

BREXIT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND LEGISLATIVE CHANGE OSC – MARCH 2021: PUBLIC TRANSPORT COVID-19 IMPACT



1.0 AIM

The purpose of this briefing paper is to set out the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the provision of public transport in Plymouth. The report looks predominantly at buses, ferries and community transport. However, it also provides an overview of rail and coach services over which the Council has no direct control but which have been monitored throughout the pandemic. Whilst a form of public transport, taxis have not been included within this report as they are managed by the Council's Licensing Team.

2.0 PUBLIC TRANSPORT PRE-COVID

2.1 Buses

Prior to the pandemic, the significant majority of bus services across the city were operated on a commercial basis by Plymouth Citybus and Stagecoach South West. Market share (based on numbers of bus services operated) in January 2020 was as follows:

- Plymouth Citybus – 65.7%
- Stagecoach South West – 25.7%
- Other Operators – 8.6%

The other operators were Target Travel, Tally Ho Coaches, Country Bus and Oakleys Coaches who provided tendered services from areas of Devon into Plymouth on behalf of Devon County Council.

Whilst most services in the city were, and still are, operated on a commercial basis the 1985 Transport Act places an obligation on the Council to consider the provision of subsidy for bus services in unserved areas where these are deemed financially unviable by bus operators. In January 2020 a total of 12 services were operated under contract to the Council at a cost of £630,769 per annum.

Pre the pandemic, patronage on bus services was healthy, bucking the national trend with an increase in patronage on the previous year. In 2018-19 over 19 million journeys were recorded. However, this fell to just over 18 million journeys in 2019-20 with the reduction resulting predominantly from the start of the pandemic in March 2020.

2.2 Ferries

Passenger ferry services for the city were, and are, provided by Plymouth Boat Trips and the Mount Batten Ferry.

A zero cost contract is in place with Plymouth Boat Trips for the provision of the Cremyll Ferry. This service operates all year round providing vital links for both residents of Cremyll and the Rame Peninsula to access Plymouth and for Plymouth residents and visitors to access Mount Edgcumbe and the Rame.

In the year to January 2020 the service carried a total of 265,637 passengers.

Plymouth Boat Trips also provided, and continue to provide, commercial seasonal ferry services to Cawsand and between the Barbican, Royal William Yard and Cremyll.

The Mount Batten Ferry provided a year round service from Mount Batten to the Barbican catering for commuters and leisure travellers.

We do not hold passenger data for these commercial ferry services.

2.3 Community Transport

Community Transport services in Plymouth were, and are, provided by Access Plymouth under contract to the Council at an annual cost of £168,800.

Services offered through the contract are Shopmobility, Community Car and Dial-A-Ride. The Community Car and Dial-A-Ride services are offered to those unable to use conventional forms of public transport due to their age or a disability.

In the year to January 2020, a total of 19,121 uses of Shopmobility/trips on Community Car or Dial-A-Ride were made, up by almost 17% on the previous year.

Access Plymouth employ 8 paid staff, most of whom work on a part time basis, and therefore Access Plymouth relies heavily on volunteers to support the services they offer. A total of 24 volunteers support the service and in the year to January 2020 gave 4,966 hours of their time either staffing the reception, helping with Shopmobility clients or as Community Car drivers.

2.4 Scheduled Coach Services

National Express, Megabus and Stagecoach South West's Falcon service provided a wide range of links across the country from Plymouth Coach Station.

Given that these are commercial services, again we do not hold patronage data for them.

2.5 Rail Services

Great Western Railway (GWR) provided frequent services to both London and Penzance with two trains an hour in each direction throughout the main part of the day. They also operated (and continue to operate) the Tamar Valley line providing vital links, particularly for commuters and students, between Plymouth and communities in the Tamar Valley. Due to the capacity of the line, this service operated approximately every 2 hours.

Cross Country Trains also provided frequent services to and from Plymouth providing links to Bristol, the Midlands and to the north of the country with an hourly service in each direction throughout the main part of the day.

3.0 PUBLIC TRANSPORT DURING COVID-19

Following the Government announcement of a full lockdown in March 2020, which included a strong message to avoid public transport, the industry suffered a massive drop in number of passengers. Indeed, passenger numbers had started falling rapidly during the week before full lockdown was introduced on the 24th March. By the end of March, most public transport services were either significantly reduced or suspended altogether.

3.1 Buses

Bus patronage in Plymouth from the end of March to the end of May was between 7% and 12% of levels for the same period in 2019, reflecting trends nationally. The long-term viability of the

commercial bus network within Plymouth (and nationwide) was therefore considered to be at risk. To mitigate against the loss of fare revenue, the Department for Transport (DfT) requested that all Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) across the country continue to reimburse bus operators for concessionary travel at pre-pandemic levels and to continue to make full payments for tendered services. The Council therefore paid the full contractual rates for tendered services and paid concessionary reimbursements at pre-pandemic levels adjusted for the forecast reduction in demand as seen pre-pandemic.¹

The Government also introduced the Covid-19 Bus Service Support Grant (CBSSG) funding which was paid directly to bus operators for their commercial services to bring revenue levels up to a breakeven point. Further CBSSG was paid directly to PCC, as a LTA, to offset any additional costs relating to the provision of tendered services during the pandemic and to allow the Council to reimburse the bus operators for the loss in expected on bus revenue on tendered services. Starting from 16 March 2020 this funding currently covers the period to 18th January 2021. It is anticipated that funding will continue beyond this date, for a period of time, but confirmation of this is still awaited, along with how long LTAs and operators can expect to receive the payments for.

In addition to the measures set out above the Council has also undertaken a number of measures to both assist public transport operators and residents throughout the pandemic, as detailed below:-

- Used the Real Time Passenger Information (RTPI) displays to show relevant messaging for customers on service levels as well as giving advice on social distancing, use of face coverings and general public transport safety messages. The displays were also used to support the Clap for Carers with a special 'Thank You' message displayed on Thursday evenings during the first lockdown.
- Automatically renewed disabled persons bus passes expiring up to and including 31 March 2021 for one year without the need for pass holders to provide new proof of entitlement while our customer facing offices have been closed.
- Introduced an online application process for those applying for their first concessionary bus pass, which will be rolled out to those wishing to renew their passes from April 2021.
- Temporarily removed the time restrictions for concessionary travel to ensure elderly and vulnerable residents could access shops and supermarkets at times specifically allocated throughout the first 6 months of the pandemic, with time restrictions being reinstated when the schools returned in September to help ensure capacity on buses for essential trips.
- Assisted highways in painting Covid 19 messaging on the ground near a number of our assets throughout the first lockdown including all three park and ride sites, Plymouth coach station and at the Cremyll ferry landing stages.
- Installed backing sheets in bus shelters advising passengers on safe travel on public transport
- Worked with the bus shelter contractor, JC Decaux, to increase city centre shelter cleaning frequency, to instil confidence in bus use, in support of the city centre re-opening, post the first lockdown, which has been achieved at no additional cost to the Council.
- Worked with Education colleagues to ensure adequate provision and safety on public transport as schools returned in September. We will continue to offer this support when schools re-open to all pupils in 2021.

¹ Throughout 2020-21, payment amounts were calculated by taking the concessionary patronage for each operator from April 2019 to January 2020 inclusive, and comparing this to the same period in 2018-19 to identify the decline in concessionary trips year on year (it was a decline for all operators). We then took the patronage data for the equivalent month in 2019-2020 and applied this percentage decline to calculate the number of trips we think would have been undertaken in the absence of Covid. The approach to pay on a results basis, using an average from previous months, was consistent with the methodology set out in the Government Policy Procurement notes.

As lockdowns have been introduced and eased bus services have been continuously adjusted to meet demand, ensuring that services remain in place for key workers and school children, whilst also ensuring adequate capacity to comply with social distancing guidelines. Following the end of the first lockdown bus patronage showed some signs of recovery but only peaked at about 60%, when compared with the same period in 2019, coinciding with schools reopening in September. Patronage currently stands at around 25% compared to last year during the latest lockdown.

3.2 Ferries

No Central Government funding has been forthcoming for ferries.

The Cremyll and Mount Batten ferry services were stopped during the first lockdown, both resuming in mid-June with slightly revised timetables. The Cremyll Ferry has continued to operate since this time, although this remains the subject of continuous review, with patronage in the 12 months to 31 January 2021 dropping to 118,925, a decline of 55% on the previous year. However, the Mount Batten ferry was once again, suspended in early January following the announcement of lockdown 3.

3.3 Community Transport

No Central Government funding has been forthcoming for community transport services. However, the Council has supported Access Plymouth through continuation of contract payments for Community Transport irrespective of level of service operated, in accordance with supplier relief guidance issued in April 2020 (PPN/20).

Community Transport returned, post the first lockdown, with a reduced service, in summer 2020. The nature of the clientele meant a significant drop in demand for services and with many of the volunteers also standing down due to their age, it was necessary to offer reduced services to ensure they could be adequately staffed, and in terms of Community Car, to comply with social distancing guidelines. The Shopmobility service was resumed from mid-June 2020 to tie in with the re-opening of shops in the City Centre, albeit on reduced hours of operation, with the Dial-A-Ride service returning from 20 July 2020 running to meet demand. The Community Car service remains suspended but as the vaccination programme is rolled out, there are signs that drivers are looking to return. Access Plymouth have also been working with the NHS regarding the provision of transport to vaccination centres, where this is a barrier to attendance for older, disabled and vulnerable residents.

In the year to January 2021, a total of 4,287 uses of Shopmobility/trips on Dial A Ride were made, down by 77.6% on the previous year.

3.4 Scheduled Coach Services

Scheduled coach services have also been severely affected, with Megabus not operating in Plymouth for many months. National Express significantly reduced their network up to the end of December and, following the announcement of lockdown 3, suspended all services until at least March 2021. The Falcon has continued to provide links between Plymouth and Bristol albeit it at a much reduced frequency supporting commuter traffic on parts of the route (end to end patronage remains low).

3.5 Rail Services

Rail services have also been severely affected, the worst affected amongst public transport modes, with the exception of air travel. April – June 2020 there was 90% reduction in passengers carried nationally, a 40% reduction in passenger trains run and passenger revenue at 7% of 2019-20 levels. Rail is now relying on support to the tune of £700m per month. The industry and commentators are reporting that this is not sustainable. Treasury cannot afford it and could force the industry to cut swathes of the network if passenger numbers show little or no sign of recovery. There is concern if people stay with, or switch to private car, as the economy recovers.

During the summer months of 2020, especially on routes serving popular holiday resorts, including branch lines in the south west, rail services were busy and the industry expects leisure travel to recover faster than commuting. However, the overall trend is that rail demand is still stuck in the sidings.

Currently train operators are gradually agreeing franchise termination fees with the DfT, thereby reducing overall financial risk in their franchise portfolios. Train operators instead will enter into Directly Awarded National Rail Contracts of varying lengths and varying start times.

Until Direct Awards commence, each train operator is operating under Emergency Recovery Measures Agreements (ERMA) where the DfT is taking all the revenue and cost risks while lockdown measures are in place. ERMA's terminate at various times in 2021 or 2022.

4.0 PUBLIC TRANSPORT RECOVERY

Covid-19 has affected all local public transport; bus, rail, passenger ferry and community transport services, and operators will require a great deal of support in the recovery process. Strong messages by Government about not using public transport have had a real impact on travel patterns and we therefore need equally strong positive messaging campaigns once social distancing is relaxed to encourage people to return.

Across public transport networks, there is a need to get passengers back travelling with confidence, but the need to travel has changed. What journeys will people want to make in the South West post pandemic?

For intra-regional journeys, the emphasis is going to be on integration of transport networks linking bus, rail, walk, cycle, taxi and car and providing attractive speed and frequencies between South West cities and capacity into city centres.

Whilst Government CBSSG funding is likely to continue into 2021-22, there will be an expectation for operators to work with, in the case of bus operators, their local authorities on the recovery process. Information received to date implies that the DfT will be directing any bus funding through Local Transport Authorities in the longer term so that LTAs can determine appropriate service levels and ensure a fair allocation of funding. Details at present, however, are lacking and more information is expected in the National Bus Strategy, which has not yet been published.

Whilst CBSSG payments have been gratefully received by bus operators (and the Council), these have only been paid to the point of breakeven. As fixed costs start to impact in the coming months, without further help we could see reductions in service frequencies or even the full withdrawal of services. Prior to Covid-19, marginal services were able to be retained due to the profitability of other routes, but this is unlikely to continue if passengers don't return within 12 months to pre-pandemic levels. People have found alternative ways of travelling throughout the pandemic, some

of which are sustainable. Working patterns and locations have changed, particularly for office-based workers, and retail has suffered greatly so getting passenger numbers back up to pre-Covid levels is going to be challenging.

Our public transport operators, and their staff, remain at the front line of the COVID-19 response; providing key workers access to their places of work, not least Derriford Hospital, and access to essential services for some of the most vulnerable members of our community, and it will be essential to continue a close, co-operative relationship with the operators in order to ensure a comprehensive service is retained, directly supporting Plymouth's economic recovery.

Public transport has been vital to the current response to the COVID-19 emergency and will also be critical to Plymouth's economic recovery. We are a bus based city and it has been, and will be, be our public transport providers who will take our children back to school, our commuters back to work and our communities to friends and families – it is essential that we all do everything we can to make sure they are in a position to do so.

Managing the demand for car travel and reducing car dependency through still being able to provide a comprehensive network of public transport services will be an essential tool towards improving urban air quality and helping to achieve Climate Emergency Action Plans between now and the 2030 date when net zero carbon is to be achieved.