

BRIEFING

The key COVID-19 challenges for urban transport authorities – and the support we need from Government

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The Urban Transport Group represents England's largest transport authorities which between them serve more than 20 million people in London (TfL), West Midlands (TfWM), West Yorkshire (WYCA), South Yorkshire (SYPTe), Tyne and Wear (Nexus), Greater Manchester (TfGM) and the Liverpool City Region (Merseytravel).

How is Urban Transport Group responding to COVID-19?

As public sector transport authorities, we are working hard to ensure that:

- public transport networks are able to safely meet growing demand as the lockdown is progressively eased; and
- road space is reallocated to enable more people to make more journeys on foot or by bike.

We are also sharing and coordinating approaches on how best to tackle this crisis through a high-level CEO (or equivalent) overarching telecon held weekly, and regular telecons of groups on bus, rail, light rail, communications, staffing, transport planning, active travel, finance, legal, data and analysis. Department for Transport Local Transport representatives regularly participate in the overarching telecon, as well as in other groups at key times. We are also liaising with Transport Scotland, Transport for Wales, the Confederation of Passenger Transport, the Rail Delivery Group, as well as UITP (the global public transport network).

What are the key challenges that transport authorities in England face in responding to COVID-19?

We face significant challenges including:

- How to meet additional demand for public transport (as restrictions are eased and as schools return) whilst continuing to ensure that staff and passengers are protected, including in relation to social distancing.
- How we continue to fund and plan public transport networks at a time when the funding support provided by Government is short-term, fragmented and on a mode by mode basis leaving transport authorities outside London unable to properly coordinate heavily constrained public transport capacity.

These are daunting challenges and will not be resolved without the Government working closely with transport authorities.

In particular, we need three things from Government:

1. A more collaborative approach to the way in which the Government is responding to the crisis in order to ensure that it is compatible with what transport authorities can reasonably achieve.
2. Greater flexibilities for transport authorities outside London to dynamically manage public transport networks as a whole in an agile and integrated manner, in the same way that London already can.
3. Funding for urban transport in the city regions to be routed via city region transport authorities (on the basis of a long-term Government commitment to cover the funding gap from COVID-19) so that transport networks can be planned in an integrated way.

What are the funding challenges for transport authorities in England in maintaining public transport services during the COVID-19 crisis?

The Government has adopted a mode-by-mode, short-term and fragmented approach to supporting the additional costs that public transport faces as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

On the day the lockdown was announced, the Government announced plans for support for **private operators of national rail services** to cover their costs (plus a management fee) which elapses on the 20th September.

Further into the lockdown phase, on 3rd April, the Government agreed to continue to continue to pay **bus** operators fuel subsidies at pre-pandemic rates. They also requested that local transport authorities continue to pay bus operators for the provision of supported services, and for reimbursement for concessionary travel at pre-pandemic levels (i.e. paying for services which for the most part were not being provided). This was followed by a new package of support on 23rd May (the Coronavirus Bus Services Support Grant or CBSSG) which provides additional funding support for those services which are actually being provided. Following the last fixed term of CBSSG funding package coming to an end on 4th August. On 8th August the Government announced that funding would continue at the same level and with at least eight weeks' notice of its termination.

An incomplete funding package for **light rail and tram systems outside of London (not including Blackpool)** for the lockdown phase was announced on 24th April and then a more complete funding package on 23rd May. The latest funding package ends on 26th October.

A deal for **TfL** as a whole, spanning the lockdown and the initial recovery phase (in return for central Government control over key TfL decisions), was agreed on 14th May. This elapses on 17th October.

On 8th August the Government announced over £40 million of funding for local transport authorities to commission additional schools transport capacity to support the return to school.

The key deadline dates for when funding runs out are therefore:

- Private operators of national rail services (20th September)
- TfL (17th October)
- Bus (eight weeks' notice period)
- Light rail (not including London or Blackpool) (26th October)
- Additional capacity to support the return to school (until Half Term)



Meanwhile, Merseytravel's exposure on the devolved Merseyrail concession has not been addressed.

Responding to the uncertainty and complexity created by the Government's approach (funding deals usually come through at the eleventh hour) is absorbing a disproportionate amount of time - time that could be spent on planning ahead for the wider challenges that COVID-19 presents for public transport.

We need a new approach based on:

- **A long-term commitment from Government to close the funding gap caused by COVID-19.**
- **Routing funding to maintain and support city region public transport provision via city region transport authorities** so that decisions about how best to fund those networks can be taken in a holistic way and in light of local circumstances, rather than funding being directed mode by mode. We have set out in more detail how this could be done for the bus element of a funding package for urban transport authorities in this [briefing](#).

Given the circumstances, some transport authority projects have been paused in favour of dealing with the immediate coronavirus crisis whilst others will be less immediately relevant. The Government should therefore **urgently (and in a coordinated way) also review the conditions and deadlines attached to the many different funding streams (including those that are competition based) that transport authorities are currently subject to**. This should be with a view to relaxing those conditions in order to allow authorities to direct funding where it will have the most impact in addressing the immediate impact of, as well as the recovery from, and legacy of, COVID-19.

Although there is a considerable financial cost associated with dealing with the coronavirus crisis itself, we will also need to continue to invest in urban transport in the future in order to meet wider goals for inclusive economies, carbon reduction, the levelling up agenda and improving air quality. **The cost of dealing with this immediate crisis should not mean sacrificing our ability to invest in, and support, the transport policies, programmes and projects which remain essential** to addressing these objectives.

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