

HELPING THE INDUSTRY TO BUS BACK BETTER

EPM Bus Solutions is well placed to help operators and local authorities alike maximise the opportunities available from England's National Bus Strategy

The UK Government has launched Bus Back Better, the long-awaited National Bus Strategy for England, and it promises a bright future for the industry. It sets out an ambitious vision that will revolutionise the way in which local bus services are provided.

Operators and local transport authorities will work closely together to create a new environment that will spur on genuine improvements for passengers. Meanwhile, for areas that choose to press ahead with franchising their local bus services will now have the means and guidance to allow that to happen.

At EPM Bus Solutions we believe we can play a key role in making that happen. Our focus has always been on providing new and innovative solutions to the market that can help operators and local authorities alike drive up patronage, reduce costs and increase efficiencies. That has and always will be our focus.

But we are changing to ensure that we are better placed than ever to help the industry meet the challenges and opportunities of Bus Back Better. We recently completed the acquisition of Omnibus, one of the UK's leading passenger transport software businesses. Bringing these two businesses together was a really natural thing to do – after all we have worked together very closely for many, many years and have a range of products and solutions that are uniquely complementary products.

We also have a similar ethos too. We are deeply rooted in the bus sector and we are the experts in what we do. We create solutions that are bespoke to the industry, which always consider the way in which the sector works, the legal framework and the challenges too. We have the knowledge and ethos

that is designed to cater for that need.

So how can we help bus operators and local authorities alike capture the opportunities of Bus Back Better?

DATA IS AT THE HEART

There's little doubt that high quality planning will play a key role in meeting the ambition contained within Bus Back Better. The bus strategy calls for high quality integrated public transport. It will see what are today competing operators harmonising their networks and the creation of multi-operator, multi-modal ticketing. This will be incredibly important in helping attracting new passengers to the bus.

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Nick Brookes, EPM's Software Director



Aiden Proctor, Business Development Manager at Omnibus

Traditionally instigating and managing such a scheme was incredibly complicated but at EPM we have a strong background in this area - we have audited a number of existing schemes for some years, working to ensure operators receive fair reimbursement. As the importance of multi-operator schemes grows and becomes a growing percentage of the average operator's income, it's going to become incredibly important that this process is managed fairly and transparently, backed by the very latest usage data.

“It's important there's trust,” says Nick Brookes, EPM's Software Director. “As the value of these schemes from an income point of view increases, the operators need to have the confidence that they are getting a fair share of that pot. Our solutions can take ticket machine data from the operator, off bus sales data and scrutinise the usage and ensure the resulting apportionment of revenue is transparent and fair.”

The quality of data is also important, according to Aiden Proctor, Business Development Manager at Omnibus. “Bus Back Better talks a lot about redefining EBSR and I think there's a real drive to improve the quality of the data that can be shared as part of the process. We already have Bus Open Data Service tools and our TransXChange files are comparatively data-rich, so we can really supply local authorities with incredibly high-quality data today. That of course can also be then supplied downstream to all the other data users too.”

That downstream data will also have a place in improving information for the passenger, not only the open data that will power a plethora of journey planning apps, but in the physical displays at bus stops. Aiden explains how Omnibus can ensure these displays

are current and up-to-date.

“OmniSTOPdesign is our bus stop display solution,” he says. “You'd be amazed by how many operators handcraft the displays you see at bus stops, but OmniSTOPdesign can create them quickly and efficiently. It can also take into account shared corridors by bringing all of the departure data together from different operators via a TransXChange file and recognise if there's commonality and merge them into a single timetable. It's really very clever and the operators we've worked with on it are really pleased with the result. They can produce all of the bus stop displays for an entire network in the time it was previously taking to produce a single display manually.”

Aiden adds that Omnibus also has tools that will allow operators





and local authorities alike to create an asset management database that will elevate the quality of information that is known about individual bus stops.

THE CHALLENGES OF BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLANS

Data will also feed into the Bus Service Improvement Plans that are the bedrock of Bus Back Better. Their content will quite often be intuitive, driven by what customers actually ask for, but data will play a role, not only in developing the plans, but also in monitoring outcomes.

This process will begin with the baseline data that will allow those outcomes to be tracked, not only through dashboards where you can monitor the improvement on a week-by-week basis, but

“Bus Back Better will have dramatic impact on every aspect of bus service delivery”

also in the creation of reports that can track performance and demonstrate improvements against BSIP targets. Much of this data will be created by operators and it is important that strategies are in place to ensure there is a transparent approach around data-sharing.

“BSIP stakeholders are going to need trusted partners to do that,” explains Nick. “We already work with the ‘big five’ PLCs, the larger independent operators and we’ve also got a strong presence

in the local authority market - working with five of the six PTEs in England - as well. Our position is that we are that trusted partner - we are able to pass across data from the operators for them to analyse and use to do the network analysis. They trust our software to pass across the data. There needs to be transparency and there needs to be data-sharing, but there also needs to be software tools to allow that to happen efficiently with the correct checks and balances.”

With a long background in the sector, EPM can also assist with historic data that will ensure a robust baseline. “Monitoring that going forward is going to be key,” adds Nick. “Bus Back Better requires local authorities to demonstrate improvement, so they will need to scrutinise that data on a regular basis. We are well placed to assist with that process.”

GREENER AND CLEANER – HELPING THE INDUSTRY GO ZERO EMISSION

Even before Bus Back Better, the move toward zero emission buses was already an emerging trend. The National Bus Strategy supports the introduction of at least 4,000 new electric and hydrogen-powered buses – it will be the single biggest investment of its kind in these vehicles. But how will these vehicles be integrated into the fleet of operators? It will have to consider the very unique requirements of these vehicles, after all it is not just all about the range an electric bus can achieve on a single charge.

“When you talk about alternative fuels, people always immediately think of range anxiety,” says Aiden. “But range anxiety is not a new thing; after all your diesel tank can only take you so far! Our software has range parameters and it has had for years. The complications really come from a whole range of things. Have you got the right number of chargers at the right location? Where is that location and will a bus have to travel to it from a terminus? How does that affect the driver’s hours? There’s a lot of different variables coming into this.”

It means that operators may have to make some big decisions

about the PVR [Peak Vehicle Requirement] and that could mean that additional driver resources will be required. It means that operators will need to undertake scenario planning to investigate what is actually achievable. “We have a package of tools in the pipeline that will assist operators in making those decisions,” reveals Aiden.

The introduction of zero emission buses will also have impacts in other areas, adds Nick.

“As operators start to invest in these vehicles they need to understand their performance,” he says. “They will also need information about what the implications for energy usage will be – some operators may end up with a mix of electric, hydrogen and diesel-powered vehicles. So they need to have the information to hand that will allow them to analyse performance. There’s a lot to think about and there are lots of positives but there are challenges that operators need to be aware of.”

THE CHALLENGE OF BSOG REFORM

One of those challenges will be BSOG where there are fleets comprising a mix of vehicle types, care will need to be taken to ensure BSOG calculations are correct. But there are also reforms planned for BSOG too.

Wales and Scotland have already reformed BSOG payments and there have been winners and losers from that process. It will be important for operators to know clearly what reform in England will mean for them.

“Our solutions can help manage that process,” says Nick. “It’s going to be more important than ever to ensure that operators don’t miss out on any revenue from the scheme that they are entitled to. We have unique expertise that can help.”

HERE TO HELP

Bus Back Better will have a dramatic impact on every aspect of bus service delivery, right from planning of a schedule through to the execution and delivery of the service. EPM Bus Solutions are well placed to help bus operators and local authorities alike to rise to the challenge and harness the opportunities. ■