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COVID-19 : A Forecast for the Bus & Coach Industry



The Cars Shown Will Accumulate Ten Times the Emissions of the Bus

Right now, most of the world is struggling with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic which has caused tragically high levels of death, especially among the old and most vulnerable.

When countries went into lock-down, bus services continued to run in order to carry essential workers, but the numbers of passengers were typically down by more than 90 per cent.

Countries have to take a slow, measured approach to coming out of lock-down and beginning to restore factories, shops, schools, and the hospitality sector to their previous levels of activity. For bus operators, this return to normality has meant steady increases in the number of vehicles returning to service, often with some level of government support.

Politicians and medical professionals quite rightly fear a second wave of Covid-19 before a suitable vaccine is available in commercial quantities. They want the public to exercise strict discipline in social spacing whenever they venture outside their homes. The World Health Organisation recommends a minimum distance of 1 metre between people. Some countries have accepted that limit while others have opted for 1.5 metres and the United Kingdom is fixed on 2 metres.

That limit makes it very difficult to run buses, trams and trains with more than a handful of passengers. Indeed, Government Ministers in the United Kingdom have been telling people not to use public transport! Other countries have made it mandatory for passengers to wear face masks, enabling them to sit closer together.

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During lock-down it was noticeable that the air was much cleaner in town and city centres. Transport is the largest single source of carbon emissions in some countries, including the United Kingdom, but buses account for only 3 per cent of those emissions.

The Government had said it would spend GBP one billion per annum for five years on bus services and measures to encourage cycling, for example, dedicated cycle lanes. That was before Covid-19 struck and sent public borrowing to unprecedented levels. That GBP one billion per annum is small change compared with money being spent on rail projects, even though buses carry many more passengers than trains.

Many countries have committed to achieving cleaner air quality within the next five years. That is a very tight deadline. Many towns and cities are considering the creation of ultra low or zero emission areas, especially in urban centres. That will only be achieved by tight controls on the circulation of cars which typically carry an average of 1.5 people per car.

Cars occupy a high percentage of urban road space and are a major contributor to congestion that delays buses and makes their services less punctual and attractive to passengers. The photograph above shows on the one side a 100 seat double deck bus in Edinburgh and on the other side the number of cars required to carry the same number of passengers at an average of 1.5 people.

It is not just the amount of road space which is so obvious in the photograph, but also comparable emissions. On a high capacity bus, the emissions per passenger per kilometre are absolutely minimal with the latest Euro VI diesel engines. Volkswagen did a lot of damage to the public perception of diesel when it tampered with smaller diesel engines to get cars certified. There was an outcry from learned medical experts that demonised diesel, but the argument about emissions per passenger on a bus still stand. Other Hot Topics discuss alternatives like electric and hydrogen fuelled buses.

At the present time, the manufacturing industry has been hit very hard. Bus and coach builders have had to shut down their factories and face a challenge when re-opening in getting all their suppliers up to speed. In some cases, operators have cancelled orders because of the uncertainty going forward, but that situation should recover quite rapidly.

Studies by manufacturers have demonstrated that the cost per kilometre of amortising the purchase price of a new bus is typically 8-10 per cent of the total cost per kilometre. Drivers normally account for more than 50 per cent of the cost.

City, suburban, interurban and rural services should re-start and get up to previous levels within a few months. Some routes might need to be adjusted, partly to ensure that hospitals are fully served. Sensible rules need to be established on the numbers of passengers that can be carried. Those rules ought to include the ability for people with face masks to sit side by side on a double seat. Drivers should be given permission to refuse entry to a bus by any person not wearing a mask.

The British Government will have to change its message from telling people not to use public transport to instructing them to leave their cars at home and use public transport! That will not be easy, but it will be essential if clean air targets are to be met. The introduction of dedicated bus lanes and traffic light priority, coupled with modern systems for contactless fare payments will make journeys faster, enabling buses to carry more passengers per day.

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Covid-19 is likely to do much more damage to the coach industry. Express services and extended tours have been hit particularly hard and the latter might not recover until 2022. Coaches are also used to carry sports teams and their supporters, school children and students, groups to theatres and concerts, and for other private hire purposes. It is going to take time before sports venues and theatres can be cleared for use by pre-pandemic numbers of people.

Registrations of new coaches in Western Europe fell very sharply when operators and their customers felt the impact of the pandemic. Many coaches were parked out of use. Orders were cancelled, causing severe problems for coach manufacturers. Production of coaches at former levels might not recover in the next two to three years.

While bus operators are receiving some financial help to provide services during and after lock-down, similar assistance is not being made available to coach operators. They will have to remind their governments that they are a major earner of foreign currency, working with the inbound tourism trade which has been decimated this year but should recover in 2021 and more so from 2022 onwards.

If sensible rules can be introduced for passengers on express coaches that important sector will be able to recover quite quickly. Express coach services not only run on routes parallel to trains but they often run cross-country where rail services are weak. Express coaches are attractive to passengers where the lower fares are an important factor, and they also offer a guaranteed seat above secure under floor luggage capacity.

It is likely that many coaches have been bought with loans from banks or specialist finance houses. They would be unwise to charge into an operator's premises to re-possess coaches because there will be no market for them. With interest rates at record low levels, they would be well advised to offer holidays from payments until the coach industry is well on the way to recovery.

If cities take serious action to combat air pollution, coaches should also benefit with access to urban centres. Some cities want to restrict their circulation even though they bring up to 50 or 60 passengers at a time. They should welcome this inbound trade which helps local economies, including hotels, restaurants, bars, entertainment venues and other local attractions.

Writing at the end of May 2020, the situation for the whole industry is not bright. However, buses and coaches have been around for more than 100 years and have survived previous large-scale disruption to their operations. They will survive Covid-19!

May 2020