

Your reference: HDS/KG

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Dear Councillor Sykes

Talking Bus and Tram Stops

Thank you for getting in touch with me on this very important issue.

As you may appreciate, TfGM continue to be highly pro-active in the area of making travel easier for people with visual impairments in Greater Manchester. This is an area that is well understood and appreciated by TfGM, and needs to be addressed in a customer-focused way, that ensures that our interventions are both scalable and financially sustainable.

For example, earlier this year TfGM teamed up with the charity Henshaws (which supports people with sight loss) to design new, free products for registered blind or partially sighted people, including a fluorescent orange pass wallet and a yellow bus hailer.

To help make travel less challenging, the new products indicate to bus drivers that visually impaired passengers may require additional assistance, prompting them to offer this instantly, and also reduce the anxiety of sight-loss passengers waiting at a busy stop – as they know the driver of the bus they are looking for will see them and make sure they stop and get them on board.

The bus hailer is a flip pad that consists of bold and embossed numbers and letters, with the braille version underneath. Users select the number of their bus and display it to oncoming traffic, signalling to the bus driver that they need to stop. The word 'bus' can be displayed if users are unsure of their bus number.

The free bus hailers and orange pass wallets are available in Travelshops in bus stations across Greater Manchester and from Henshaws. Both products come in clear plastic wallets to withstand all weather conditions and have instructions for use in braille and text. The launch of this new solution was applauded by Debbie Abrahams MP, Shadow Minister for Disabled People.

What is central to our approach is close and direct engagement with people who are affected, and with organisations that represent this user group, including the Royal National Institute for The Blind (RNIB) who have been doing some great work in this area in identifying technology solutions that can be achieved through new wearable technology, that can remove the need for physical installations of audio equipment – which would prove prohibitively expensive and a challenge to maintain if applied across our whole 12,000 bus stop estate.

The CityVerve ‘talkative bus stops’ project you refer to aims to explore how the issues raised in your letter could lead to improved information at bus stops to enable and empower visually impaired people (as well as people with other disabilities) to make a journey independently. The grant award of £10 million was made by InnovateUK, with strict rules on how the money can be spent.

The main constraint is that the funding is for research & development only, and as such cannot be used for capital delivery. Rather the funding will enable TfGM to identify the most appropriate solutions to problems identified by our customers, which will lead to the development of a suitable business case for future investment in solutions.

TfGM consults with the Disability Design Reference Group (DDRG) to help TfGM (and delivery partners) fully understand the barriers disabled people encounter when making a journey by public transport, and it is intended that the DDRG will engage with the concept solution developed out of ‘talkative bus stops’ once a prototype has been designed in terms of this element of the City Verve project. As yet, we do not know whether the solution will be a physical installation or wearable technology, or a combination of the two.

In terms of an opportunity to research the potential for audio announcements at busy bus stops, we plan to make good use of our ‘Bus Stops of The Future’ trial site. This is a ‘super shelter’ at Piccadilly Paton Street, the £300,000 pilot scheme that has been funded by the Department for Transport, and created by France-based architectural studio Aurel Design Urbain, with support by designer Peter Saville. We are trialling digital visual information at this shelter at present but not audio, and so CityVerve ‘talkative bus stops’ presents the perfect opportunity to do so.

CityVerve ‘talkative bus stops’ is still in its early planning stages, and we’d welcome you, and any other stakeholders you would recommend, to be involved with the concept design stage of the project.

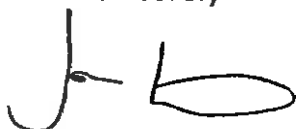
In relation to audio and visual equipment on buses, last week we launched automatic audio and visual announcements on our free Metroshuttle buses, which provide information to passengers on aspects of the journey such as the route plan and the next stop, as well as places of interest and nearby businesses.

From a national perspective, TfGM expect the issue of provision of audio and visual information on buses to be part of the “Bus Services Bill” debate as it reaches its conclusions in the Lords. The Bill, currently before Parliament, seeks to amend the framework for the delivery of bus services in England outside of London and provide for improvements in ticketing, open data and bus registration. Hopefully this will provide for positive action in relation to this important area and TfGM are monitoring progress on this with interest.

It is worth noting that on the Metrolink network, audio visual information is already provided. At stops, visual passenger information displays detail the next tram and destination, and on arrival of the tram at the stop, an audio announcement is made on tram when the doors open which announces route and destination to enable passengers to board the right tram.

On Metrolink platforms, there is a tactile paving boarding point indicator to enable disabled people to know where to stand so when a tram arrives, the doors will open in front of them, and thus in the case of visually impaired people they can make use of on-board audio announcements to board the right tram to their destination.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Lamonte', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr Jon Lamonte
Chief Executive