



COVID-19 exit strategies for public transport authorities

This synopsis brings together findings and takeaways from EMTA webinars on the topic of COVID-19 resilience and recovery held in October 2020. Interactive discussions on the role of public transport authorities during the 2020 EMTA general meeting in November 2020 have further deepened and enriched these insights. This document sums up main challenges and opportunities coming from COVID-19 impacts for public transport planning and management. By identifying areas of intervention PTA's can fulfil their primary role and possibly mitigate impacts from this COVID-19 pandemic and be more resilient to future service disruptions.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND TRENDS

Public transport operation

Increased financial pressure

Despite low passenger numbers due to travel restrictions and general uncertainty, most cities and regions had retained a high public transport service level to provide safe conditions for customers. As a result, public transport operators are faced with reduced revenue but a stable level of fixed costs. On top of this, extra costs are incurred for special measures, cleaning and disinfection, safe distancing provisions, special shuttle services, etc.

Uncertainty for staff

The needed cost savings implied by financial pressure discussed comes with the risk of job losses within the public transport sector. This uncertainty may manifest itself in social actions. It may also make a career in public transport less attractive in the near future.

Public mindset

Increased cautiousness for health and safety

As a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic people show greater concern about the safe use of public facilities incl. public transport. This uncertainty has been increased in some cities by negative travel advice from public authorities and led to a loss of trust.

Renewed appreciation for things previously taken for granted

The currently required distancing and remote activities highlighted the value of being able to be physically together. The reduction of traffic as experienced in many cities made people realise how pollutive, noisy and space-consuming traffic can be.

Awareness of crowds and density

The general intention to keep a distance and avoid crowds also leads to an increased interest in cultural and leisure offers outside the cities. If the need for safe distancing continues, this might lead to an increasing interest to live outside the cities.



Regular customer surveys carried out by HSL (Helsinki) during the Corona pandemic revealed new passenger concerns:

- **Crowds** in public transport, which may make it difficult to maintain a safe distance;
- The **behaviour** of fellow passengers, not respecting health-related rules or travel while they are tested positive;
- The **cleanliness** of public transport vehicles, especially seats and high-touch areas, such as poles, handrails and buttons.



Economy

Audience- and crowd-dependent business sectors came to a stop

Most locations, such as restaurants, leisure attractions or event facilities have to limit their capacity, some even have to close temporarily. The continued loss of business income may lead to loss of jobs once government support finishes.

Uncertain business perspective in public transport

A lack of clarity in public subsidizing leads to the delay of formal tender procedures and more temporary contract agreements. This uncertainty may lower the attractiveness of private operators for investors. For the time being, the situation is more stable for operators in gross cost contracts.

Location independence

Increase of remote activities

Most organisations succeeded to set up efficient remote working for a substantial share of white-collar staff. People enjoy more location independence and want to continue- at least partly. Also, universities in some cities are offering online lessons only.

Shift to home-centred processes

Travel restrictions lead to more online shopping and an increase of delivery and pick-up services where possible - bringing goods to people instead of people to goods. As that development leads to more freight traffic in city, city logistics becomes more important.

Mobility

Dispersion of passenger flows

With more remote working commuter trips see the biggest reduction in passenger numbers in comparison with leisure travel. This shift results in more dispersed travel patterns at more individual time slots and more diverse routes. The current restrictions reduce the distances travelled and bring more focus on the immediate neighbourhood where people live.

Lower peaks

A more flexible organisation of education and working with staggered starting and finishing times for schools and companies results in lower peak demand and better spread of public transport usage.

More active transport modes used

The share of non-motorised modes has increased and includes longer walking and cycling distances. As a result, the option to take a bike on trains becomes more important.

2 IMPLICATIONS ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Challenges

Financial pressure due to low passenger numbers and high costs

There is the risk of a downward spiral of lower demand and lower affordable service level. Public transport services temporarily closed down or lines curtailed may not be re-opened.

The continuous uncertainty of demand recovery may lead to the stalling of investment projects.

Sector dependency on public subsidies

The continued need for funding, possibly higher due to slow demand recovery, may create a competition with claims from other sectors, such as health care, education, culture and hospitality etc.

Disappearance of quality transport operators from the market

There is an unclear basis for upcoming tenders, the COVID-19 impact on travel demand makes it hard to anticipate the correct levels for 10+ years. A lack of trust in security and stability of contracts may lead to transport operators refusing a participation in tenders and hence limit the choice for PTAs.

Changing mobility needs

Changing activity and more disperse travel patterns may no longer be in line with current networks and service offers. This needs to be taken into account when reviewing budgets and investment priorities.

Opportunities

Digitalisation

The need for safe distancing and contact reduction brought more openness and readiness of people to adopt digital offers and processes. Public transport authorities could benefit from this development. Smooth and trusted solutions do already exist for contactless payment. A solid data basis for passenger numbers, travel patterns and system performance may allow for more flexible and individualised service.

Sustainability still high on political agenda

Despite COVID-19 being the short-term priority for governments, sustainable urban development, environmental protection and climate change remain key concerns for political decision making. Highlighting the role of PT for sustainable mobility can help to ensure continuous attention and support allowing to benefit from investment in clean technology and active modes.

Having experienced cities with less car traffic and more space created for walking and cycling may also get the support of the public to re-distribute urban space permanently.

Changing mobility needs

Lower peaks are good for safe distancing and travel comfort, they allow better capacity management in public transport systems. Less capacity needed for the peak hours can help to provide a higher service quality at times and lines, where the demand has increased.

Community spirit of public transport stakeholders

As a reaction to the challenges coming from the COVID-19 crisis, in many cities there is still a sense of "we are all in the same boat" for all stakeholders, with high flexibility and readiness to fight back. The joint challenge caused a positive competition and readiness to learn from each other. Carrying that attitude onwards could help to develop more effective and efficient urban transport systems.

POTENTIAL AREAS FOR INTERVENTION

Precise measures and action plans of course depend on the local context, but group discussions identified a series of options that public transport authorities could use to address the threats and capitalize on opportunities identified above.

Agility

The initial response worked rather well in many authorities. Having a pandemic plan certainly is a plus, but also recent efforts to be prepared for security events, such as terrorism attacks, paid off and helped in downscaling and adapting of activities. Crisis exercises done in the past helped everybody in the organisation to know what to do.

“Our trained staff having built capacity and experience on how to act in case of emergency situations proved key to quickly adapt once the outbreak started and to shift into service contingency mode.”

Dorthe Noehr-Pedersen, CEO Movia



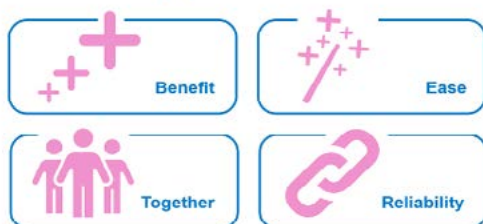
Quality standards

Quality standards represent an excellent option to address passengers' new concerns with health, safety and cleanliness. Harmonised efforts across all modes and service providers inspire trust and encourage people to use public transport. They also help to define appropriate service levels that should be maintained, even as demand recovery is currently hard to predict.

- Listening to customer concerns and incorporating their priorities is essential to show that you care about their wellbeing.
- Be visible with quality standards for cleanliness, as with appliance of active occupancy management using all modes, on platforms and in stations;
- Actively introduce policies to avoid and decongest the travel peaks and avoid movement in tight and badly ventilated spaces.

HSL has translated the findings of the recent customer surveys into a number of cornerstones that frame their efforts to provide quality public transport in Helsinki answering to customer concerns identified in regular passenger surveys.

Cornerstones of customer experience



Funding and financing strategies

One of the challenges is that public transport needs to compete with other fields of public interest for funding. A local/regional authority dedicated to public transport may focus future budget discussions more on adapting services and networks to achieve a workable solution for public transport, even consider investing in infrastructure and zero-emission fleets in order to support operators and make public transport an attractive option again.



An important element in achieving more resilience for transport authorities may be a diversification of income and the ability to raise or divert local taxes to contribute to the financial consolidation of public transport.”

Julian Ware, Transport for London.



Investment plans and strategies

Review investment projects, rethinking if they are still the most obvious and urgent ones to initiate in the current uncertain context. Examine if the planned projects still align with what recovering customers actually calls for:



Ruter, public transport authority for the counties of Oslo and Viken, awarded a tendered contract to Norgesbuss, resulting in a shift 96% of the entire fleet in Oslo south to carbon-neutrality by January 2022.



Foto: RUTER ©



With 109 new electric buses from January 2022 nearly 40 per cent of all buses driving in Oslo becomes electric. More electric buses lead to a decrease in climate emissions and cleaner air for all inhabitants.”

Bernt Reitan. Jensen, CEO Ruter

Ruter#

Data and digitalization

The recent months have proven that digital tools are very useful assets to increase the resilience of any organisation and are embraced by a larger share of people than ever before.

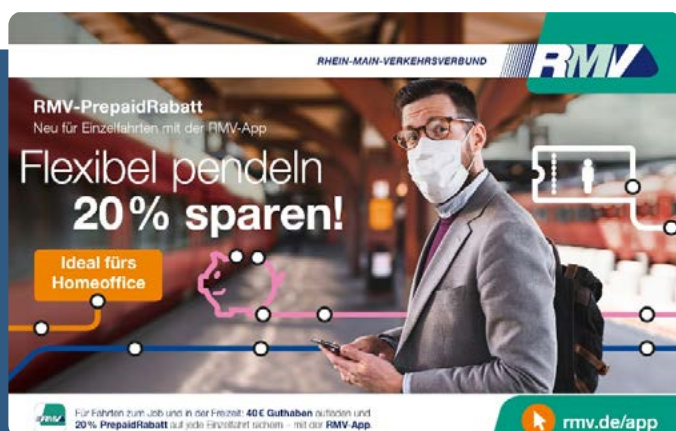
- Use available data sources and digital platforms to facilitate the planning and delivery of flexible public transport service in line with changes in demands;
- Develop smoother and more efficient internal processes for planning, scheduling, maintenance etc.
- Use digital technology to create attractive customer services and improve online contact;
- Think about the impact of digitalisation on job profiles and needed skills, develop new perspectives for employees and make working in public transport attractive for future talent.



RMV (Rhein-Main Verkehrsverbund) has included vehicle occupancy analytics into the existing passenger travel information app. This new feature aims to increase safety perception and passenger trust. Providing a real-time estimation of passenger numbers helps customers to make an informed decision for their journey.

New products and service offers

Review existing fare and tariff structure to assess their alignment with changed mobility needs. New fare products may provide more flexible offers to existing customers and attract new customer segments to public transport.



In order to provide an attractive option responding to less regular travel patterns and to benefit from the growing appetite for digital and touchless solutions, RMV has developed “PrepaidRabatt”, providing a discounted ticket price based on a pre-paid credit line only available as smartphone ticket.

Contractual relations

Review your risk management strategy and risk allocation with your operators, sorting out what's fair for either of those and what is reasonable and equitable to achieve an overall balance. Contracts need to stimulate quality and performance, but also anticipate the extent of allocated risks and responsibilities in case of extraordinary conditions.

A reduction in travel demand may remain for a longer time. The more either operator or authority depend on revenue, the higher their financial risk. Revenue-based net cost contracts put a high degree of risk onto the operator and may make them less attractive to bid for. Gross cost contracts expose the authority but may be more straightforward to avoid cash-flow problems for the operator, limiting budget discussions to the authority or government side.

Urban development

Harness the positive mindset coming from the experience of how pleasant living in a city is perceived without traffic pollution and create advantages for public transport.

- Re-design of urban space and adapt to walking and cycling will favour public transport
- Assess which temporary measures to facilitate walking and cycling might possibly be sustained as permanent (no-regret) measures that will benefit public transport.

Integration

Promote the growing role of active modes for health benefits and for sustainability reasons as they are natural partners for public transport. Explore new partnerships and cooperation models to provide better door-to-door services and smoother integration covering all modes.

Stakeholder coordination

The balance of transport demand and supply has been disrupted. Transport authorities can play a major role in re-installing this balance and shifting it towards sustainable modes at the same time.

- Reach out to businesses and other local stakeholders (schools, universities, cultural and public administrative institutions) to see how their visiting / opening hours can be adjusted to reduce travel peaks
- Support local transport service providers in understanding demand changes and adapting their routes and service frequencies where possible.



By negotiating staggered starting times of classes Dutch public transport authorities not only managed to flatten travel peaks once schools and universities reopened but also save operational costs by spreading of demand on the longer run.”

Ingrid De Bruijn, senior advisor Vervoerregio Amsterdam.





In order to encourage local businesses to promote sustainable urban mobility for their employees also during the COVID-19 pandemic, ATM (Barcelona) has implemented the concept of co-responsible mobility plans. Based on a review of the individual company context, the plan proposes measures, such as:

- Encouraging remote working and staggered start and exit times for employees
- Enhancing video conferencing and communication
- Managing schedules and visitor appointments to avoid peaks
- Promoting active modes of mobility
- Promoting public transport, implementing dedicated routes within industrial zones or areas with many working spaces.

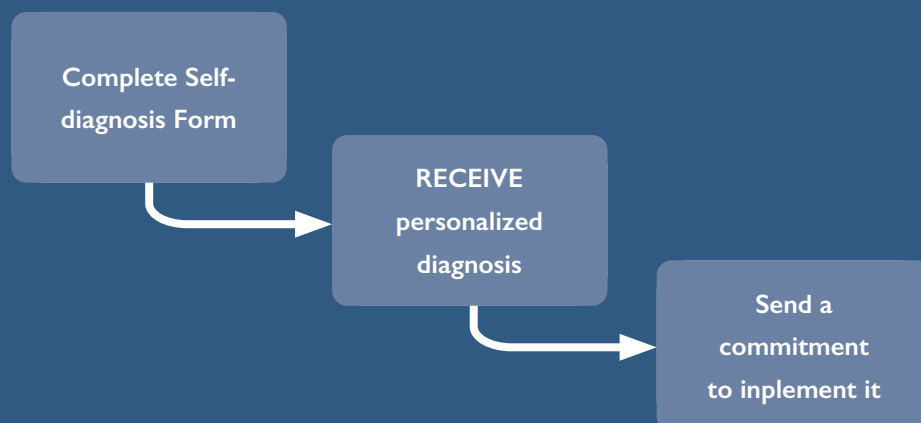
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QUÈ CAL FER?

PLANS DE MOBILITAT CORRESPONSABLE

Els passos per a l'elaboració dels plans de mobilitat corresponsable a empreses són:

- 1 Utilitzeu l'eina d'autodiagnosi contestant el formulari en línia
- 2 Anàlizeu i llegiu l'informe personalitzat que s'envia automàticament
- 3
- 4 L'ATM farà una valoració del pla i us farà la corresponent comunicació
- 5 S'incorporarà la seva empresa a l'apartat "Què és una empresa corresponsable?"



Outlook

This document aims to support transport authorities and their transport operating companies with some alternatives to effectively respond to the current challenges and devise strategies to move out of this pandemic. EMTA discussions helped to identify challenges as well as opportunities to create perspectives for recovery of business and build staff capacity to be more resilient to deal with such strong and impactful disruptions.

At the time of publishing this document, the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing and no evidence-based solutions nor clearly defined steps to move ahead are available. Yet, it is time to think ahead and we hope this synopsis can inspire public transport authorities and their stakeholders to rethink their roles and build capacity to adopt strategies and measures to reduce the impact of disruptions and be more resilient in a post-pandemic world.

Some say the pandemic can also be considered a blessing in disguise to usher new business propositions. This should not deceive us and make sure not to take this global pandemic for anything else than what it is: a major disruption, an accelerator and amplifier of change. It can shed light and bring innovative solutions within our reach, creating opportunities that perhaps were already present but not yet tried. By forcing us to review, re-think and re-assess, it can help to uncover weaknesses and reveal dormant strengths. Tackling these capacities can help an organisation to innovate and thus come out stronger.

Thank you

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Mr Christian Arntzen (SL Stockholm) and
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all presenting in webinar "Financial situation and risk allocation" (October 1, 2020)

Mr Lluís Alegre (ATM Barcelona),
Ms Mari Flink (HSL Helsinki Region Transport),
Mr Markus Huber (RMV, Rhein-Main Verkehrsverbund) and
Ms Dorine Duives (TU Delft)
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Ruud van der Ploeg, Secretary General

The logo for EMTA, consisting of the letters "EMTA" in a bold, white, sans-serif font, with a stylized blue and green swoosh underneath.