Arriva Bus Company Response to E&E Select Committee review into Bus Services

Please find below the responses from Arriva to the recommendations.

Recommendation 1
Arriva are supportive of this.

Recommendation 2
All of our vehicles are equipped with smart electronic ticket machines which are equipped with GPS tracking equipment so that all of our vehicles in service can be tracked. This information is accessible on our app through the journey planning tool and on our website also through the journey planning tool. This will show the available journey options and will also show if the journey is cancelled or delayed. All of our vehicle tacking data is also available as open data allowing third party apps and websites to show the data in various formats. Using these third party apps or websites it is possible to see in realtime the location of every one of our vehicles which is in service, or look at journeys historically to see at what times they operated. Bustimes.org is a particularly good third party website for this information.

One of the biggest challenges around realtime tracking is that the expectations of it are greater than it can capably deliver. The technology and systems are excellent at locating a specific vehicle at a specific point in time. However, this combined with the timetable is used to predict the time the vehicle will arrive at a specific stop, but this is only ever a prediction and the time it does arrive is driven by the real world conditions.

As an example, a bus is at point A at 1000, and the passenger is waiting at point B. The journey is timetabled to take 5 minutes so the realtime app shows that the bus is predicted to be at point B at 1005. The timetable is pretty reliable and 95% of the time this journey does take 5 minutes. However, on this day between the points, there is traffic congestion on the road because of a broken down car. As the bus approaches the congestion the app will still predict that the bus is due at point B at 1005, as it is at this point still on schedule as the delay is in front of the bus. However, the bus doesn't move for 5 minutes. The customer at point B sees that the bus arrival time is getting later and later, and is frustrated as they think the app is not accurate. It said the bus would be there by 1005 and it is not, and the arrival time is just getting later. The app will be showing that the bus is due to arrive at 1010 now, as it assumes that the traffic will clear. However, the app and no one else know when the traffic will clear. Eventually when the delay becomes over a certain time (usually about 15 minutes but this is specific to each route depending on the frequency and typical delays), the app stops predicting that it will arrive by a certain time, as it knows that it can't predict when it will arrive. In this example, the app is working as designed and as best it can. However, the passenger is understandably frustrated because in their eyes the app is telling them false information. Every day on the network we have issues like this where our services are delayed. Sometimes it can only be a few minutes, and others it can be more than an hour. It can be for many reasons including roadworks, accidents, badly parked cars etc. We do our best to mitigate the impact of these by building a robust timetable which works most of the time.

In terms of journey cancellations, we will cancel journeys on the app. However, often when we cancel journeys we do it after letting the bus run late for a bit, with the logic that it is better to run a journey with a small delay, than to not run it at all. However, as the delays get longer, the impact on the following journeys becomes greater and we reach a point that it makes more sense to cancel a journey and get the next journey on time than to just keep letting it run late all day. What this does

mean is that the app could show the bus running late, and then the decision to cancel the journey is made, so it then shows that the journey is cancelled. A criticism we often receive is when we cancel a journey, why don't we inform passengers earlier instead of letting them think the bus will come, but just late. The answer to this is that we don't know earlier that the journey will be cancelled and as soon as we make that decision, we update the app.

In summary, the app is a really useful tool for passengers and most of the time it works very well. It is a real improvement compared to the days before the app when standing at a bus stop you had no information. However, on occasions the app will not predict the arrival time with 100% accuracy because as I've outlined above it isn't able to. It is not possible to produce an app which can predict the future with 100% accuracy, as the highways network on which we operate is too chaotic and unpredictable. I understand the frustrations of passengers waiting at the stop and not getting the information they need from the app and I understand that they feel the app is at fault. However, the app will never be able to accurately predict the arrival times of buses 100% of the time. The best we can do is to improve it's accuracy by regularly reviewing timetables to make them robust and working closely with those responsible for the highways network to deliver predictable journey times.

Recommendation 3
Arriva are supportive of this.

Recommendation 4
Arriva are supportive of this. As a national operator we tend to do this on a national scale but are always happy to engage with those who can help us to help them access our services. In addition, many of the factors driving bus accessibility and design are driven by legislation and I would urge groups such as Herts Vision Loss to engage with the DfT directly so that their views are included when such legislation is being created or amended.

Recommendation 5
Every driver at Arriva receives 35 hours of classroom-based training every 5 years (effectively 1 day annually) as part of their CPC which they are required to hold in order to drive a bus in service. We deliver our CPC in house and a key part of the training at Arriva is around how to interact and assist less able passengers, including those with visual impairments. If there are specific incidents when a driver's actions or behaviour is not at the standard it should be, then I urge the customer to get in touch with our customer services team with details of the incident to allow us to investigate and take appropriate action to ensure that such an incident doesn't happen again.

Recommendation 6
Legislation is in place to mandate next stop announcements on buses. All new vehicles require the equipment to be fitted from October 2024, and all existing vehicles require that the equipment is retrofitted by October 2026. Arriva are currently working on a project to deliver this within these timescales.

Recommendation 7
When purchasing new vehicles, Arriva will always consider ZEV options. Indeed, we currently operate a large number of ZEVs across the UK and Europe and we are continually introducing new ZEVs into our fleet. However, introducing ZEVs is challenging, both financially and operationally. Initial purchase costs are a lot higher than non ZEV vehicles, and there are significant infrastructure challenges around converting depot sites to accommodate ZEVs. In addition, the operational range of ZEVs is much less than a non ZEV meaning that either additional vehicles are required to deliver the same service level or services need to be reduced to meet the operational requirements of ZEV.

The transition to ZEV has started and we are in the early stages of that journey and we are committed to following a ZEV path. In terms of biodiesel, we currently use a biodiesel fuel blend at some of our sites. This is dependent on supplier availability and cost and the split between biodiesel and non-biodiesel is optimised to minimise mechanical issues.

Recommendation 8
To an extent this is already happening. We are regularly asked for our views on road layouts for new developments in Stevenage to make them accessible for bus routes.

Recommendation 9
Arriva are supportive of this.

Recommendation 10
Arriva are supportive of this. Provision of appropriate bus stop infrastructure at key destinations is essential for encouraging bus use to these destinations.

Recommendation 11
We are happy to explore new routes. Ultimately our challenge will always be whether new routes are commercially sustainable, ie is there sufficient demand to generate sufficient revenue to cover the costs of operation? There are many pockets of passenger demand unfulfilled by the current bus network, but getting them over the hurdle of being commercially sustainable can be difficult.

Recommendation 12
I would strongly challenge the conclusion that the current service was not fit for purpose and the associated report does not give the evidence to support this conclusion. The current bus network in Stevenage carries millions of passenger journeys a year in Stevenage and is depended on by large numbers of people who without it would not be able to make the journeys they do. The service can certainly be improved on and Arriva are continually striving to deliver this, both with actions that we are taking, but also in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council. The network is provided with relatively low levels of subsidy and low fares yet it is a comprehensive network in Stevenage serving the vast majority of areas. With single journeys costing no more than £2 and unlimited annual travel available on our network for as little as £1.92 per day, bus travel in Stevenage offers excellent value.

The wider question about how we pay for our buses as a country is one that has dominated the industry and government for a long time. The majority of services in Stevenage and in the wider UK are commercial services, meaning that the costs of operating them are primarily covered by the fares generated by the passengers using the service. Regardless of the model of operation, if the network is dependent on revenue from passengers then, the network will align to a level that can be supported by this revenue. Undoubtedly if this revenue can be topped up by additional funding, then this will lead to much improved services, but as always the question comes down to where this funding comes from which becomes a political decision.

One item specifically which Stevenage Borough Council can influence in terms of funding is the level of departure charge levied on bus operators and hence indirectly bus passengers for the privilege of serving the bus station. This departure charge is one of the highest we pay across Arriva. The provision of a central bus station brings huge economic benefit to Stevenage, yet the costs of providing it are heavily shouldered by Arriva and indirectly those passengers using it who are often the least affluent in society. In many towns and cities, there is no departure charge levied for serving a bus station and the scale of the cost at Stevenage does make it an outlier. Put simply, if as an operator we didn't have to shoulder this cost which we do not elsewhere, we would be more able to invest in service improvements, newer fleet or lower fares in Stevenage. If Stevenage Borough

Council are genuinely serious about delivering improved bus services in the town, then this is something they can do to facilitate this.

Recommendation 13
As per recommendation 11, we are happy to explore new routes. Ultimately our challenge will always be whether new routes are commercially sustainable, ie is there sufficient demand to generate sufficient revenue to cover the costs of operation? There are many pockets of passenger demand unfulfilled by the current bus network, but getting them over the hurdle of being commercially sustainable can be difficult. It also must be considered than many of the journeys possible on such a service can already be made on other services and it is important to ensure that any new services don't significantly abstract patronage from existing services.

I hope I've covered everything satisfactorily. If you need anything further from me, just let me know.

Regards
Michael

Michael Jennings
Head of Commercial
Arriva Southern Counties
Kent, Medway, Essex and Southend
Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire

M: 07824 691 139
E: jenningsm.sc@arriva.co.uk