



OXFORDSHIRE BUS SUMMIT 2022 REPORT



INTRODUCTION

In the post-COVID era, bus travel needs to undergo change. The disjointed approach once adopted can no longer work in such a connected world. The Oxfordshire Bus Summit sought to resolve this. In creating the event, we wanted to bring a more rounded, holistic approach to travel solutions.

To do so, we gathered representatives from inside and outside the industry in order to think differently, and to gain perspectives from those that commission, plan and operate buses. It was also hugely important that the Summit captured a broad range of Oxfordshire's public transport users and employers within the county. Attendees ranged from:

- Council officers
- User groups
- Major employers
- Local politicians
- Local businesses
- Bus operators
- Education officers (students and administrative officers)

The Summit, convened by MP Annelise Dodds, attended by Layla Moran MP and was hosted by Ade Thomas, CEO and Founder of local Oxfordshire sustainable media company Green.TV. Green.TV have created multiple successful events including the EV Summit, World EV Day and the Decarbonisation Summit. The Summit was organised by Oxfordshire County Council in partnership with the Go Ahead and Stagecoach bus companies.

This range of attendees and delegates produced a variety of poignant presentations and discussions on the future of Bus Travel, which will be detailed in the coming pages.

OVERVIEW

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

The Summit began with a presentation by Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, Liz Leffman, opening with a definitive diagnosis: not enough people are using buses currently. This is central to the 2022-2025 plan of Oxfordshire County Council, which rests on four clear points:

1. Investing in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network for Oxfordshire
2. Prioritising active travel and public transport to support healthy lifestyles and address inequalities in travel connectivity
3. To develop, publish and deliver the Oxfordshire Local Transport and Connectivity Plan
4. To deliver the commitments within the Oxfordshire Bus Service Improvement Plan

To enact these, the County Council has developed the £60 million Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). This includes a package of new bus lanes and other bus priority measures which are targeted to achieve at least a 10% improvement in bus journey times, real-time information upgrades, new cross-boundary services and reductions in fares for under 19s.

Bus improvements will also serve to decarbonise. Working with the new ZEBRA scheme, Oxfordshire County is working with the operators, Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach, and government bodies to unlock funding to transform Oxford City network and introduce a fleet of electric vehicles.



OVERVIEW

OPERATOR ACTIVITY AND COMMITMENT

Oxfordshire has faced a challenging time over recent years in regard to public transport, specifically bus travel. Austerity, rising competition from rail services and disbanded council teams have reduced operating margins to as low as 2%. At the height of the pandemic, patronage levels dropped overnight to 6% of normal use. But Oxfordshire is already recovering. A recent funding round of £12.7 million has injected new financial impetus into the sector. Bus operators are now starting to encourage more people back with marketing campaigns such as “Bus Transports You For Less” and “All hail the Bus”.

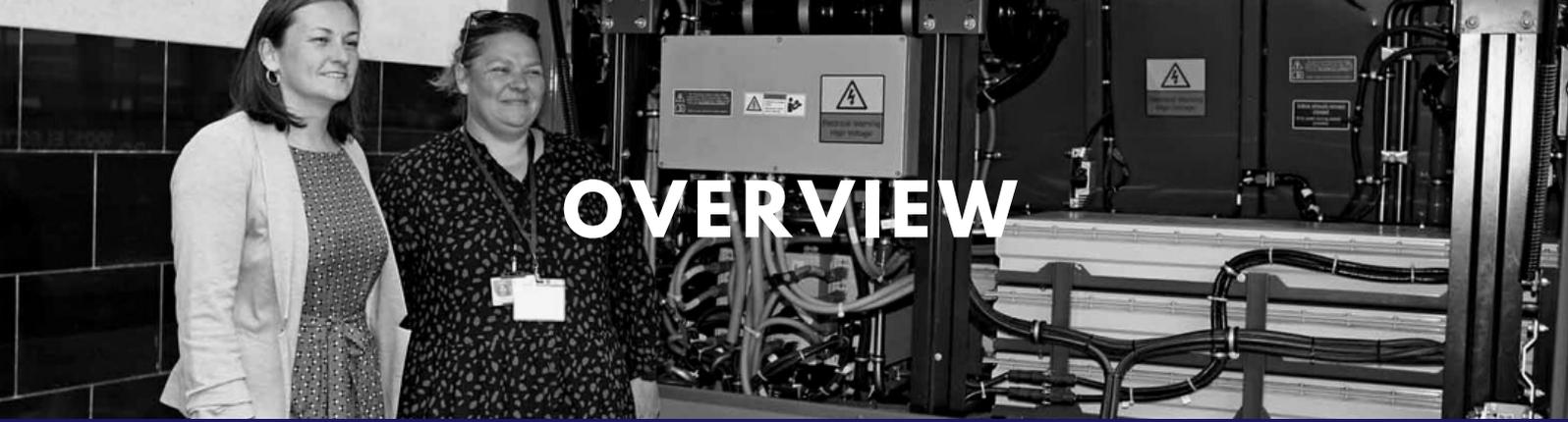
The post-COVID world also offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to systematically overhaul Oxfordshire's bus network. Operators have committed to work with the county council to unlock funding for electric vehicles through the ZEBRA scheme and will be investing

£43 million into decarbonising the entire city's fleet. However, delivery of the ZEBRA scheme is time-critical and dependent on measures to improve bus journey times such as those being planned by the council being implemented at pace.

Around the country there are examples of how we can think beyond the normal bus routes to work together to deliver a network to meet the changing needs of our customers.

OXFORD BROOKES

Oxford Brookes, working in partnership BROOKESbus, is a university-supported bus operation serving the three campuses of Oxford Brookes and Oxford city centre. Further, it is an example of how businesses working in partnership with bus operators can design mutually beneficial solutions to vastly improve the bus experience in Oxfordshire for everyone: while the service is primarily designed to meet the needs of University students and staff, around 40% of the patronage on the service comes from the wider public. The service, which has returned to 90% of pre-COVID patronage levels, has served millions since its inception in 2003. Most recently, BROOKESbus reported 146,207 customers in May 2022. This is set to increase with improvements in routes and efficiency for the 2022/23 academic year.



OVERVIEW

GREEN INVESTMENT GROUP

In total, \$47.6 trillion will be needed to achieve our goals. Buses are already transitioning at pace - 39% of all buses sold in 2020 were electric, and there are already 600k e-buses in operation globally. Further, it is anticipated that public fast, bus and truck chargers will account for 50% of all charging infrastructure investments by 2040. In an effort to galvanise bus and HGV charging,

Green Investment Group have partnered with Heliox to create a comprehensive CaaS (Charging as a Service) offering including a fixed monthly finance offer for heavy-duty and LCV fleet operators through Heliox turn-key charging solutions.

MILTON PARK - WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Milton Park is the new, dynamic epicentre of life sciences and biotechnology in Oxfordshire, as well as a hotspot for decarbonising technology innovation. As employee density increases, innovative transport solutions are needed. Milton Park's sustainability team invested in the expansion of public transport through a partnership with Thames Travel, improving frequency, geographical coverage and hours of operation of the service.

A £20 annual ticket is available for all Milton Park employees to travel to the park from anywhere in Didcot. In turn, this will attract new occupiers, enhance the ESG portfolio, and help meet planning obligations, as well as ensuring that Milton Park is a great neighbour to local residents.



THE MANIFESTO

One of the key aims of the June Bus Summit was to bring a wide range of people together to help inform our bus strategies across the county going forwards. As such, we invited delegates representing the key stakeholders in Oxfordshire - from bus user and pensioner associations to active travel campaigners and major employers - to attend roundtable discussions with council staff and bus operators.

The working groups discussed some of the key barriers holding back bus uptake across the county and what we can do to overcome them.

Those barriers were identified as

- Ease of use
- Reliability of the network
- Speed of journeys

Their passionate discussions have led to the following recommendations for policymakers and operators to take into account as they draw up both current and future plans for Oxfordshire's bus network:

- **Creating a network of 'transport hubs'** 5
- **Simplify the bus network** 6
- **Modernise the network** 7
- **Modernise the buses** 8
- **Speed up bus journeys** 9
- **Promote active travel as part of bus journeys** 10
- **Engage with key demographics** 11

CREATING A NETWORK OF 'TRANSPORT HUBS'

Delegates supported the creation of 'hubs' at key points throughout the county where bus (and, where applicable, train) services interconnect. This would involve larger hubs on the edges of urban areas, like the current park and ride facilities with smaller 'micro-hubs' placed between smaller towns and villages.

Aware of budgetary constraints, delegates highlighted that this need not involve building big new facilities from scratch but expanding the infrastructure at existing bus stops served by trunk inter-urban services, or areas where two or more current routes intersect. They suggested that a mapping exercise should be undertaken to determine where the nodal hubs should be placed based on space, catchment size, demand, proximity to popular destinations (tourist attractions, workplaces, leisure facilities etc) and any other relevant factors.

EASILY ACCESSIBLE BY ALL MODES

- To make it more viable for people (especially those in more remote rural areas) to use the bus for at least one part of their journey, increasing demand for bus services in those areas.
- Expanding the park and ride model to encourage people to park outside of urban centres in order to reduce congestion.
- This would, in turn, speed up bus journeys in town and city centres.

FREE, SECURE BIKE STORAGE

- Promote active travel by encouraging people to use bicycles or ebikes for at least one part of their journey by providing them with the security to leave their bikes parked for longer periods of time.
- It would also be advisable for hubs to be located along or near established cycle routes.

SHARED FACILITIES

- Key facilities (e.g. ticket machines, toilets, WiFi provision) could be shared by different bus operators and their customers, creating a more comfortable bus experience.
- As bus fleets are increasingly electrified, hubs could be equipped with rapid DC charging infrastructure for buses to recharge along the way.

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SIMPLIFY THE BUS NETWORK

One of the biggest issues identified at the summit was the over-complexity of the bus system in Oxfordshire, from a passenger perspective. Whether new to the area or longstanding residents, many attendees said they had found their experience using buses in Oxfordshire to be confusing, which put them and others off wanting to use it.

SIMPLIFY THE LOOK

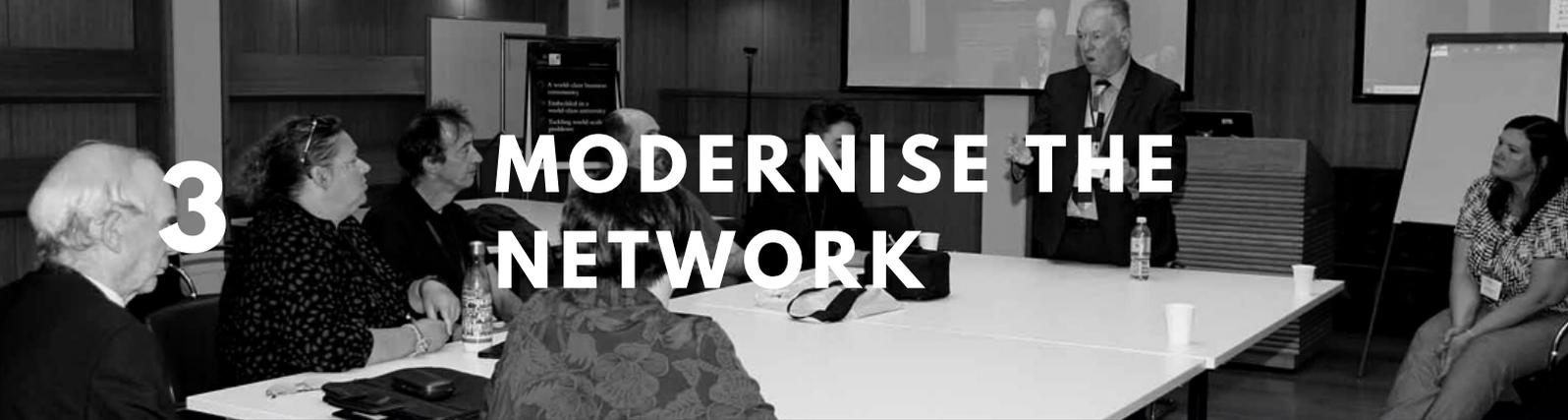
- Rather than bus operators each using different systems, all buses should use a central simplified numbering and/or colour coding system to make it easier for passengers to identify which lines they need to take.
- Bus stops should be more clearly painted with the colours/numbers of lines they serve.

METRO MAPS

- A simple, easily legible map of the county's bus network - with colour coded lines for each route - should be on display at every bus stop, emulating the system used in major cities around the world.

MORE STANDARDISED TICKETING

- Though multi-operator tickets are already widely used in Oxford city, in the wider county the picture is different. A target was identified to replace the current, dispersed ticketing system (with various types of tickets on offer from each operator, some of which can't be transferred between different services) with a more 'joined up' approach.
- This could be organised by offering tickets for a designated number of journeys, following the European model or a zonal system, expanding the successful "Oxford Smartzone" concept more widely across the county.



Delegates at the summit identified a number of ways that Oxfordshire's bus network could be modernised in order to make it easier to navigate for current users and encourage new passengers to start using it. While there are clearly some key differences, many thought that there were lessons to be learned from the rail sector in terms of providing a more seamless user experience facilitated by technology.

IMPLEMENT A CONTACTLESS 'TAP ON TAP OFF' SYSTEM

- Speed up the rollout of contactless payment infrastructure across the whole of the county, whereby the cheapest fares are automatically calculated for them without the need to ask for a specific ticket.

INTEGRATED TIMETABLE AND PAYMENT APP

- Create an integrated live timetabling app for the entire Oxfordshire bus network, where passengers can check bus times all in one place in real time. This would include a map feature allowing them to track the progress of their bus and amend their journeys if needed.
- Currently, some operators already offer this, and include other operators' service where these operate in the same areas as their own, but it would be case of housing all of the information from across the entire network in one app.
- Attendees suggested the inclusion a 'route planner' function to help passengers plan a bus journey across the county in the cheapest and/or quickest way possible.
- They also recommended making ticket purchases available within the same app (mirroring 'Trainline' for rail users) to make the user experience as seamless as possible and make buses more appealing to younger passengers. However, they acknowledged that this might involve some cost or commercial complexities.

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MODERNISE THE BUSES

As well as modernising the overall network, the working groups also pointed out that some features of the buses themselves need updating to fully equip them for the 21st century. This would make buses a more attractive mode of transport for generations to come and encourage certain demographics - like commuters and students - to start taking the bus more often.

REFITTING BUS INTERIORS

- Attendees agreed that refurbishing the interiors of some of the older buses would change perceptions that buses are an inferior way of travelling.
- Including modern, better quality seating and features such as USB charging were seen as priority areas.
- Operators highlighted that this could be done at relatively low cost.

UPDATING INTERNET CONNECTIVITY

- Make onboard WIFI connection more reliable for commuters to work during their journeys.
- Update built-in modems from 3g to 4g and 5g to ensure stable connection to bus timetabling apps so buses can be tracked more reliably in real-time and avoid signal 'black spots'.

AUDIO-VISUAL DISPLAYS

- Provide audiovisual "next stop" displays on buses across the network, including live maps, estimated times to the next stop, and with interchange stops clearly highlighted, displaying which other bus lines, train stations and cycle routes they link to.
- All new buses will be fitted with these systems but older ones could be fitted now to speed up the process and make sure rural areas are receiving a good quality service.

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SPEED UP BUS JOURNEYS

Delegates at the summit established that Oxfordshire's bus networks are being held back by old, busy roads. The congestion and inevitable delays that come with the reliance on historic road systems are off putting to many potential bus travellers, so prioritising buses on the road will make buses more reliable and practical, therefore making them a far more attractive alternative to travelling by car.

IMPROVE BUS PRIORITY

- An overwhelming amount of the roads in urban areas need to be restructured and overhauled in order to build a more bus and bike friendly region and to deliver faster bus journey times
- Where possible, road space in urban areas should be re-allocated away from private cars towards active travel modes, with more bus lanes, modal filters and cycle lanes.
- In rural areas, bus lanes are not always practical. However, buses can still be given improved priority at key junctions through the use of new technology, such as intelligent traffic light control systems which communicate directly to the bus. This technology should be prioritised for roll out across Oxfordshire to all junctions served by frequent bus services..

IMPROVE ORBITAL CONNECTIVITY

- Bus journeys in Oxford city are easy on radial routes to and from the city centre, but less easy when seeking to make "orbital" journeys around the city. As a result, car modal share for these journey types is much higher than desired currently.
- Bus priority measures should therefore be designed to improve orbital bus routing and to ensure that any displacement of private car traffic from the traditional bus routes does not impact the development of these orbital routes.

A major recurring factor at the summit was the incorporation of active travel into Oxfordshire's bus network. Active travel has been identified as a major step in the decarbonisation and the reduction of congestion in urban areas, so successfully rolling active travel into the public travel network as a viable alternative to travelling by car will propel viability of Oxfordshire's bus routes.

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PROMOTING ACTIVE TRAVEL AS PART OF BUS JOURNEYS

INTRODUCE SAFER BIKE STORAGE

- In order to incorporate active travel into Oxfordshire’s bus network, cyclists need more safe and secure spaces to store their bikes at bus stops, transport hubs and major bus stations.
- This is an action that county and district councils could feasibly work on.

EQUIP BUSES TO BE MORE BIKE-FRIENDLY

- The buses themselves could be better equipped to accommodate cyclists.
- Buses could be redesigned with designated areas to store bikes, allowing cyclists to transition directly from active travel to public transport.
- Alternatively, bike racks or other carrying capabilities could be added to buses, making them more accessible for cyclists while retaining space inside.

CONNECT ACTIVE TRAVEL NETWORKS TO BUS NETWORKS

- At present there is limited visibility when using the bus network of opportunities to interchange with the cycle network.
- Bus operators should look to include information on cycle and e-bike hire facilities on their next stop displays and journey planners.
- Key cycle and walking routes should be included in the bus “metro map” to ensure interchange possibilities are more easily understood and to make both buses and cycling / walking more accessible.

Traditionally key demographics for bus routes are generally falling in numbers. This is likely due to a plethora of factors including the fallout from the governmental advice to avoid public transport throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.



ENGAGING WITH KEY DEMOGRAPHICS

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ENGAGEMENT CAMPAIGNS

- School children are traditionally frequent bus users, which opens the option to work with schools to encourage children to use the bus beyond school.
- Elderly passengers have generally been swayed against using the bus due to COVID-19 measures, so a campaign to promote the cleaning regimes and safety measures taken on the bus networks will help to change these perceptions.

ACCESSIBILITY AND EASE OF USE

- Greater effort could be made with seating and accessibility for elderly passengers, to make the buses a more comfortable environment for regular use.
- Simplifying the timetables and routes to make the buses easier to understand and use could have an impact on the drop off with certain key demographics.

INCREASE THE SAFETY OF NIGHT-TIME SERVICES

- Connecting with local authorities and night-shift workers who are likely to use the bus outside of usual hours will help advise the safety precautions to be taken on night-time services, thereby opening the bus routes as a viable and comfortable transport network late into the night.

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