



Department
for Transport

Department for Transport
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To Local Authority Transport Officers

DATE 25 March 2020

via email

Dear colleague,

COVID-19 – Supporting the Bus and Coach Sector and its Passengers

The onset of coronavirus in England has had a significant impact on how people travel. We understand the importance of bus services to communities, key workers and people taking essential journeys, and we are determined to support them.

Continuity of payment to operators

Ministers have therefore agreed that the Department will continue to pay Bus Service Operators Grant to operators on the basis of estimated service levels before the coronavirus outbreak, and will not revise these estimates down where service levels have declined due to the coronavirus impact on the industry.

The Department appreciates that local authorities are facing a range of pressures as a result of the coronavirus. But Ministers hope, and expect, that as part of your response, you will want to support vital local bus service providers so that they can continue to play a central role in your communities after this pandemic.

In particular, we would urge you to continue to pay bus and coach operators for tendered services and home to school transport at the levels before any downturn in service provision or patronage, for at least the period of the outbreak. This will help ensure that bus operators continue to be able to provide socially necessary services once the outbreak is over. This is set out in detail in Procurement Policy Note 02/20 - Supplier Relief Due to COVID-19 (attached). This means that contracting authorities should continue to pay suppliers for the next three months (even if service delivery is disrupted//temporarily stopped) in order to ensure business continuity and protect jobs. Authorities should also pay invoices immediately on receipt to support cashflow. We would also urge you to continue to pay operators for concessionary fares at levels before any downturn.

Local authorities are well-placed to understand their local bus services and nothing in the above should stop you from, as part of this funding, seeking to ensure that bus operators make an appropriate offer to passengers, for example by protecting vital services which connect communities to lifeline services such as supermarkets, or link key workers to their employment.

We understand that local authorities are also under financial pressure, hence the recent Government announcement of an additional £1.6 billion support to local authorities to

respond to coronavirus. But we are keen to ensure that local transport services are still available to those that need them most during this period.

Without our joint support, bus services and the communities they serve will be impacted for the foreseeable future – with services at risk of being lost or requiring local authority support.

Changes to timetables

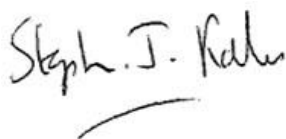
As you may be aware, we have also been working with the Office of the Traffic Commissioner (OTC) to ensure changes to bus services can be made promptly in response to a shortage of drivers or reduced passenger demand, while maintaining vital services for key workers and other making essential journeys. Operators will be able to send applications for temporary variation of services made at short notice, due to the exceptional nature of the situation, to both the Traffic Commissioner and relevant local authority at the same time and include a full timetable. As part of this process, we are asking local authorities to limit the time for consulting them to 24 hours instead of 28 days.

The Secretary of State is clear that he expects that as bus operators amend their timetables they should continue to provide appropriate service levels for key workers, most particularly to hospitals, and that buses are not heavily loaded because of reduced service patterns. In doing so we would expect bus operators to do all that they can to ensure that they are always providing the services that local authorities consider are required. We also wish to see first class communication to passengers so that they are absolutely clear about what buses will be running where and when. Please work closely with your operators to ensure that this is achieved.

As you know, as part of the Better Deal for Bus Users, we provided an additional £30 million to local authorities to help support new services or replace lost services. Given the circumstances, local authorities may wish to use this funding to support bus operators to run minimum service levels during this time. If any local authority wishes to amend proposals that they have already submitted please contact the email address betterdeal4buses@dft.gov.uk.

Thank you for your support.

Yours faithfully,



Stephen Fidler
Director of Local Transport