

Background

This report provides an update to the previous report from June 2020 in relation to the introduction of restrictions on the general public due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March, and subsequent bus network response. Since June, further changes have been made to the local bus network, working closely with Operators, and work has been undertaken regarding both social distancing and Emergency Active Travel Fund measures in conjunction with Operators and Local Authority Partners.

Network enhancements

Supporting Bus Operators

As lockdown restrictions have continued to be eased and the demand for travel and local bus travel has increased bus patronage has shown a steady rate of growth.

Most buses across the network continue to operate to around 50% of their standard seated capacity due to social distancing requirements on vehicles. It is anticipated these capacity restrictions will remain in place whilst social distancing is required.

To ensure the West Midlands Bus network has been able to continue to meet the demand for bus travel, despite these capacity restrictions TfWM have worked very closely with bus operators. This has ensured that the level of service available has continued to be sufficient, maintaining accessibility and connectivity for the region. With effect from Sunday 5th July bus service changes were introduced which brought service levels to around 100% of Pre-Covid provision (summer timetables). In some cases, this provision has been re-purposed and therefore is not exactly the same as the pre-Covid provision. Through necessity the network has been agile to meet changing passenger demand. For example, the routes in Coventry which operate between the City Centre and Warwick University have not been restored to their usual frequencies whilst the students have been working remotely, this has enabled these vehicles to be re-purposed elsewhere on the network.

The network has maintained flexibility to ensure where passenger demand grows quickly service levels can be revised accordingly. TfWM has worked with all operators to understand usage of bus services at a trip by trip level. This has enabled any journeys which are regularly busy to be identified and suitable mitigations implemented. In addition, National Express have provided a number of dynamic spare vehicles across the network which can be deployed to meet any acute increases in demand.

As of the week commencing Sunday 16th August the bus operators have reported across the whole network patronage is about 55% of Pre-Covid levels. Our understanding is that compared to all other regions except London this is the highest level of patronage in the country and demonstrates how important local bus services are to the West Midlands. In comparison to pre-Covid, the times when passengers are using buses has notably changed. Usage during the traditional busy morning and evening peak travel has reduced with a more even spread of travel throughout the day. Understanding this has ensured the network is tailored to meet demand.

Supporting Bus Operators

With bus patronage across the West Midlands showing recovery to around 55% is an improvement from 10% at the height of the pandemic. However, this has been and still is a difficult position for operators as revenue levels and the associated cash flow is much reduced. To support bus operators through this period and to ensure the bus network has continued running TfWM have worked with the Department for Transport (DfT) to develop and administer a number of measures.

TfWM have continued to provide support in the form of maintaining subsidised bus payments and English National Concessionary Travel Schemes and Child Concessionary Travel reimbursement.

In addition, commercial bus operators and TfWM are receiving funding from the DfT's COVID-19 Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG) and restart funding which is designed to ensure bus services

can continue to run during the pandemic. The grant has now been extended to run through to September 2020 and the DfT have committed to a 8-week notice period ahead of any discontinuation of the funding which has not been realised as yet. The funding is designed to cover any loss of operating costs which are not picked up through the TfWM or Government support already in place including the furlough scheme.

Supporting Passengers

Information

TfWM has been carrying out a complete refresh of roadside printed information to update and reflect all services running at 5th July. This has resulted in the production of 9,807 posters and 1,345 flags which has taken around 6 weeks to roll-out.

The next set of service changes are happening on 30th August and TfWM will also be updating roadside information to reflect these, prioritising key areas with significant changes such as Northfield, Coventry and Smethwick.

The data is currently being input into the system but it is expected to be another high quantity update which will start appearing on street from 27 August.

From then on, TfWM has agreed with bus operators to update roadside information approximately every 4 weeks. Digital information, through journey planners and apps, is being kept up-to-date on a weekly basis and real-time information screens are being updated as service changes occur.

Social Distancing & Key Messaging at Stops

TfWM has worked to improve social distancing, and compliance with new regulations, at bus stops and in bus stations as lockdown has been released. This has involved a series of messages being displayed in bus stations and across roadside infrastructure, which has included reminders to Stay Safe – Stay Apart, and the need to wear face coverings when travelling by public transport. A robust campaign saw every

bus shelter in the West Midlands receive prominently displayed vinyls with these key messages. This was further supported in central locations and key interchanges with stencilling on footways reminding customers to socially distance whilst waiting for their service.

At key points on the network there have been changes to service stopping arrangements. For example, set-down only stops were introduced in Walsall near to St Paul's bus station to reduce the conflict between alighting and boarding passengers in the same location. Similar work was undertaken in Solihull Town Centre and Chelmsley Wood Interchange. In Birmingham City Centre and Coventry City Centre, additional temporary stops were added at key points in order to spread out services, and thus their waiting passengers, to reduce the potential for crowding around certain areas. To assist with narrow footways, some stops on Carrs Lane have been retained as set-down only, so as to reduce pavement congestion for pedestrians passing through the area.

Supporting Local Authorities

Throughout Lockdown and Recovery TfWM has been working closely with Local Authorities on social distancing measures at bus stops, and both tranches of the Emergency Active Travel Fun, which has seen pop-up and more permanent measures being developed, such as cycle lanes.

Regular monitoring has been undertaken across the network to highlight areas where further interventions may need to be made, either through physical measures in conjunction with the Local Authority, or engagement with other stakeholders, for example around business parks where there had been peak demands observed at bus stops.

Whilst preparations are underway regarding the return of schools in September, further stop-level analysis is planned across the region, in order to enable TfWM, the Local Authorities and bus operators respond to demand patterns as they emerge, to promote social distancing, and keep

the public transport network functioning in a safe and sustainable manner.

Supporting Key Workers

Free public transport use on bus and tram for NHS workers in the West Midlands by showing their ID card, continued until 28th June 2020. The NHS Shuttle services, which were introduced through TfWM's work with National Express Accessible Transport (NEAT) to support NHS Trusts, their staff and partner organisations, by repurposing the use of the Ring & Ride service to support the wider public transport network, continue to be provided free of charge to NHS staff at the present time.

The initial service for the NHS provided a combination of shuttles at some key sites, with other locations being supported through a Demand Responsive model. As the public transport network provision has increased post-lockdown, the NHS services have been scaled back to linking four shuttle operations from Good Hope, Russells Hall, New Cross and Manor Hospitals, with Park & Ride and Transport Interchange facilities.

The service has carried over 17,000 passengers since its inception at the beginning of April 2020, with there regularly being around 200 passengers carried per day during the week.

Next Steps

Service changes 30th August & School Travel

With effect from Sunday 30th August network changes are introduced across the region to co-inside with the return of schools for the commencement of the new school term.

A significant amount of planning has taken place across TfWM, bus operators and other bodies such as Local districts, Local Education Authorities, schools and Further Educational Establishments. This has informed potential areas of the network which need additional capacity and wider bus network design.

TfWM and bus operators has also accessed funding from the Department for Transport and the Department for Education to provide additional journeys at school times to meet the anticipated demand. Along with other measures such as ensuring double deck vehicles are on the most appropriate routes, duplication of journeys at school times, some dedicated school bus provision and the availability of spare vehicles to be deployed where required.

The network changes detailed above have coincided with a comprehensive marketing and communications strategy which has covered multiple aspects of return to school travel including;

- Timetable information
- How to travel and use the bus safely
- Ticketing information
- Travelling via other modes and encouragement of active travel for suitable journeys

For up to date details of the bus network and forthcoming service changes please visit:

<https://www.networkwestmidlands.com/plan-your-journey/network-overview/bus-updates-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/>

For up to date information regarding school travel:

<https://www.networkwestmidlands.com/plan-your-journey/back-to-school/>

If you do require any further information please do not hesitate to contact the team:

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Further Information

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