

Case Study:

# HOW IS MILTON KEYNES LEVELLING UP BY TRANSFORMING ITS BUS SERVICE?

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# ADEPT

The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport

## INTRODUCTION

**One of the 12 missions in the Levelling Up White Paper focussed on transport infrastructure, as part of the drive to boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards:**

*“By 2030, local public transport connectivity across the country will be significantly closer to the standards of London, with improved services, simpler fares and integrated ticketing”.*

The Department for Transport (DfT) published the *Bus Back Better* Strategy in 2021. This sought to make buses “more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better co-ordinated and cheaper”. It was underpinned by a commitment of £3 billion investment during the current Parliament to improve buses outside London.

A key part of the strategy is for local transport authorities (LTAs) to commit to establishing Enhanced Partnerships with bus service operators, or to be moving to franchising as part of a combined authority. LTAs were asked to implement ambitious bus priority schemes and draw up Bus Service Improvement Plans.

## BUS SERVICES IN MILTON KEYNES

**Milton Keynes is characterised by its grid system, with horizontal and vertical roads running alongside but not through residential estates. This creates challenges for the bus network as bus stops are not typically outside people’s homes, but are located on the main roads.**

Some bus services have withdrawn from operating services within estates because of the constraints of the design. Bus services can also be subject to delays due to the design of the road network. Outside the city centre, around 70% of the Milton Keynes is rural, with a network of villages.

Milton Keynes City Council (MKCC) and bus service operators publish a [Milton Keynes Public Transport Passenger Charter](#) each year. This sets out a commitment to deliver a safe, reliable and high-quality bus provision, including high frequency services for key routes, and demand responsible transport in low density areas.

The Council is also working to improve the contribution of public transport to its low carbon ambitions. A key part of this will be the delivery of new electric buses.

Milton Keynes successfully bid for funding for new electric buses under DfT’s Zero Emission Bus Regional Access (ZEBRA) scheme.



## THE INTRODUCTION OF DEMAND RESPONSIVE TRANSPORT

**The Covid-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on bus services, leading to a significant loss of income and significant changes in passenger travel.**

Milton Keynes had been planning to trial a Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) service in 2020, as an alternative to a subsidised bus service. However, the timing of the pandemic, and the contract renewal process for supported services meant that the Council took a decision to accelerate the transition.

From April 2020, 11 formally subsidised routes were replaced by a DRT service called MK Connect.

MK Connect is fully integrated with the local bus system and uses technology to direct passengers by phone or app to the most appropriate route. This could be a timetabled bus route or a journey via the demand responsive service.

If using the demand responsive service, passengers are picked up when a vehicle is available and dropped off at or close to their chosen destination, sharing the journey with passengers heading the same way.

Able bodied users are expected to walk up to 400m to their nearest stop and the service accepts concessionary passes in the same way as a bus. Passengers with a wheelchair or disability will be matched with a fully accessible vehicle.

The system is run under a private hire vehicle licence, using vehicles with less than 10 seats. The system is integrated with the wider bus service, so that users are sign posted to bus services if their journey can be completed by a traditional bus service.

MK Connect is popular with young people who can travel anywhere across Milton Keynes for a flat fare of £1.10. There are currently 1,300 rides a day on the system with an ongoing increase in users.

Half the fleet used by MK Connect is electric. The ambition is for all to be electric in the long term, but there is currently a shortage of electric vehicles and limited options for wheelchair accessible models.

MK Connect is now the largest DRT network in the UK. It is operating well, catering to 85% of net demand with the aim of reaching 95%.

MK Connect is paid for by the Council with some funding from S106 contributions. There is a net saving of c.£1 million from moving to the DRT model. One fully subsidised route remains, with two cross-boundary routes shared with other local authorities.



## WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW?

**MKCC is actively seeking to improve bus services across the Milton Keynes area through partnership working.**

The Council is in the process of preparing an Enhanced Partnership Plan to cover bus services across the council area.

The passenger transport team is focusing on improving bus journey times and is gathering data on the locations and bus services where there are frequent delays. The next step will be to obtain recommendations on engineering / highways solutions to improve the road infrastructure, and cost / benefit analysis.

The Council and bus service operators are also developing a marketing campaign to encourage people to use the bus and MK Connect service, recognising the fall in passenger numbers following the pandemic (currently c.70-75% of pre-pandemic levels).

This will include sending a timetable booklet out to all households, with details of where to obtain up to date information, as well as information about other transport options such as e-scooter hire.

## SUCCESS FACTORS

- **Disruption:** Covid-19 accelerated the transition to the DRT network – the pandemic hit at a time when 11 supported bus service contracts were due to be retendered.
- **Integration:** the DRT service is integrated with the bus service and other transport modes and is intended to ‘feed’ and support the bus service.
- **Financial stability:** the introduction of the DRT service has created a more sustainable financial model for local supported bus services, securing a net saving of £1 million per year.

## CONSTRAINTS

- **The nationwide shortage of drivers** and rising fuel costs are limiting the provision of bus services in Milton Keynes.
- **The MK Connect service does not use the former bus stops** due to the licence arrangements and limitations of current Traffic Regulation Orders. This is something that could change under future tender arrangements.
- **Rural Mobility Fund** was not granted to Milton Keynes. It would have been used to aid the transition from bus service to DRT service.
- **Bus Service Improvement Plan** implementation funding was not granted to Milton Keynes. This would have helped to accelerate work on highways and infrastructure improvements.

## LEARNING POINTS

- **Competition for funding** has reduced the speed at which councils can move to improve local services and infrastructure. The Levelling Up White Paper contained a specific mission to improve public transport but competitive bidding is an issue for local authorities.
- **Bus services are not directly controlled by councils.** Whilst the enhanced partnership model provides a means to strengthen the link between local authorities and the providers of bus services, it takes time to put in place. In this example, MKCC was able to intervene to provide an alternative model for the supported services that they funded.
- **Communications and marketing of local bus services** is essential to encourage a shift to public transport following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This should be supported by wider service planning to integrate different transport options and fares incentives.

## LINKS

MK Connect:

<https://ridewithvia.com/mk-connect/>

Milton Keynes Passenger Transport Charter:

<https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/highways/bus-rail-and-taxis/milton-keynes-public-transport-passenger-charter>

Confidence in using public transport during coronavirus (COVID-19) (DfT):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/confidence-in-using-public-transport-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

Bus Back Better (2021) Department for Transport:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bus-back-better>

Levelling Up the United Kingdom (Feb 2022), Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

*During 2022, the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport led a project to explore how local authorities are levelling up through action to address disparities in multiple domains - public health, local environmental quality, exposure to climate risk and socio-economic deprivation.*

*This project was in collaboration with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, the Association of Directors of Public Health, the Association of Directors of Children's Services and the Local Government Association, recognising the synergies between our work areas, and the links between wellbeing and place.*

*This case study is one of a series of examples which look at how local authorities are levelling up, across service areas.*

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