

Sustainable Transport & Active Travel Summit – transcript

Joel Mitchell, Stagecoach: Connected travel, visions & strategies

I'm Joel. I'm the managing director for Stagecoach Southeast. I love Eastbourne, absolutely cracking town. I was driving in this morning and just observing the beauty of the place it's a gorgeous town we're very happy to be here.

We have a very Progressive County Council we have a very progressive Town Council and we're lucky in that respect. The reason I was able to observe how gorgeous it was is because I was stuck in traffic which reminded me that for every hour a bus is on the road it needs an additional 10 minutes to cover the same distance as it did 10 years ago and that's one of the challenges that we face.

The other observation was that I drive a fully electric car and that lateness has now meant that I couldn't risk leaving the car in the one decent charging point at the DeVere hotel. There is a personal cost and some of this behavioural change that Patrick just talked re the trains, and you heard from Caroline this morning, this is about personal cost and making a sacrifice and if we are going to see that shift you must accept that sometimes things might be slightly suboptimal in the short term for long term gain.

A bit like Patrick, I'm a career Railway Man. I had 20 years in rail, and this is my 25th year in transport and I was doing well really enjoying the railway had a good career and I had a bit of time on Southern Railway.

I got a call one day which said, 'do you fancy putting your name in the hat to be the managing director of a stagecoach in the Southeast where I live?' I lived in Kent, and did I fancy a move to Sussex? I did some research, rode on a few buses, didn't fully enjoy the experience and was thinking, are buses really my thing? Just before I turned it down, I Googled the value of buses to society and I don't know why I did that particularly, other than I don't really like. want to spend all my career not doing something that makes a difference and I found something by a company called Greener Journeys. A lady called Claire Haigh (<https://greener-vision.com/author/claire/>) School of Economics there's some really good stuff in there and the one that really stuck out for me is that one second from the end where essentially She says a 10% Improvement in local bus service connectivity and the 10% most socially deprived areas we've heard a lot about today, actually ends up saving 2500 years of life which blew my mind actually. If you're thinking I want to do something that makes a difference here to society look at all the other KPIs as well linked to public transport and that it absolutely drives, in terms of societal environmental economic benefit. I think it was Bill Shankly once said it's not a matter of life and death it's more important than that and I feel to me that you can apply that to the transport sector. So, I'm chuffed to bits to be here today, to raise the awareness of how important the bus service is to a community. Stagecoach Southeast, we operate in this area and our Topline numbers don't read that great, I won't go into the numbers, but you can all find them online.

I joined in March 2019 and like Norman said, almost within a month of turning up I realized the entire bus industry was largely doomed and had been dying for 10 years. I thought oh my god what have I done why have I left the railway for this? We very quickly grabbed together everything we

possibly could, customer surveys, staff surveys, transport surveys and built ourselves a five-year strategic plan for Change and growth. Discovered it is about getting away from this thing where you put a bus on the road and they will come, that is dead, that is obsolete, it's a terrible way to try and run a bus company and instead of trying to understand why people want or don't want to use the bus. We got very excited about our five-year plan, launched it in January 2020 had six weeks of it and then walked straight into covid and that's been the last five years.

If I'm honest with you, I feel really hard done by and very cheated off, because I've had no chance to get into the stuff that we wanted to get into until about 3 months ago where I feel now, like we're back in control and in command of what we want to do which is create a bus network and a bus service that's right for the people. A service that people want to use, we're very, very fortunate here we've got a great County Council and they have been really brave and you've heard from Craig (County Council Officer), do not underestimate how incredibly important and critical the bus service improvement plan is.

It's an exciting time for me and my team. I feel aggrieved because we are 5 years behind where we wanted to be at, at this point in time. And the industry is probably 10 years behind where it should have been for all the very good reasons we've heard about today.

The key thing I want to share with you now is this. We have a new owning group DWS stagecoach which has been around for about 40 years and last year DWS bought stagecoach from Brian Sowter and Ann Gloag, who were the brother and sister partnership that created stagecoach and this owning group are great. You know when you hear you're being taken over by an asset fund you think oh dude where's this going? However, they have bought us because they want to invest in our environmental credentials, so they have a huge Capital program over the coming years, and we have been very fortunate to secure from DWS 14 million pound of capital investment to Electrify hopefully our 99 route and also our 11a potentially. The reason why we've got that is because of Craig and his BSIP and DWS's intent. They've come together at the right time it's perfect. Loads and loads and loads of local authorities and operators, not just Stagecoach operations, but other groups as well have asked for investment. Within our organization, we had to get in the top 25 of all of the bids to get DWS to commit to give us our 14 million quid and we came 25th. Frankly it doesn't matter if we're 25th or first because it's now down to the DfT to award it to the local Authority. So we've done our bit and we're able to invest we hope, depending on what the DfT do.

One of the challenges for us, and this is why I'm here today, one of the points I need to make and I feel this is going to be very controversial, one of the reasons why DWS puts in the top 25 is for the other bits there stage coach prioritizes the availability of complimentary measures and one of the things that's got us into that top 25 is the bus lane in Seaside. That is controversial okay and I'm coming on to this final point in a minute because we've talked about it already. Lots of good stuff to come. We're well up for doing better in Eastbourne, we think we've let the customer base down here for a long period of time, we're desperate to try and make it work. This time last year Eastbourne (Stagecoach) was forecast to lose about million pounds. We're not here to make a load of money, we can't run at a loss because, although we've got charitable aims, Stagecoach is not a charity so we have to try and make the economics of the bus industry work for the good of the environment, our communities, society and everybody else that we want to try and serve.

Last bit to close with, can anybody in the room tell me what Einstein's definition of insanity is?

Spot on, doing the same thing over and over again expecting a different outcome. So, I was asked by Jill who invited me to present today, what do we need? What do I need? I need your help and your

help comes in the form of Bravery because now is the time, if we're going to make this shift, as I stand here today my competitor isn't Christian and his mob at Brighton and Hove, nor is it Govia Thames link Railway, nor is it cycling, nor is it walking, they are complimentary parts of a full system transport system. What we need to do together, what we need to do is get more cars off the road, okay, and the bus can help with that. So, I ask you help me, help us all, to reduce car use, 56% of emissions in the transport sector comes from private car, one double-decker bus takes up to 75 cars off the road. If every single new car that we bought from tomorrow is an electric vehicle, it will still take 15 years to get diesel cars out of the car fleet! Okay so if we want to actually deliver on our environmental credentials and get to Net Zero like we've been talking about, we have to make a brave change, we have to get rid of our cars, or drive them less. Thank you very much for listening.