

Bus routes are not usually considered until late in the development programme



City design with buses in mind

Nick Small and Mike Watson analyse how transit-oriented development can be made to work.

Policy and professional practice in the UK has sought to prioritise sustainable modes, including public transport use, for over 20 years. Nevertheless, certainly outside London, translating these national planning and transport policy themes into successful outcomes has often proved to be elusive.

Now, when levels of development are being demanded that exceed anything achieved for a generation, there has been increasing recognition recently that the development sector must become much more adept at designing in high-quality bus services. Evidence across the UK shows that ambitious housing delivery targets cannot be accommodated without achieving a step-change in the use of all sustainable modes from existing and new developments.

Transport, planning and urban design experts have become increasingly concerned about the car dependency of recent development. This frustration is

shared by bus operators, in particular Stagecoach, which has frequently found itself being unable to serve developments in the way that was intended or at the high standards to which the company aspires.

Bus networks are inherently flexible, allowing them to evolve synchronously as development takes place. Bus services lend themselves well to extension or other improvements, in a manner that can be more closely aligned with population and employment growth than other mass transit modes. Unfortunately, this flexibility has led to an assumption that bus services and supporting roadside infrastructure need not be considered at the outset of development planning, as they will find their own level. For this and other reasons, making provision for efficient and attractive bus services is too often underplayed, if not forgotten. Given the many conflicting influences that successful urban design must address, the result is that many largescale developments have unwittingly designed out high-quality bus services.



Outside London, the vast majority of bus services are run commercially, in a deregulated environment where passenger revenue (including concessionary fare reimbursement) entirely sustains the services provided, with no direct local or central government subsidy. The bus industry constantly seeks to provide the public with reliable, frequent, direct and cost-effective bus routes. Design of the built environment to facilitate this is an essential condition, if modal shift from cars towards public transport is to be achieved.

National and local guidance has consistently steered designers to create places that prioritise sustainable travel modes. Design approaches have been entirely recalibrated to resolve the conflict between reducing the dominance of the car and slowing traffic speeds, and prioritise active travel. However, the guidance has not at the same time placed commensurate emphasis on allowing buses to make efficient progress. The application of these principles has led to a plethora of developments where bus services cannot offer the flexibility and convenience that is necessary to make them an attractive choice to residents. Ironically, the result has often been an exceptionally high level of car dependence.

Common features of such developments include:

- Tortuous alignment of the main streets providing for internal circulation, often combined with access strategies that do not permit buses to offer relatively direct and simple routes
- Road widths that do not allow two large vehicles to pass on key stretches, in many cases because tracking exercises are unrealistic, seriously aggravated by uncontrolled on-street parking
- Acute pressure on the highway from parking demand, aggravated by inadequate or poorly located parking provision; rear parking courts, a key tenet of PPG3-compliant design, have proven to be especially problematic
- Poor-quality roadside infrastructure, when provided (often only by retrofit) is not always sited to provide the optimal and readily understandable access to bus services from nearby homes, ideally well within 400m

The protracted build-out periods of largescale schemes compound these difficulties. Commencement and progress on many comprehensive planned

developments has often been slower than anticipated, despite the economic recovery. Once implemented, principal street connections that allow buses to penetrate new neighbourhoods are frequently not provided until late in the development programme, or until the end. Worse still, a trend is emerging where agreed measures to effect preferential access to buses via so-called bus gates into or within developments are delayed or abandoned, not least because of real or perceived issues with enforcement or adoption.

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In many cases, planning consents on the largest schemes have also been renegotiated on viability grounds. In so doing, a wide range of planning conditions or Section 106 obligations are often amended or dropped, many of which have a material bearing on how far effective public transport can be provided, and at what stage. Minor tweaks of master planning, and phasing, can have as big an influence on bus service provision as complete respecification of the access and movement strategy.

While multiple professional disciplines are involved in the planning and delivery of development, to date there could have been much more dialogue between them and the bus industry. Nor has the development sector's experience of attempts to engage with the bus industry always been straightforward, even with the skills of specialist transport planners. Planning timescales within the bus industry are typically much shorter than for development promoters, up to two years ahead, while for developers and local authority planners, the short term typically can involve up to five years hence, and local plans are required to look at least 15 years beyond the date of adoption. In contrast, input into planning submissions is often required within tight deadlines, a paradox that is not always well understood within the public transport industry.

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teams and local authority planners and transport officers. Until now, there has been no consistent guidance from the bus industry framed in language that is consistent with the local and national policy suite, while ensuring that the needs of bus operations are clearly spelt out.

Stagecoach, operating comprehensive local bus networks across the UK, has now backed up its specialist advisory service to developers, focused mainly in the Midlands and south of England, with generic advice to all those professionals involved in planning and bringing forward residential development in particular. Far from replacing national and local advice, the document: *Bus Services and Residential Development*, is aimed at distilling key elements of best practice, and pointing out some common, easily avoidable mistakes.

Rather than focusing on the exceptional, the guidance takes as its starting point, that setting out key principles that can consistently inform development planning and design, would go a very long way to help facilitate the best possible bus services, irrespective of the locality, context or development mix. Even this cannot entirely substitute for timely and well-informed discussion. Stagecoach is urging developers and planners to approach them early, ideally pre-application, for specialist input alongside local authority officers, to inform effective plan-making and exemplary urban design.

Looking to the future, a much more consistent level of buy-in from bus operators in the planning and development process ought to offer all stakeholders a much higher level of confidence that rebalancing patterns of development and urban design towards more sustainable modes can become a reality, not merely a worthy aspiration. ☹

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