

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON

BRIEFING NOTE

Subject: Response to UCL Initial Assessment of London Bus Driver Mortality from COVID-19 Report

Date: 27 July 2020

1 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide a response to the UCL Initial Assessment of London Bus Driver Mortality from COVID-19 Report.

2 Overview

- 2.1 The 10 bus Operators who are contracted to run Buses in London on behalf of TfL are the employers of bus drivers and as such are primarily responsible for their pay and conditions. However, TfL does set contractual standards and requirements, and provide guidance in certain areas, for example customer experience as it is important that there is a consistent approach across the London Network. When we are operating in business as usual circumstances TfL Bus Operations Senior Management Team meet with the MDs of the Bus Operators bi-monthly to discuss common issues, known as the Bus Operator Forum. There is also a quarterly meeting specifically to discuss Safety.
- 2.2 As the scale and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic became apparent, a regular daily call was set up between TfL Bus Operations Directorate and the Bus Operators to discuss key issues and mitigation activity across the bus network. These regular COVID calls commenced on the 17th March following the first announcement from Central Government that where possible people should work from home. However, they had been preceded by discussion on this subject at specifically organised meetings and scheduled Operator fora. The frequency of the tripartite meetings between TfL, bus operators and Unite the Union were also increased to weekly to ensure a collaborative approach to issues. These meetings were in addition to those held at an Operator level between the company and their local Unite representatives and Full Time Officers.
- 2.3 There was very little clear guidance initially on how to best mitigate the risk of infection. TfL and the bus operators followed and responded to the official advice from PHE that primarily focused on hand hygiene. As the pandemic progressed, there were conflicting views of potential mitigations and interventions that could prevent the spread of COVID-19 or lower the risk, some of which were being used elsewhere globally. These were discussed, and TfL were clear with the Bus Operators from the beginning that TfL would only recommend appropriate measures following PHE advice. As PHE advice changed over time, TfL guidance to operators reflected this.

3 The COVID-19 Response

- 3.1 TfL welcomes the recommendations in the UCL report and has outlined below how we are implementing them or intend to implement these recommendations.
- 3.2 Whilst there are some areas where the operators as the employers should and did take the lead, there were other decisions that needed to be implemented pan London to provide consistency for customers and / or because TfL set and control most aspects of the service requirements. While operators introduced a number of interventions on an individual basis to mitigate risk to their employees, those most commonly deployed are listed below. These interventions were introduced following regular dialogue with Unite the Union full time officials at a tripartite level, as well as within each organisation with the Unite local representatives and Officers. In addition to the TfL/Operator daily COVID calls, Operators held their own extensive briefings for executive and management teams to cascade the latest information.
- 3.3 A comprehensive list of the interventions undertaken by TfL and the bus operators can be found in Appendix 1.
- 3.4 To protect employees who may have been most at risk from COVID-19, from 17 March, TfL funded enhanced sick pay for anyone suffering from COVID-19 symptoms or were self-isolating for up to 14 days because someone in their household had symptoms. This included bringing the entitlement for payments forward to Day 1 in most cases, and supporting an increase in rates for those who would otherwise only get Statutory Sick Pay.
- 3.5 Operators furloughed both staff who were shielding and those living with people who were shielding. From the 8th of April, The Commissioner of Transport, Mike Brown, granted special leave with pay to vulnerable employees – those with underlying conditions which do not require them to shield in accordance with PHE guidance, but were at a higher risk from coronavirus. This helped to ensure that vulnerable employees did not feel compelled to come in to work for financial or contractual reasons. He wrote to the bus operators to urge them to do the same, thus ensuring a similar protection for those vulnerable employees within bus companies.
- 3.6 Even prior to Covid, bus operators take the health and wellbeing of their employees very seriously and have individually introduced a wide range of initiatives most appropriate to their workforce. Further detail is available in Appendix 2.

4 Recommendations from UCL

Recommendation 1

- 4.1 Many bus drivers are at high risk of COVID due to the occupation of bus driving and proximity to the public, their age, sex, pre-existing health conditions, BAME and area of residence. All bus drivers and particularly those with multiple risk factors need enhanced protection through early interventions on ill-health prevention and reducing exposure during epidemics. Companies have taken a wide range of actions, but not at the same pace. As passenger numbers increase again, it will be important to have confidence that the planned actions are likely to be effective, are led by the scientific evidence and are implemented simultaneously across bus companies with clear recommendations for early adoption of measures in the event of a second spike. There is scope for TfL to develop clear guidance on rapid and simultaneous implementation of measures in the event of spikes of infection in London or increased infection rates among staff.

TfL Response

- 4.2 During the early days of the pandemic there was limited knowledge about how the virus was transmitted and the effectiveness of interventions to reduce the risk of infection. Official guidance was often unclear or changed over time as the science improved our understanding of transmission and preventative measures. This led to interventions being trialled or introduced by different operators at different times sometimes in addition to official guidance and without a clear scientific basis at the time (e.g. temperature testing and holes on assault screens).
- 4.3 Phase two of the UCL study will look at the role of occupation in the transmission of COVID-19 and will further our understanding of the efficacy of different preventative measures. A further detailed piece of research has also been commissioned by TfL with UCL to understand the fluid dynamics of air within the drivers cab to further inform preventative measures and will be published soon. A clearer understanding of the COVID-19 virus, the efficacy of different preventative measures and a set of TfL-led plans for deployment will ensure confidence in protecting drivers from a second spike. We will review our emergency planning guidance taking into account what we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic which would include mechanisms to assess our most vulnerable colleagues.

Recommendation 2

- 4.4 BAME staff, especially those living in poorer areas, are more at risk of becoming severely ill and dying from COVID-19. The recommendations in PHE's recently published report "Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups" should be implemented. In particular that employers should have strategies to create healthy and supportive workplaces (within and outside the health service) that have zero tolerance for discrimination and empower BAME staff to raise concerns about occupational risk and safety.

TfL Response

- 4.5 TfL welcomes this recommendation; all operators have a zero-tolerance policy to discrimination and channels for anonymous reporting. For cases that cannot be resolved through the normal channels, there are a number of escalation methods available including via Unite H&S reps within operators, TfL, and CIRAS, the national Confidential Incident Reporting and Analysis Service.

Recommendation 3

- 4.6 TfL's occupational risk assessment tool should be used by London bus companies to identify those most vulnerable - with the oversight of TfL- to reduce the risk of employee's exposure to and acquisition of COVID-19.

TfL Response

- 4.7 TfL are committed to reduce the risk of exposure to coronavirus for all employees, particularly those that are vulnerable. TfL has developed an occupational risk assessment tool that has been made available to all operators to enable them to identify those most vulnerable to COVID-19. Some operators already have their own assessment tool at Group level and have begun to employ these for those staff who have requested one. TfL will work collaboratively with all operators to share learnings and assure consistent application of the risk assessment tools.

Recommendation 4

- 4.8 The contribution of pre-existing health conditions, known to increase the severity of COVID-19, suggests a need to introduce criteria for staff by TfL and bus operators to be offered additional protection. This would enable TfL and bus companies to make arrangements to protect those now known to be more vulnerable, as understanding of the disease increases. Improved engagement with health promotion initiatives and uptake of preventive interventions is also essential, to reduce the risk of diseases such as hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

TfL Response

- 4.9 TfL are committed to protect those that are at a higher risk from coronavirus. Phase two of the UCL study will look at the role of occupation in the transmission of COVID-19 and will investigate any factors that lead to differences in infection and death rates across different operators. The report will consider if any further interventions are needed and in particular how to refine the criteria to limit the exposure of bus drivers from future occupational exposure to COVID-19.

- 4.10 Drivers are not required to disclose health conditions to their employer that do not affect their ability to drive safely and the medical that is undertaken as part of getting their licence or as mandated for renewal, is confidential. Bus operators should ensure that their OH providers are able to quickly identify those at increased risk so that they can be given appropriate support in case of a future pandemic and in order to provide them with health promotion initiatives.
- 4.11 We will build on the existing Health Bus to encourage prevention, diagnosis and treatment for diseases such as hypertension as highlighted in section 5.4.

5 Next Steps

- 5.1 TfL and Operators will work with UCL to refine the remit of Phase 2 of this work to provide an evidence led approach to future action.
- 5.2 TfL will review our emergency planning procedures to ensure we can learn lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that the bus operating fraternity as a whole in London is better prepared for a second wave or future pandemics. This will focus on introducing the right interventions at the right time and how to protect the most vulnerable employees.
- 5.3 We will continue to learn from research and advice from PHE, central government and other academic institutions, and adapt our plans accordingly.

6 Appendices

Appendix 1 – COVID-19 Response Interventions

TfL led Interventions

Restricted access to front seats

- 6.1 Not all bus models have seats directly behind or opposite the driver but where they do, these seats were cordoned off in mid-April on advice from TfL as a precautionary measure, although some operators had already started doing this. There was no official advice from PHE on this issue.

Middle Door Boarding

- 6.2 Middle Door Boarding only became feasible once lockdown started due to the significant reduction in passenger numbers and was undertaken before the results of the UCL research into fluid dynamics and transmission were known. At the time other cities across Europe were taking a similar approach.
- 6.3 Following discussion with both employees and Unite within the operators, and at tripartite level, a week's trial at Walworth garage was conducted to ensure it would work operationally. The trial proved successful and the entire bus network was converted to middle door boarding on the 20th April. The thinking behind this was that removing the need for customers to pass by the drivers when they board would decrease the risk to the bus drivers. At the time there was no evidence to support this.

Other Vehicle Interventions

Changes to assault screens

- 6.4 The speech holes in the driver assault screens were identified as a potential risk for transmission of the virus – at the time specifically from the risk of spitting. Operators started to cover over these holes, and later it was agreed this would be done across the fleet.
- 6.5 To establish and minimise the remaining risk to the driver from customers, TfL asked UCL to undertake a detailed piece of research to establish what changes needed to be made to assault screens (if any) to further decrease the risk of viral transmission for bus drivers. This work took some time due to the time it takes to complete computer modelling and some issues with the super computer that generates this work being hacked.
- 6.6 In parallel with this work operators were asked to begin to trial solutions to cover other gaps in the assault screens. As the evidence emerged that closing off the gaps around the assault screens would reduce risk, TfL asked all bus operators to close off these gaps as quickly as possible. This work was completed over a several weeks as some bus models were more difficult to seal than others and supply of some materials such as polycarbonate were pressurised by significantly increased demand from other business sectors.

Daily Antiviral Cleaning

- 6.7 This was introduced by all operators phased in over the week commencing 9th March, as chemicals could be obtained. Touchpoints in depots, at meal relief facilities and within bus saloons are sprayed and wiped daily following their normal clean to kill any remaining virus.

Enhanced Cleaning

- 6.8 Enhanced cab cleaning regimes were introduced by Operators at different times through March and April, depending on how rigorous the existing standard cleaning regimes were. Electro-static spraying / Fogging using similar anti-viral products was introduced by several operators as an extra measure in addition to touch point cab cleaning although there was no evidence to suggest this was any more effective than cleaning with anti-viral products.

Driver Interventions

Communications to Drivers

- 6.9 Some Operators started COVID-19 related communication with their drivers as early as the end of January, with the majority providing information at the start of March as the risk and extent of the pandemic became clear. This overlapped with the much wider awareness of COVID-19 from the media and government.

HR policies and advice

- 6.10 HR policies were, where appropriate, updated as appropriate and followed up further through driver communications to ensure a consistency of approach. These were updated further as more information became available.

Hand Sanitiser and Wipes

- 6.11 It was clear from PHE that good hand hygiene was an essential preventative measure from the outset. Hand sanitiser was identified as a mitigation, especially for locations where hand washing wasn't possible. However, hand sanitiser was in extremely short supply from March, and despite ordering large volumes, most deliveries for bus operators were diverted to NHS and care organisations. TfL and the operators collaborated in sourcing sufficient volumes from the end of March and they were distributed to drivers as quickly as possible.
- 6.12 Antiviral wipes were even more problematic to source, but became available in sustainable volumes from mid to late April.

Premises

6.13 Access to toilets at stands

- 6.14 Some routes rely on toilets in public premises such as cafes and shops which were closed with no notice as a result of lockdown. TfL and the Operators worked together to ensure temporary solutions could be found, installing temporary toilets or rescheduling breaks.

Enhanced cleaning of premises

- 6.15 This was implemented in line with the enhanced cleaning of vehicles from the second week of March.

Adapted premises/social distancing

- 6.16 The first operators began to make changes in March, and social distancing was in place in depots quickly. This continues to change/be adapted as guidance from PHE changes.

Interventions that were contrary to, or in addition to, PHE Advice

- 6.17 There was debate over interventions that were not part of PHE advice. TfL asked the operators to continue to follow the PHE advice.

Masks

- 6.18 The wearing of face masks was not initially advised by PHE in order to protect supplies for those working in healthcare settings. This advice changed in May 2020, at which point TfL advised that non-medical face coverings could and should be made available to drivers by operators. They remain available today, and whilst mandated in some circumstances, it is discretionary to wear them whilst in the cab due to the extensive work to seal the gaps around assault screens and speech holes now offers the driver and customers enhanced protection (See 6.4)

Temperature Testing

- 6.19 Even though it was not advised by PHE, one operator introduced temperature testing against TfL advice in mid-April, and another introduced a small short-term test at the request of Unite, and reported on that to TfL and the union. To establish whether temperature testing can be an effective mitigation, an independent trial of temperature testing at the six largest operators commenced on 22nd June.

Other

H&S/Union Reps stood down

- 6.20 All operators stood down union representatives from regular duties from March and April to help with communications for drivers, conduct joint risk assessments, assure cleaning regimes on premises and vehicles and review and agree work to modify driver cabs. Representatives also played a crucial role in ensuring drivers were socially distancing in communal areas and that formal lines of communication remained open and clear.

Cleaning Inspections

- 6.21 Existing checks carried out by managers were supported by the stood down TU reps linked to the above.

Appendix 2 – Driver Health and Well Being

Fitness

- 6.22 Many examples are available where operators have sought to encourage more healthy lifestyles such as discounted gym membership, cycle to work schemes, exercise videos, weight loss programmes and healthy eating options in canteens/vending machines.

Mental Health

- 6.23 Operators have also looked at ways to encourage employees to discuss mental health including free counselling and guidance through Employee Assistance Programmes, mental health awareness training for managers and Health and Wellbeing champions in garages.

The Health Bus

6.24 A tripartite forum between TfL, Unite the Union and bus operators was established before the pandemic and rolled out a Health Bus to deliver an occupational health service to bus workers. The service provides a rapid health diagnosis in an easy to understand format that drivers can access at their work environment free of charge. The assessment measures height, weight, body mass index, body fat %, blood pressure, heart rate and hydration level. Lifestyle factors including sleep, smoking, relaxation, home life, work life, stress, diet, alcohol and exercise are also assessed. Following their screening, the Occupational Health Technicians will be on hand to provide each employee with guidance and lifestyle advice. This initiative launched in November 2019 and is available for all operators to use.

Challenges

6.25 While health and wellbeing initiatives are introduced with the best of intentions, they are not always well received. Several operators have provided healthy food options in canteens only to receive complaints and others have closed canteens completely due to preferable options available elsewhere. Providing gyms in garages has also been explored but would carry with it issues of liability and drivers may well prefer the flexibility of discounted gym membership to exercise away from work.