improving public transport through technology

Submission to the Transport Select Committee

Managing the impact of street works – RTIG Inform

1. Introduction

1.1. RTIG Inform is a community organisation with over 50 members which seeks to establish, support and share good practice in the use of information and communications technology in public transport. With members from public authorities, transport operators, consultancies and the systems industry, we have an impartial perspective and aim to support the common good.

1.2. More information on RTIG Inform and the public transport technology sector can be found at www.rtig.org.uk

1.3. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this inquiry into managing the impact of street works - a key issue for the public transport sector.

1.4. Our evidence addresses the questions posed about whether local authorities have sufficient powers and resources to manage the effect of street works on congestion, travel disruption, pavement access and accessibility; and about the effectiveness of processes for notification of works and obtaining permits. Our focus in this response is from the perspective of public transport operations and the provision of information to the public about the likely and actual impact on public transport.

1.5. We would be happy to supplement the submission below with any oral evidence required by the Committee.

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2. Attractiveness of Public Transport

2.1. It has recently been well publicised that it has become increasingly challenging for bus companies to keep services running to time as a result of increased congestion. Where congestion is expected and reasonably consistent, for example, where there are a larger number of vehicles on the road during peak hours, this can be managed through updating timetables and the provision of bus priority – thereby ensuring that the passenger receives a consistent service. Consistency is important for passengers as they can plan with confidence in the duration of a journey. It is much harder for a passenger to plan journeys where the duration is inconsistent and/or unexpected changes occur.

2.2. The recent report by Transport Focus 'Making great bus journeys'[1] identifies that "Passengers want their bus to turn up on time, without a long wait, and to reach their destination in good time mirroring the expectation set in the timetable. Having a good experience at the bus stop/station environment while waiting, with accurate, ideally real-time information, to hand can make this a better experience."

2.3. Street works, sometimes even minor works, are a significant contributor to the uncertainty in journey time for buses. To be aware in advance of when street works will be taking place and how traffic is to be managed, is important to enable bus operators and local authorities to plan for the disruption and inform passengers accordingly.

2.4. Where street works will result in communities being cut off from bus routes because of a diversion, there should be a requirement that a shuttle or temporary service is put into place to provide the community with as much continuity of service as possible.

2.5. As climate change increases and the need to achieve greater modal shift to reduce emissions becomes thereby more urgent, the ability to provide bus services which can keep to time and to improve information about disruption becomes even more important.

2.6. Recommendation:

(a) Shuttle or temporary bus services should be provided where communities are cut off from bus routes because of diversions.

3. Permit Periods

3.1. It is key to the management of the impact of street works on public transport to know as far as possible in advance - what is being planned and when.

3.2. The current approach to notices for planned works whereby the work is expected to only take a few days, but the permit nonetheless allows for the work to be undertaken for some time over a significantly longer period, does

[1] https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/making-great-bus-journeys-2/

not allow bus operators and authorities to plan their operations; or to keep passengers informed about any diversions or changed journey times as a result of the works. The more significant the disruption works will have on a bus journey - the more important it is to have certainty over when the works will start and end.

3.3. It is, therefore, important for public transport teams in authorities to be involved early in the planning process: to ensure that the potential impact can be fully understood and communicated to bus operators and passengers. This requires that local authorities' public transport and highways teams are properly resourced not only with sufficient staff, but also the technology to enable the impact to be identified, understood and communicated as early and effectively as possible.

3.4. Where there is uncertainty on exact dates for street works, perhaps because they form part of a larger programme of works, advanced planning notice should be given: with confirmation of start and end dates provided at least three weeks beforehand.

3.5. Recommendations:

(b) Permits for works should only be granted for the actual period of time that the works are expected to take.

(c) There should be at least three weeks notice given for street works which are expected to impact on public transport.

(d) Local authorities need to be properly resourced to manage the impact on public transport.

4. Impact on public transport

4.1. Bus companies plan their bus routes and timetables to maximise the efficiency of their operations - making best use of vehicles and drivers to minimise non-passenger carrying time. There is not therefore, in the majority of bus timetables, sufficient time between vehicle journeys to absorb delays from disruptive street works, as to do so would be hugely costly and inefficient. Planning for where disruption is going occur is therefore essential; improving the notice given for street works and cooperation with authorities and utility providers is required to make a meaningful contribution to reducing the impact on passengers.

4.2. The impact of street works on bus passengers is felt not just at the point of the works, but before and after them. Indeed, because of changed journey times, buses delayed due to increased congestion will impact not just the journey they are currently running but future journeys where they are unable to start their next journey on time because they have not ended the previous one when they would normally be able to do so. These delays become cumulative as the day goes on unless an operator has been able to plan for the delays and take mitigating action. These actions need to be planned and communicated in advance to drivers, staff and local authorities and potentially the regulator, all of which adds cost to the bus company. In some situations, the only effective mitigation to managing anything beyond a minor delay, is to

reduce service frequency or increase the number of buses operating on a bus route – thereby significantly increasing costs if a vehicle is even available.

4.3. Impact on bus services doesn't necessarily occur on routes actually passing through the street works. Indeed, where there is attendant congestion and queues on other roads, bus routes crossing the congested roads will also be impacted. It is therefore important from a network management perspective to take a wider view than just on the directly affected bus routes.

4.4. Technology can play a role in planning mitigation; it is possible for roadwork planning systems to use bus route data to alert utility providers and authorities to the presence of bus routes and that they may be impacted. Such alerts can be used to trigger a review process with bus operators to work with them to improve passenger information and minimise disruption. Increased use of artificial intelligence and scenario testing should assist with identifying potential impacts and mitigations.

4.5. In urban areas traffic signals are frequently coordinated by using urban traffic control (UTC) systems, When street works occur which require traffic signal controls to be implemented, these are typically standalone and not linked to a UTC - resulting in a wider than expected impact on traffic. It has been shown that where temporary lights are connected to UTC, there is a reduction in congestion on the road network[2] [3]. Authorities should require the use of connected temporary traffic signals at street works which are expected to have more than a minor impact on traffic.

4.6. The larger bus operators may have systems which can consume street works data and identify where there may be an impact. However, the majority of operators do not have such systems and so where the cause of the disruption arises from the utility providers and the approval of the works, the obligation to consult and work with bus operators should rest with the utility providers and local authorities.

4.7. Recommendations:

(e) There should be an obligation on utility providers and authorities to consult with bus operators on the impact of planned street works.

(f) Authorities should have the ability to require the use of connected temporary traffic signals.

5. Communication to Passengers

5.1. Closing a bus stop because of a diversion by placing a bag over the pole or via a "bus stop closed" notice is simple for the street works promoter, but for the passenger - not *that* helpful. Rather, they need to be told where the replacement bus stop is. Whilst this is likely to be fairly obvious in many small-scale street works for a fully able and confident passenger, for someone who

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[2] https://www.jctconsultancy.co.uk/Symposium/Symposium2015/PapersForDownload/Minimising%20the%20Impact%20of%20Street%20Works%20and%20Roadworks%20Portable%20Traffic%20Signals%20operated%20under%20fixed%20time%20UTC%20or%20full%20SCOOT%20control.pdf

[3] https://content.tfl.gov.uk/tfl-utc-control-temps-lane-rental-industry-publication.pdf

is not confident and or has a disability there is a need for additional support to be provided. At a minimum, this will be to inform them where the replacement bus stop is and even if it is only a short distance away – to clearly signpost it to allow, for example, those with a visual disability to easily and safely locate the new stop location.

5.2. Planning for the impact of street works and communication to passengers takes time and this needs to be factored into the timeline for advance notice of street works.

5.3. If a bus route is being diverted once a diversion route has been agreed, updating bus route data so that it appears in information sources used by a passenger takes time. For some sources this can be achieved within a few days, whilst others take longer and require resource planning to ensure that accurate information is to be provided. Paper notices at bus stops along a route alerting to potential delays require printing of the information and then someone to place the notice at each impacted bus stop which could involve many tens of locations.

5.4. Updates to online sources for passenger information are not instantaneous and need at least a week to ensure updates are available. This is why we are calling for at least three weeks confirmed notice to enable authorities and operators to respond and plan: for online information systems to be updated and information posted on street; and for passengers to plan for any impact on their journeys.

5.5. One of the biggest areas of passenger contact for operator and passenger transport contact centres and social media is information about where is my bus?, why did the bus not arrive on time? and similar queries related to disruptions. The fact that a passenger is concerned or frustrated enough to contact someone shows the importance of providing timely disruption information.

5.6. Whilst large operators may have the systems to provide such information on disruptions to passengers, small operators do not. To ensure that there is consistency of information available to passengers, bus operators must be able to publish disruption data in a standardised format to a national open data platform. The Bus Open Data Service does have a disruption service but it is currently limited to local authorities and therefore requires engagement by the authority and sufficient resources to keep it updated. The disruption service should be opened to bus operators who have the resources to maintain their own data, and there should be a bureau service for the small operators who do not have such resources.

5.7. Providers of information to passengers are increasingly keen to proactively provide information on disruptions to improve their customer offer and reduce the need for customers to ask for information. These include international companies such as Google and Microsoft as well as UK companies many of whom who are members of RTIG.

5.8. RTIG Inform has over 20 years experience in developing standards and providing advice and guidance to the industry on how to produce and share passenger information - including disruption information. It is, therefore, well placed to support the industry in providing improved information.

5.9. Recommendations:

(g) The Department of Transport should facilitate the ability for bus operators to publish and manage their disruption data.

(h) Operators should be required to provide disruption information to passengers.

6. Costs

6.1. Maintaining up to date information within all the information systems used by a bus operator for planning, communication and maintaining accurate passenger information, as well as the regulatory requirements of the Office of the Traffic Commission and Department for Transport, is a significant resource drain on bus operators and local authorities. This cannot easily be planned for because of the uncertain nature of street works, particularly those carried out by utility providers.

6.2. There should be an expectation that the organisations responsible for the street works cover the costs associated with closing bus stops, updating information systems and where necessary - providing shuttle or temporary services.

6.3. Recommendations:

(i) Promotors of street works should be responsible for covering the costs of managing the disruption to public transport.

RTIG Inform

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