

Report title: Covid Update: Passenger Transport		PSEG/13/20
Report to: Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee		
Date: 26 November 2020		For: Discussion
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County Divisions affected: All Essex		

Purpose of Report

1. To provide the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the passenger transport network during the current pandemic and to highlight issues and risks.

Background

2. Passenger Transport has been significantly impacted by the ongoing Covid pandemic. It has also operated as a key service, enabling key workers to get to work; children to get to school; people to access healthcare, to shop and to exercise and to socialise within social distancing rules.
3. Both central and local government have put significant resource into supporting the network and there is an in-principle commitment to continue to do so while social distancing requirements remain in place.

Update of current issues

4. This section of the report provides updates on the key services.

Commercial and supported bus network including registration and information

5. The first period of national lockdown from end March to end May saw an extremely challenging period for the bus network with stringent 2m social distancing requirements on services and a strong 'avoid public transport' message from central Government. This was followed by a slight relaxation in social distancing requirements which provided further capacity for the re-opening of non-essential retail in June and introduced the mandatory wearing of face coverings.
6. Due to social distancing and other Covid restrictions the bus network remains in a state of wholesale market failure with no prospect of a return to commercial operation while social distancing remains in place. In order to ensure continued running of the network Central Government put in place Covid Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG) for both commercial and supported services. They also continued to pay Bus Service Operator Grant (BSOG) at pre-Covid rates and asked that local government continued to pay Concessionary Fares, supported local bus; and home to school contracted rates at pre-Covid contractual levels. ECC took a series of decisions to meet these commitments. ECC has also administered the local authority element of CBSSG and undertook a liaison and network approval role with operators to ensure appropriate service

coverage within the operating constraints.

7. Ensuring that existing payments have continued to be made in an appropriate way; and that new payments are also made appropriately and from the correct budget have meant additional work in the Delivery Unit. Ensuring that financial information is as up to date as possible, so we have visibility of emerging Covid pressures or falls in income has been critical. Work included delivering financial returns for year-end whilst working from home during the first lockdown, unexpectedly using systems and networks and working with colleagues in ways that had not been originally envisaged. The team also worked to ensure that providers could be paid promptly to support businesses during the turbulent early lockdown period. This has included managing payments of £3.4m of Central Government Funding to support local bus, the return to school, the commercial market and additional capacity.
8. Due to the level of service change, ECC suspended its Realtime information services because of the high number of errors that would have occurred and directed bus users to operator's websites where the most up to date information was available. The screens were also used to remind bus passengers about wearing face coverings and to thank key workers.
9. Between April 2020 and September 2020 ECC extended the hours of operation of the Essex bus pass scheme were extended from the usual times of 09:00 to 23:00 Mondays to Friday and all times at weekends and on public holidays to 24/7 operation. This was to allow older people and people with disabilities to make use of dedicated opening hours in supermarkets and other shops. Following the relaxation of the initial lockdown restrictions and the return to school and work, passenger numbers began to grow. Operators began to be concerned that with continued restrictions on the number of people who can be carried on buses, they would not be able to cope peak period travel demand. This would risk students and key workers being left at the roadside. As a result, it was agreed that bus pass times would revert to normal from 1st September 2020
10. In recent weeks ECC has worked with operators as they increase network provision and the Realtime system has been reactivated as information has become more robust. Bus passenger numbers across the network are back up to around 50% of what they were pre-Covid from a low of around 23% at the start of lockdown.

Report:	Normal Running	May	June	July	August	September	October
Item:							
Services running as normal	N/A	18%	20%	28%	36%	46%	49%
Services currently closed to public		41%	40%	35%	31%	26% (19% closed school and 7% suspended)	23% (19% closed school and 4% suspended)
Services running to special arrangements	N/A	39%	38%	35%	32%	26%	25%
DaRT services operating as/when needed	N/A	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	2%
		% of network operational					
Mileage (miles)	671,656	331,446 49%	455,912 68%	522,520 78%	550,972 82%	582,295 87%	594,459 89%
Trips	58,365	29,401 50%	40,035 69%	45,839 79%	48,622 83%	51,888 89%	53,124 91%

11. The main issue for the future of the network is how ongoing financial support is provided once social distancing requirements are removed; but while there is a lag in passengers returning to bus use. ECC continue to work closely with Daft and have emphasised this point. A large-scale withdrawal of funding before passenger numbers have returned to pre-Covid levels would leave many (and probably most) services unable to operate commercially.

12. ECC is looking at setting a new strategy to support the bus network through a period of recovery, refresh and re-shaping.

Home to School Transport

13. The lockdown requirements, including the position for schools, were announced nationally on the evening of Thursday 19 March for introduction on Monday 23 March. This included the provision for vulnerable children and the children of key workers to continue to be able to access schools. ECC worked urgently with operators to agree an approach which could guarantee ongoing provision of transport for entitled children attending school. This included liaising with schools and operators on individual requirements.
14. The return to school in September posed a huge challenge for the bus network and home to school transport. In August local authorities were asked by DfE to take on an additional role to ensure there was sufficient capacity on the commercial bus network to ensure children could get to school. Given social distancing requirements reduce the capacity of a bus by over 50% this was a significant challenge. DfE grant funded ECC £1.2m to enable sufficient additional capacity to support those existing journeys. ECC worked closely with operators to deliver a range of solutions including 'closing' certain journeys so they are available to school children only; adding duplicate vehicles; and/or replacing single deckers with double deckers. Additionally, ECC has worked across transport, education and public health to ensure children with specialist health conditions have been supported to access school where the school can accommodate them. ECC's operators and the drivers, passenger assistants and office staff who work for them have been fundamental to the success of this approach and their commitment to transporting children, working quickly to resolve issues and manage uncertainty have been critical. This was supported by a communications campaign regarding government guidance on face coverings, social distancing and travel. The guidance was also included with 11,000 letters sent to eligible passengers.
15. A second significant risk was a large-scale switch to car away from bus as parents chose to drop their children at school. Through the Stop.Swap.GO! digital behavioural change campaign, ECC launched a '[Getting to School or College Information Service](#)' that provided a one stop shop for information on walking, cycling and bus use. This included all the advice on travelling by bus and bespoke Park and Stride maps for schools. Overall, the initial return to bus for school journeys appears to have been around 70% which is a significant achievement in very challenging circumstances.

Park and Ride

16. Park and Ride services were shut shortly after full national lockdown was introduced and passenger numbers dropped significantly. ECC worked with suppliers to ensure the work to site a temporary mortuary there was able to proceed successfully. The ECC P&R manager re-deployed to the wellbeing service to support vulnerable people through the lockdown.
17. With the easing of restrictions on social distancing and the re-opening of non-essential retail requests for P&R services to resume started to come in and the sites re-opened in August running to reduced services. The re-opening also saw a first step towards a Park and Pedal service with the provision of quality bike storage. Further work is

planned to seek funding for good quality routes and wayfinding. Passenger numbers are currently at 20% of pre-Covid levels but have been growing steadily since re-opening. P&R services have also been used by school children for the journey to school as there is a £1 day fare for children up to 18 years. Diversification opportunities continue to be delivered within Covid rules and have included high performance car meets, car boot sales, a temporary COVID testing clinics and an outdoor church service.

Ugobus, Adult Social Care and Community Transport

18. Ugobus are ECC's in-house fleet and primarily deliver adult social care transport but also some local bus and home to school transport. Reductions in demand from these core transport services during Covid has seen Ugo bus deployed to support other activities. This has included supporting the distribution of food parcels; distribution of PPE, distribution of IT and sports equipment and supporting the movement of deceased. This involved Ugobus drivers working significantly outside of their normal working patterns and arrangements.
19. As the demand for adult social care transport has increased, Ugobus has upgraded the vehicles with safety screens to protect the drivers and has reverted to delivering its core services, working closely with the day care centres to ensure passengers only travel within their 'bubble'. The service again stands ready for requests as we move into the next phase of the tiered lockdown.
20. Additionally, there have been complex needs for transporting adult social care clients over the last seven months. This has included various moves for individuals, obviously at a time of high risk, including moving Covid positive passengers, those in at risk groups but also more challenging issues such as needing to move all residents from a closing care home. There has also been the challenge of understanding novel transport issues such as PPE requirements and ensuring providers are able to access appropriate provision.
21. Our Community Transport schemes across Essex have been unable to carry out their usual essential services for our most vulnerable members of the community. They have however continued to make a valuable contribution from the start of lockdown. This includes providing deliveries of hot meals, click and collect shopping, medications, parcels and making important welfare phone calls to prevent isolation. Some funding has been made available from Parish Councils to maintain essential shopper buses and the schemes have supported both ECC and the NHS to provide transport for key workers. Vehicle adaptations to include Perspex screens, PPE, hand sanitising on buses, and deep cleaning vehicles via "fogging" has ensured the services are safe to use during this time. Inevitably there have been some redundancies and a difficulty to retain volunteers along with some staff being furloughed.

Travel Training

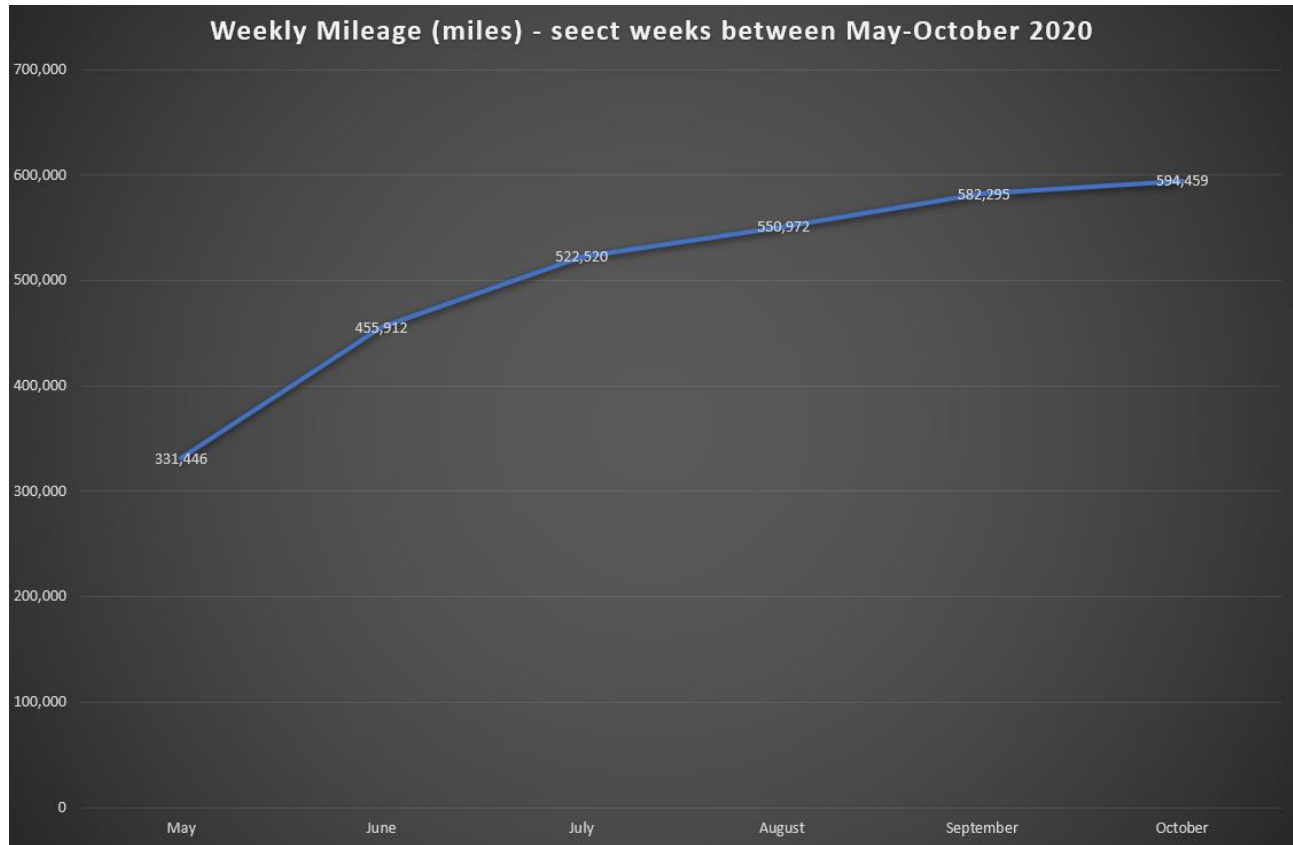
22. Travel Trainers provide training mostly, but not exclusively, for children with special education needs giving them the skills and confidence to travel safely on the bus network or in another sustainable way, such as walking. This gives them key life skills and is often a transformative experience for them and their families. In the first phase of national lockdown Travel Trainers re-deployed to support the death registration process.

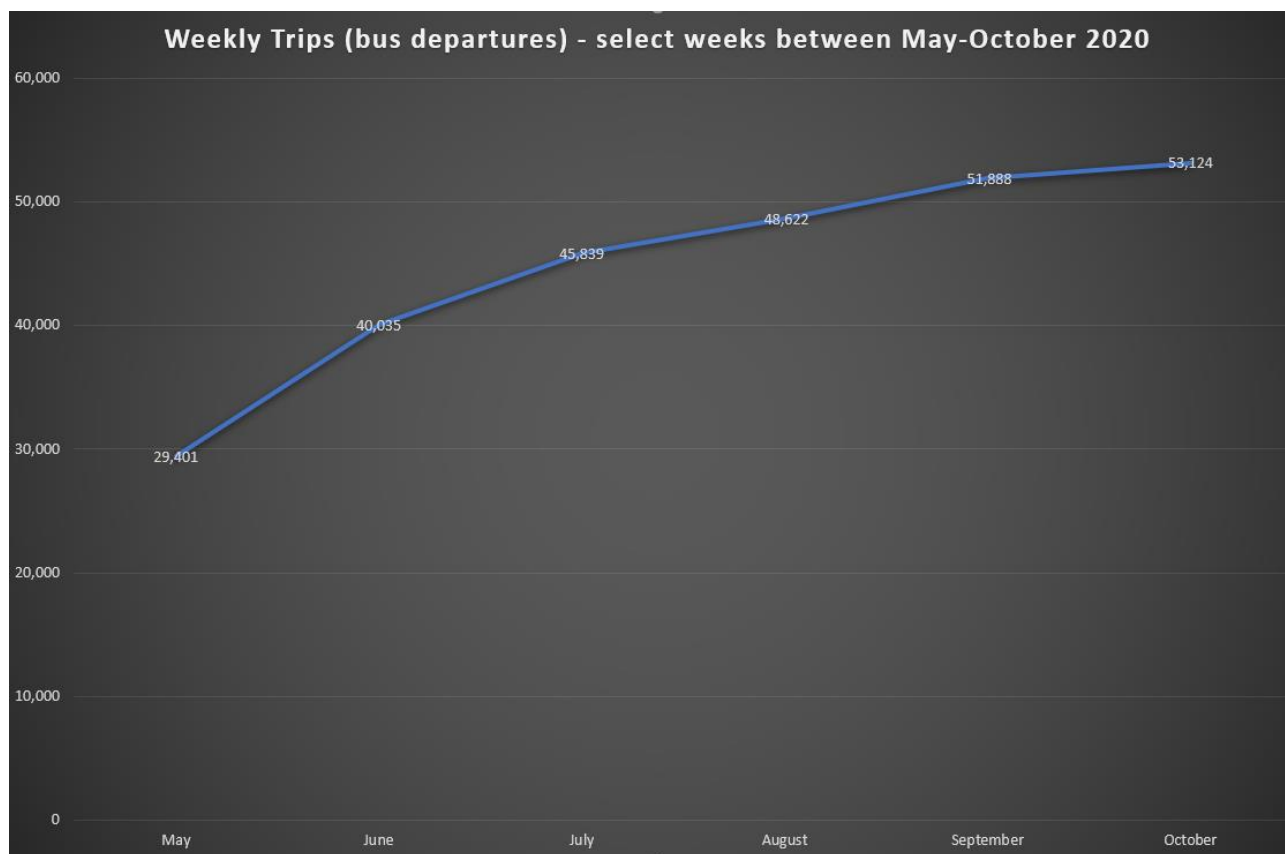
With the re-opening of schools and the expansion of the bus network, they have largely returned to delivering their core service.

Next Steps and future issues

23. Given the uncertainty over future demands on services, ECC are seeking to remain as flexible as possible – supporting additional Covid work and addressing Covid specific issues while seeking to run as much ‘normal service’ as possible shaped around demand. The key risks ahead are:
- Significant long-term damage to the bus network and a slow return to pre-Covid patronage
 - A significant financial pressure across the commercial network resulting in service curtailment or withdrawal

Annex A – Network Performance





ESSEX BUS NETWORK OPERATIONS - MAY-OCTOBER 2020

