



IS RIDE-HAILING THE FUTURE?

Some regular bus routes have been scaled back because of COVID-19. They aren't the only way to provide public transport, however; another model with another type of vehicle is being trialled, finds Steve Banner

Small buses often based on Mercedes-Benz Sprinter platforms have enjoyed a revival in recent years.

Operators are employing them on lightly-used but socially-necessary routes where using a full-sized single-decker would not be cost-effective; especially given the widespread reduction in local authority financial support for such services.

They are also being deployed on DRT – demand responsive transport – services which allow passengers heading in a particular direction to book and pay for a seat in advance, typically using a smartphone app. They are then picked up and dropped off at their chosen location. There is no fixed route, and no bus stops.

Using smaller vehicles allows the

operator to offer a degree of flexibility that could not be achieved with a full-size bus.

Fleet managers and technicians with long memories will be aware that running buses that rely heavily on light commercial technology is nothing new. When bus deregulation was implemented in 1986 everywhere apart from London under the 1985 Transport Act, a number of businesses launched high-frequency services using vehicles based on models such as the Mercedes-Benz T2, Dodge 50 Series, and Ford's ubiquitous Transit.

They were often serviced and repaired in garages that also accommodated single- and double-deckers, a situation shared by their successors over 30 years later. So how difficult is it to mix the two types of

vehicle in the same workshop?

Ayrshire-based Shuttle Buses does not find it difficult at all, says director David Granger. With a mixed fleet of 55 vehicles, the Kilwinning-based company's activities embrace everything from running local bus services to private hire work. Its fleet portfolio includes eight low-floor Mellor Stratas based on Mercedes-Benz 516CDI underpinnings (pictured, p27, top right). Grossing at 5.5 tonnes, the wheelchair-accessible Strata can carry 22 passengers, although capacity is of course limited at present by COVID-19 social distancing restrictions.

Two of the Stratas are used on conventional bus routes. The remaining six are deployed on a DRT dial-a-ride service aimed at elderly passengers and people with disabilities on a

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contract with Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) under the MyBus banner.

The technicians who work for Shuttle Bus had to receive some training to work on Strata, says Granger, but were already familiar with Mercedes technology. “We’ve got a few Varios and we run Optare Solos with Mercedes engines,” he points out.

The maintenance regime is a little different, however. “Our Stratas can get through a lot of brake pads, for example, because they’re not fitted with retarders,” he says. Solos, on the other hand consume kingpins with enthusiasm, he adds; every vehicle has its weak points.

Subcontracting the maintenance of models with a high Mercedes content to a franchised dealer would not be a practical option, says Granger, given the 25-mile journey involved.

Any additional expenditure on repair and maintenance was offset by the 10.1p per kilometre BSOG (bus service operators’ grant) low carbon vehicle incentive payment Strata attracted. Transport Scotland points out that the incentive scheme was revised last year with a payment spread of from 5p to 30p a kilometre, depending on how environmentally-friendly the bus is.

Not having to contend with the constant stopping and starting that is a feature of regular bus routes, the Stratas used on DRT work are pretty much glitch-free, says Granger. “They’re ideally suited to it,” he comments. They are out seven days a week, averaging 20mpg or more compared with the 18mpg averaged by those used conventionally.

No matter how well they are maintained and built, small buses that have to suffer the unremitting pressure of a stop-start bus service day after day cannot expect a long life, says Granger. “We reckon on five years, rising to ten years if they’re on a DRT contract,” he says. “By contrast we’ve got 15-year-old Solos that are still on front-line bus work.”



DRT services aimed at anybody who wishes to travel are springing up all over the country – for example, Arriva recently launched its ArrivaClick service in Watford, pictured above, but with mixed success. Some operators have closed them, having found them to be unprofitable.

COVID-19 has not helped. Social distancing requirements limit the three ArrivaClick minibuses operating in Watford to carry no more than four passengers apiece. But local authority support, where available, can go some way to keeping them afloat. Watford Borough Council is subsidising the ArrivaClick vehicles, while North Lincolnshire Council is funding the new JustGo North Lincs DRT service provided by Go-Ahead bus company East Yorkshire. It was launched in August.

IN-HOUSE SERVICING

JustGo North Lincs will rely on six accessible 17-seater Sprinters which will be serviced in-house at the company’s Elloughton depot, says East Yorkshire marketing officer, Rhys Plater. He does not believe that this will present any problems. “We have an experienced engineering team which maintains our 300-plus fleet of single- and double-deckers and coaches,” he says. “The technicians will require some training and need to become familiar with Sprinter, but we should be able to undertake most of the training in house.”

It will also be able to call on expertise from other Go-Ahead operations: the



Sprinter fleet comes from the group’s previous DRT ventures. “We experienced no problems looking after them, none at all,” says Oxford Bus Company head of engineering Keith Green.

As well as maintaining its own vehicles, East Yorkshire handles some third-party servicing in the workshop at its Hull headquarters.

So Dumbarton’s McColl’s Travel should face few headaches when it comes to servicing and repairing the four Stratas it has acquired to operate on a contract with SPT (pictured, p26). With a total bus and coach fleet of some 40 vehicles, and based 20 miles to the west of Glasgow, it operates a five-bay workshop which takes on third-party van, truck bus and coach repair and maintenance work.

Businesses whose technicians need some support when asked to look after small (often Sprinter-based) buses used on DRT/dial-a-ride services have no need to feel isolated. Daimler subsidiary EvoBus (UK) offers aftersales support, including technician training courses, under the OMNIplus banner. Based in Coventry, it distributes Citaro buses, Turismo coaches and Sprinter minibuses on this side of the Channel.

The main problem for bus companies offering DRT services is not so much vehicle maintenance, but ensuring that the local authority support that is invariably required to keep such services viable remains in place. Without such support, they are likely to go the same way as all too many rural bus services. **TE**