

Appendix 2 – EP workstreams and strategic approaches

1 Punctuality, reliability and journey times

The EP contains targets to improve punctuality, reliability and journey times. Of these, punctuality is currently the key focus because of poor performance compared to targets.

A separate report on punctuality is being considered at this EP Board meeting.

The following are the key components of the punctuality workstream, some of which will also assist in improving journey times:

- Improved scheduling
- Bus priority measures
 - Bus lanes
 - Bus lane operating hours
 - Bus lane and bus stop enforcement
 - Signal priority
- Bus stop rationalisation
- Measures to reduce boarding times, in particular through digital ticketing.

Delivery against this programme continues, although there remain a number of significant barriers and trade-offs.

- As set out in the paper to the EP Board, there is often a direct trade-off between punctuality and journey time/frequency when scheduling services with a fixed level of resource. A push to improve punctuality may mean less frequent services on some routes.
- SYMCA and councils have committed to a programme of bus priority measures funded through the Transforming Cities Fund and City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement schemes, which must be spent by 2027. Although capital funding is largely sufficient, delivery can stall because of local opposition to bus lane installations. It is essential that we find ways to provide priority for buses on congested routes if punctuality is to be improved, and buses are to be an attractive alternative to the car for motorists.

2 Fare subsidy and concessions

Reducing fares on public transport is a significant part of the BSIP strategy. The BSIP and EP Plan include a priority to “ensure that ticket prices are more competitive with other modes and parking charges in urban centres”.

Fare subsidies have two potential benefits. Reducing the costs of public transport relative to other forms of transport may induce a proportion of car users to switch modes for some journeys. It can also make a significant contribution to addressing cost-of-living concerns for low-income households, a particular issue at the present time.

There are already a number of concessionary travel passes for specific groups, including the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme for the elderly and disabled (ENCTS), and locally funded Zoom passes. The BSIP and EP Plan contain a commitment to develop a consistent offer for under 21s and additional concessions/discounts for target segments. Future concessionary travel funding is being reviewed as part of setting the SYMCA 2023/24 Budget.

The £2 fare cap represents a significant new form of fares subsidy, available to all. The locally-funded Mayor's fare operated from 1 November to 31 December 2022, and the current nationally funded £2 cap is due to come to an end on 31 March 2023. There is an urgent need to develop an exit strategy from this scheme, assuming the national scheme is not extended. This could involve reverting to a locally-funded subsidy, or accepting that fares will return to the market rates set by operators.

The impact of the Mayor's fare is currently being evaluated. This should provide valuable insights into the extent to which fares subsidy is effective in stimulating mode shift, as well as addressing cost-of-living concerns. It is anticipated that further advice will be brought on this issue to the Mayor in the first instance, and then to the EP Board at the next meeting.

It should be noted that, although the BSIP and EP Plan include commitments to make bus ticket prices more competitive with other modes, the EP Scheme does not currently include any specific measures that influence the costs of car use. In the medium to long term, demand side measures are almost certainly going to be needed as part of an affordable strategy to achieve significant mode shift.

3 Network development

As noted in the body of the paper, the commercial bus network went through a significant contraction in October 2022. As a consequence, SYMCA funded a number of new tendered routes from reserves, although the net result was a loss of route mileage overall. In addition, government funding for bus services under the Bus Recovery Grant is uncertain beyond 31 March 2022. SYMCA is involved in a process of retendering the majority of the tendered service network, as contracts can no longer be extended. Given the uncertainty of government funding highlighted above, it will be a major challenge to maintain the existing network.

But even against the backdrop of a shrinking network, there will be opportunities for targeted growth. The Enhanced Partnership contains commitments to invest in trials of new services, route uplifts and extensions. The programme involves SYMCA and operators sharing market and socio-economic information to identify potential new markets and areas of growth. It is important that operators use their commercial skills to take forward market opportunities and reverse the trend of network decline.

The EP Scheme makes a commitment to trial Demand Responsive Transport services. DRT may be a cost-effective way to provide passengers with a service where it is not possible to provide traditional commercial or tendered services. But too often DRT schemes have imported the high cost, low demand of conventional bus, and we need a fundamental rethink of the business model. SYMCA's bid to the Levelling Up Fund includes a project to establish a platform to operate DRT by procuring and developing the customer interface needed to support DRT. At the time of writing, the outcome of this bid is unknown.

4 Ticket simplification

Ticketing that is simple and allows a passenger to easily identify the ticket option that is best for them will help attract and retain bus passengers. The policy on fares subsidy covered in 2 above is linked, but separate to, the simplification of ticket products. There are two key components of the programme to simplify ticketing.

First an audit is underway of all ticket products together with usage. This will allow little-used products to be removed, so removing some of the confusing “noise” in the SY ticketing offer.

The second stage is to identify where single operator tickets might be removed by the relevant operator in favour of a multi-operator alternative. Given that multi-operator products are generally more expensive than the single operator equivalent, it is essential that the removal of single-operator products is accompanied by a proportionate reduction in the price of the multi-operator product. This is to avoid passengers losing out, particularly in districts where there is only one predominant operator. SYMCA is planning to commission a study to identify an appropriate price point for each multi-operator product, which will be relayed to the TravelMaster board.

In addition, a review of the “TicketFinder” on the Travel South Yorkshire website is planned. This will focus on making sure that ticket information is up to date, and that the website makes it easier to find the best ticket for a specific traveller. We also intend to explore linking the TicketFinder to the journey planner, so that ticket information is provided automatically whenever the journey planning function is used.

In the longer term, the need to simplify tickets and assist passenger to find the best ticket may be subsumed by the introduction of Tap and Cap fares. This is covered under the retail strategy below.

5 Retail strategy

The retail strategy is concerned with the way that tickets are sold, and is closely linked to the structure of tickets available. The EP Plan makes clear the intention is to move South Yorkshire to a multi-operator “Tap and Cap” environment. Under Tap and Cap, passengers pay on the bus using a contactless bank card (the “Project Coral” model), an ITSO smartcard/phone app, or a QR/barcode phone app. The back-office system automatically calculates the best ticket option for a passenger each day, depending on how many trips they make, so the passenger can be assured they have the best deal.

The type of Tap and Cap will depend on whether a flat fare structure is adopted. Flat fares (such as the Mayor’s fare) do not require the system to know where the passenger alights (tap-on only is required). Conversely if ticket prices depend on distance or zones rather than being flat, then buses also need to be equipped with tap-off readers, so the system can calculate the correct fare. This is being addressed through a refresh of the retail strategy.

In the shorter term, until a Tap and Cap system is fully in place and being used by all operators, the strategy is to encourage payment off the bus using pre-purchased products, as this reduces boarding times and improves punctuality.

Under all scenarios, it will for now remain possible to pay for travel by cash for those that do not have bank accounts and/or wish to pay as they go using cash.

An implementation pathway is being developed that navigates through this complex environment, ensuring customers retain choice and at the same time that transactions are simple, accurate, low-cost and do not create unnecessary delays for buses.

6 Information

The EP Scheme and Accelerated EP make a commitment to adopt a single source of the truth in relation to information on services. Information provision largely falls into the following categories:

- Timetable and route information
- Interactive journey planning
- Fares and ticket information
- Real time passenger information
- Other information (e.g. on accessibility of vehicles)

Currently information is available from a variety of sources. Travel South Yorkshire, operators and a range of third-party providers offer information on websites, and some on phone apps. The contact centre provides telephone information. Bus stops and interchanges have paper-based information displays, and some have real time displays.

The information displayed is in the main consistent, given that each system generally uses the same underlying data. However there are sometimes differences in the output (eg in journey planning) caused by variability in the functionality and capabilities of the specific system.

Work has started to consider how all relevant information can be made available in one location, i.e. the Travel South Yorkshire website. A key priority is also to develop an app that provides the same information as available on the TSY website, as TSY does not currently have a phone app. We will also ensure that information is presented in as accessible and user-friendly way as possible – for example by exploring the option of providing map-based real time information that enables the passenger to track their next bus's location on a map.

In parallel, it is essential to make sure that all information used by all current platforms is accurate, and unfortunately this is not always the case. There is an important task to ensure that timetable, ticket and real time service information provided by operators is timely, accurate and supplied in the nationally-prescribed format. Improving the accuracy and accessibility of real time information is a particular priority, given its importance when punctuality of services is poor.

7 Bus stop infrastructure

The EP programme seeks to improve waiting facilities for passengers. This includes the safety and comfort of bus stops, through the installation of shelters, lighting etc. It also involves improved paper-based and electronic real time information at stops.

A hierarchy of stops, and standards for each level in the hierarchy, are being developed so that passengers have clarity on what they can expect. There is also a capital programme to install new shelters and real time information displays, in accordance with the standards. The TCF and CRSTS provides funding for new shelters and real time information displays, and delivery of these is progressing well.

8 Vehicles

There is a commitment for operators to apply agreed standards on fleet quality, presentation and cleanliness.

The EP programme also seeks to contribute to reduced emissions through the rollout of new electric buses in the fleet, under the Zebra programme. We are expecting a second Zebra bidding opportunity over next few months.

9 Marketing and brand

One of the key objectives of the EP is to grow patronage on buses. Part of this is the use of marketing to increase awareness of bus services and encourage uptake.

Marketing can be conducted at the system level (e.g. a “back to bus” campaign), or on a more targeted route-by-route or customer segment basis.

Concerns over current network performance, particularly punctuality, make it questionable as to whether now is the right time to systemically market bus services to potential new customers. The danger is that a poor experience will deter future use. That said, there has recently been a doordrop of publicity material to promote the availability of the £2 fare. A strategy for marketing may be best focused in the short term on specific corridors, where targeted improvements have been made.

There is a strategic choice too between marketing that targets groups such as ENCTS passholders; and those that are fare-payers. Encouraging greater use by concessionary travel passholders supports overall patronage growth, and assists operator revenue. However it does not itself add to the farebox, and it increases the cost to SYMCA. It may also have a limited impact on congestion. To address objectives around financial sustainability and congestion, marketing may be best directed specifically at new fare-paying passengers and peak time (commuting) travel.

In the longer term, part of the marketing strategy is to develop a single South Yorkshire network identity/brand. While this could potentially be the TSY brand, there is a case for completely new branding, for example as has recently been developed in Greater Manchester.

The Enhanced Partnership has created a sub-group to develop a marketing and communications strategy that supports the Enhanced Partnership’s objectives. SYMCA will lead on the elements that will impact multiple modes, like the network brand.

Customer support and participation

A number of EP priorities relate specifically to supporting and involving passengers. This includes a common complaints procedure, and specific measures such as introducing a last bus taxi guarantee scheme and no quibble compensation, to provide reassurance to passengers. These latter two have been highlighted as priorities with the potential for quick implementation.

There are also commitments to involve passengers more closely in the planning of the network and the EP itself through participative processes. This includes the development of a Transport Promise that will replace the current SYPTE Customer Charter and reflect the aspirations of the EP. The EP Forum is taking forward this initiative, and expects to report back to the EP Board at its next meeting.