

Speech: Buses that build a better society

Good morning everyone.

It's a pleasure to join you this morning.

I'd like to thank Transport Times for hosting this key event in the bus calendar. And ensuring buses remain high on the agenda as an important driver of mobility, economic growth and community cohesion.

One hundred and twenty years after the first motorized bus services were established in Britain – buses remain by far our most popular, effective, and flexible form of public transport.

Over that time, transport technologies have come and gone.

And travel patterns have changed dramatically.

Yet throughout, buses have remained a constant.

Part of the transport fabric of every town, every city and every region.

You may have seen reports last week that passenger journeys were down slightly.

But the fact remains that two thirds of all public transport journeys in Britain were made by bus and coach last year.

4.4 billion individual bus journeys last year in England alone.

And almost nine in ten passengers say they are satisfied with their bus services.

Which is a tribute to the whole industry.

But these numbers are so much more than just a set of statistics.

Mere figures don't reflect the purpose of those journeys – nor the benefits they bring to society. Benefits like taking children to school, young people to job interview and pensioners to medical appointments.

Buses are the glue that binds communities together. And they are a vital link for those who may otherwise be isolated and for those who live in rural areas.

But they also keep our high streets busy while tackling congestion and air pollution.

So I'd like to take this opportunity to talk to you about what we are doing in government to ensure that Britain's bus network not only serves people's

transport needs. But is also set up to continue contributing in all these ways to our society and economy.

First – if we want buses to thrive over the coming decades, it's vital that we continue to improve, to innovate and to move with the times.

And to do this we have to ensure that buses participate in the digital revolution all around us.

The rise of technology highlighted by innovations such as CityMapper's journey planning app, as well as ride sharing services like UberPool, are changing the way we get around and the way we think about transport.

Increasingly, mobility is being viewed more as a service planned and paid for via a smartphone. So if bus services are to continue accounting for three quarters of journeys, the industry has to reach out to customers to provide easy access to information about local bus services, fares, payment method and bus stops.

Customers are going to demand real time data about the journey all through easy and convenient apps. And there's a lot of great work going on to speed up the pace of change.

For example operators are developing contactless and mobile ticketing – making travel more convenient.

But as Secretary of State Chris Grayling said in a speech to the Confederation of Passenger Transport last week the industry also needs to respond to the growth of demand-responsive transport. Through initiatives like travellers being able to request journeys through a smartphone app or minibus services which take passengers where they want, when they want.

That's exactly what ArrivaClick does, which I saw when I visited Kent last week, as well as Go-Ahead's PickMeUp service in Oxford and it can do it at a lower cost than a traditional fixed-route, fixed-timetable bus.

Technology changes like these should be seen as an opportunity for the bus industry – not a threat.

For example, we can use innovation to make buses accessible to all.

Last summer I launched our [Inclusive Transport Strategy](#) – to help disabled people travel easily, confidently and at no additional cost.

And the Bus Services Act 2017 contained a range of measures to harness technology in order to create better, more accessible services.

Measures such as Accessible Information Regulations, which will speed up the delivery of audible and visible information on board local buses, with £2 million government funding to help smaller bus operators meet this commitment.

The Bus Open Data powers in the Act will also lead to improved services,

helping passengers to plan their journeys and secure the best value tickets.

I saw this already happening on a trip to Reading Buses last summer for the launch of their Innovation Centre.

Lastly, the Act enables local transport authorities to partner with local bus operators and introduce benefits like multi-operator smart ticketing, connecting bus timetables and ticketing with other modes of transport, such as rail, to provide more seamless journeys.

Today I also want to highlight greener travel.

Buses have a clear strategic advantage over other road transport in terms of the environment because they have the capacity to reduce car use, ease congestion and improve air quality.

Fifteen percent of the fleet already uses low emission technology, with electric buses now on the streets of Liverpool, Guildford and others, such as Harrogate, which I was pleased to see in person.

We're supporting innovators to make buses cleaner than ever and last year the government announced £40 million of funding for 20 local authorities through the [Clean Bus Technology Fund](#) – providing grants of up to £500,000 to upgrade buses operating in areas of poor air quality, with low emission technology.

And today I am delighted to announce that we are awarding [£48 million to operators and local authorities across the country to help buy ultra low emission buses and invest even further in charging technology](#).

This funding will support the purchase of 263 ultra-low emission buses, ensuring that communities from Cardiff to Nottingham, from Yorkshire to London, from Coventry to Newport, from Manchester to Brighton and many more places around the country can enjoy the benefits of cleaner, greener bus services that benefit society as a whole.

It will also provide £14.2 million of investment in charging infrastructure, further supporting our progress towards greener journeys.

Indeed, this latest investment reinforces the bus industry's role as a leading contributor to the government's Road to Zero Strategy and also to our [Future of Mobility Grand Challenge](#), which encourages greener journeys through technological innovation.

But buses also benefit society because of the role they play in improving lives on an individual level.

As lead minister on the role of transport in tackling loneliness, this is a matter close to my heart and it's essential that we act.

Research by campaign group Greener Journeys found that two thirds of people sometimes feel lonely – while a third admitted that they deliberately catch a bus to ease these feelings.

There's some really imaginative thinking going on in the industry to examine if there's more we can do.

For instance, last week [Go Ahead launched the Chatty Bus campaign](#) – meaning that from Newcastle to Brighton, Chatty Bus ambassadors were on board buses talking to anyone who wanted a chat.

Stagecoach also redesigned one of its open topped buses, previously used to transport holidaymakers around Skegness into a community bus which provides a friendly place for people to chat and have a cuppa.

And National Express and First Group have been running their own campaigns aimed especially at preventing loneliness among older people.

But stopping the scourge of loneliness will require a much more concerted effort.

Which is why we made a commitment last year, in the [government's Loneliness Strategy](#), which was itself inspired by the visionary work of my late colleague Jo Cox to work with the transport sector and take action.

So today I am delighted to make a further announcement. That the department is launching a major collaboration with Greener Journeys to explore how we can use buses to further address the issue of loneliness.

This initiative is supported by a pledge from four bus companies, Go Ahead Group, Stagecoach, National Express and First Group to examine the vital role of buses in addressing loneliness.

Whether that's looking at how bus interiors can be designed to help with social interaction or considering how to roll out even more chatty buses - which have so far proved to be a great success.

This is just the first step and there is huge potential for the transport industry to make a real difference to the lives of people who want more human contact. So I look forward to seeing more great initiatives over the coming year.

I want to finish by talking about a theme which has run throughout this speech – and that's partnership.

I firmly believe that the quickest and most effective way of improving bus services is through partnership – whether it be through initiatives with government, working with local communities or effective collaboration between operators and local transport authorities to tackle congestion.

I know that many of you are already involved in collaborative initiatives – whether they're as a result of the government's £2.5 billion Transforming Cities Fund. Or whether you are taking advantage of the collaborative opportunities afforded by the Bus Services Act. Legislation which provides new and improved ways for local transport authorities to partner with bus operators, like in York, where the city council and operators have launched a customer charter which sets out the standard of service that passengers can

expect.

But while we can legislate to encourage partnerships the impetus must come from you.

So I would encourage all of you – operators and local authorities to continue to forge strong relationships which are so critical for achieving many of the goals I've spoken about today.

Because if we can build a bright future for this industry, we will also achieve a bright future for the communities you serve.

This will be built on new technologies, like the ultra-low emission buses we are supporting today.

On effective legislation, like the Bus Services Act.

On understanding what customers want.

And on collaboration to tackle issues like loneliness.

These are our objectives for the future – not just to boost bus services and not just to provide better journeys but to build a better society too.

And we will build it through partnership.

Thank you.