducted research into passenger attitudes towards information on *Bus service changes*. Its main conclusions – rejection of frequent changes, the need for relatively lengthy advance notification of changes, and a preference for at-stop publicity – may be challenging to apply in the current circumstances. We accept that communication channels and, to some extent passenger expectations, may have changed since this research, but the broad principles are likely to still apply.

Signs are promising that operators and authorities are already managing the flow of information well. In April 2020 Transport Focus published its *Coronavirus travel survey*, capturing the view of almost 6000 members of its Transport User Panel. Key findings included:

- most of those travelling by bus found it easy to find information on what services were running: 77 per cent of the 472 people who had used buses outside London said that it was easy to get information on what services were running before they made their journey, while 20 per cent found it either not very easy or not at all easy.

- only a minority of passengers had attempted to claim a refund for their season ticket: 10 per cent of the 249 with a bus pass and 21 per cent of the 298 with a multi-modal pass. Around 20 per cent were not sure that they could claim a refund, and around 10 per cent were not sure how to go about it.

What does your information need to cover?

Changes to local services may include the following:

- changes to route/stopping patterns
- changes to timetables, including first/last buses
- changes to journey times, perhaps following a reduction in traffic congestion.

These changes may affect connections to other buses or to trains and trams.

It may be helpful for passengers to understand what alternative services exist, for example where a local service has been withdrawn, key destinations such as schools and hospitals removed or timetables significantly reduced. Highlighting key changes makes life easier for passengers, rather than relying on them to work out all of the implications.

Information should always include the advice to check before you travel, so passengers are not left waiting at bus stops.

Some operators have introduced changes to payment methods. Where exact money only is in operation, the onus is on operators to ensure fares are well publicised.

Where passengers who have bought season tickets have heeded the Government's advice to avoid non-essential travel, or where reduced services no longer meet their needs, they should be entitled to a refund. Whatever the rules, entitlement to refunds and how to claim them should be made clear.

Eligibility for concessions has been widened during the pandemic, with some local authorities supporting free travel for essential workers, such as NHS staff. Operators have been asked to accept English National Concessionary Travel passes before 9.30am. Such changes need to be publicised.

Reassurance should also be offered to passengers that operators are doing everything they can to ensure safety on board, for example enhanced cleaning regimes, the application of social distancing guidelines through changes to seating arrangements, the use of protective screens and the need to change how fares are paid.

While we appreciate that there may be good reasons for certain differences between operators and between local authorities, the more closely that changes and policy approaches can be aligned, the more effective communication is likely to be. Passengers are more likely to understand and remember one simple and consistent message than several slightly different ones.

It is important that the absence of formal local consultation on service changes is not accompanied by a reduction in informal dialogue with passengers. Comments, complaints, suggestions and enquiries should continue to be welcomed and communication channels should be well publicised and professionally managed. There should be feedback mechanisms available to key workers to report where the

network is not meeting their needs or where there is overcrowding. Changes to operators' customer service opening hours should be well-publicised. Passenger input from these processes should be reviewed when further modifications to services are being considered.

Explaining the changes

Although it is likely that most people will readily appreciate the reason for service reductions, large sums of taxpayers' money are being spent and essential services provided and it is important that there continues to be public accountability.

The broad reasons for service changes – Government travel advice, the need to safeguard services to meet the needs of people making essential journeys, the availability of drivers and other staff, the safety of passengers and drivers, the drop in patronage, and the need to ensure the bus industry survives to help revive the economy post-lockdown – should be set out. This may be best communicated and kept up to date through a frequently asked questions section on operator and local authority websites.

It may be helpful to explain why it is thought that running 40-50 per cent of services strikes the right balance and that operators are expected to plan the revised network and timetables with local authorities. The Government is supporting operators to meet the costs of running that level of service to ensure that those people that still need to travel are able to do so, but also taking into account that social distancing advice needs to be followed on board vehicles.

It should be made clear that the current arrangement is designed to safeguard service levels for three months from 17 March, subject to revision as the Government's travel advice changes.

Timing of communication

It is recommended that the changes put in place as a result of Government advice are clearly headlined as COVID-19 changes and it is made clear that these will stay in place, subject only to minor alteration, until Government advice alters. It should be made clear that the end of lockdown may not coincide with the end of all restrictions.

Given the fluidity of the current situation, it is important that passengers can have confidence that the information they are looking at is up to date. Any information about local service changes should be accompanied, wherever possible, by:

- the date on which the changes take effect
- the next review date.

It is appreciated that initially some operators had little opportunity to provide advance notice of changes and we know some passengers were caught out by the suddenness of service reductions. It is hoped that, as Government travel advice changes, operators are able to give longer notice of service changes, particularly for timetabled services which are not 'turn up and go'. A notice period of at least 14 days

would help to get the message across to passengers travelling less frequently, such as those using the bus to carry out their weekly shop.

It is recognised that the ability of operators and local authorities to post accurate review dates and meet 14-day minimum targets will depend on receiving sufficient notification of a change in government advice.

If changed travel advice does not allow for 14 days' notice to be achieved, all organisations should strive to get revised information into the public domain as soon as they practicably can.

Channels

Passengers use a variety of communication channels to access information about bus services. Bus operators and local authorities should avail themselves of as many different channels as possible, including:

- operator and local authority websites
- social media channels
- print and broadcast media, including local radio
- Traveline
- journey planning apps
- travel centres and information points
- bus stations
- bus stops – real time passenger information (RTPI) screens and printed notices
- on bus
- hospitals, and retail outlets such as supermarkets and post offices
- stakeholder networks.

Remember to present information for passengers with sensory impairments in accessible formats, wherever possible.

Each approach has strengths and weaknesses, which is why it is important to use them in combination. For example, information can be updated quickly on websites and social media but some passengers cannot access them or prefer to speak to someone who may be able to give added reassurance and answer questions.

Previous Transport Focus research confirmed the popularity of providing information at the bus stop. But we accept that it will be more difficult to ensure this is always accurate; where they exist, RTPI screens at stops can be an effective channel. Keeping information up to date on buses themselves and at key destinations should be easier to achieve.

What all the channels rely on, however, is having accurate timetable information available, including in online journey planners and through mapping apps. A travel centre won't be able to help passengers on the phone if its staff don't have access to accurate timetable information.

It is important to think through the delivery of any communication. For example, where using a helpline, the number should be given wide publicity and not simply put on a website. Otherwise parts of your audience may be unaware of it.

Call centres need to be provided with up-to-date information and staffing levels need to be maintained as far as is possible during the current situation. Avoid the use of premium numbers and ensure that people phoning from mobiles are not charged extra (not all mobile phone call packages accept 0800 numbers as part of their free minutes).

Communication checklist

There is some expectation that services may be ramped back up in the near future, but there is also a possibility of further reductions. We recommend using this checklist to help ensure that you provide the information your passengers need under all scenarios:

- **Timetable accuracy:** whether it's a slight tweak, a major scaling back or reinstating withdrawn services, passengers need to know the new times. It is important to update all your electronic information, such as journey planning and RTPI feeds. Two specifics would help when a timetable change is made:

  - Make sure that getting your data in TransXchange[1] amended is no less a priority than getting a PDF on the website or sorting out drivers' rosters. It should be an integral part of amending the timetable and ideally complete – recognising current circumstances – 14 days in advance. If data is not correct, passengers using smartphone apps or looking online could turn up for buses that aren't running – or not turn up for buses you've just reintroduced. Also, RTPI displays at bus stops will be wrong.
  - Tell Traveline as soon as you have a broad overview of the change you want to make from a particular date, even if you are still working on the data. This is a quick, simple way – at no extra cost – to ensure that when passengers phone up or make journey plans online, Traveline can give people an overview of what's changing.[2] For example, Traveline can warn people that you are changing from a Saturday to a Sunday service from a particular date – even while you're still working on the data.

- **Relevant and sufficient:** review the FAQs on your website to check that you've addressed all the questions passengers are likely to have accurately, succinctly and unambiguously.

  Still accurate?: regularly check that all the information on your website, app and – where you can – at bus stations and bus stops is still correct. It may have been right a week ago, but is it now? It is important to take down inaccurate and out-of-

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[1]TransXchange https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/transxchange – a UK data standard for routes and timetables and a key input to the Traveline National Dataset (TNDS) used by Traveline for its branded information channels and its open data service used by Google, Apple, Microsoft and others.
[2]A new service Traveline Information Ltd is introducing as a result of the Coronavirus impact.

date information.

- **Clear and accessible:** check that you have used plain language and a format that passengers can access, including those with disabilities.

- **Timely:** make sure you provide information when the passenger needs it, in order to inform any decisions they need to make.

- **Appropriately disseminated:** have you displayed or distributed your information via communication channels likely to be readily accessible to the target audience?

Bus Open Data

The Bus Open Data Team at the DfT is working with operators across the sector to publish complete and up-to-date timetable datasets on the Bus Open Data Service. Operators who require support to publish their timetable data onto the Bus Open Data Service should email busopendata@dft.gov.uk and use the subject header 'BODS DATA PUBLISHING' and they can set up a meeting to agree next steps.

Sharing best practice

The DfT will ask operators to show that they have taken account of this guidance in communicating changes to the relevant local authority and the general public. Particular attention will be paid to whether operators have endeavoured to ensure passengers are aware of timetable changes and have up-to-date schedule information.

We would encourage operators and authorities to tell Transport Focus about examples of best practice which we may be able to include in future versions of this guidance. Email consultation@transportfocus.org.uk.