

Ms Aileen Fallon
Special Committee on Covid-19 Response
Leinster House
Dublin 2
D02 XR20

1st July 2020

Dear Ms Fallon,

Re: Invitation to make written submission

We appreciate the opportunity to make a written submission on the topic of the impact of Covid-19 on public transport. I am responding on behalf of Ms Hollingsworth the Chairman of The Go-Ahead Group plc who was contacted initially regarding this submission.

It goes without saying that the last few months have been an extremely challenging time, not only transport operators but for all society. Our response to the crisis has been guided by collaborative working with the National Transport Authority (NTA), SIPTU as our recognised trade union and jointly with other public transport operators across Ireland.

There have been some difficult and challenging decisions to make but collectively we have worked hard to protect our colleagues and to reduce and manage the risk of the virus. In turn this has ensured that public transport has and continues to play a vital role in keeping the country moving throughout this pandemic.

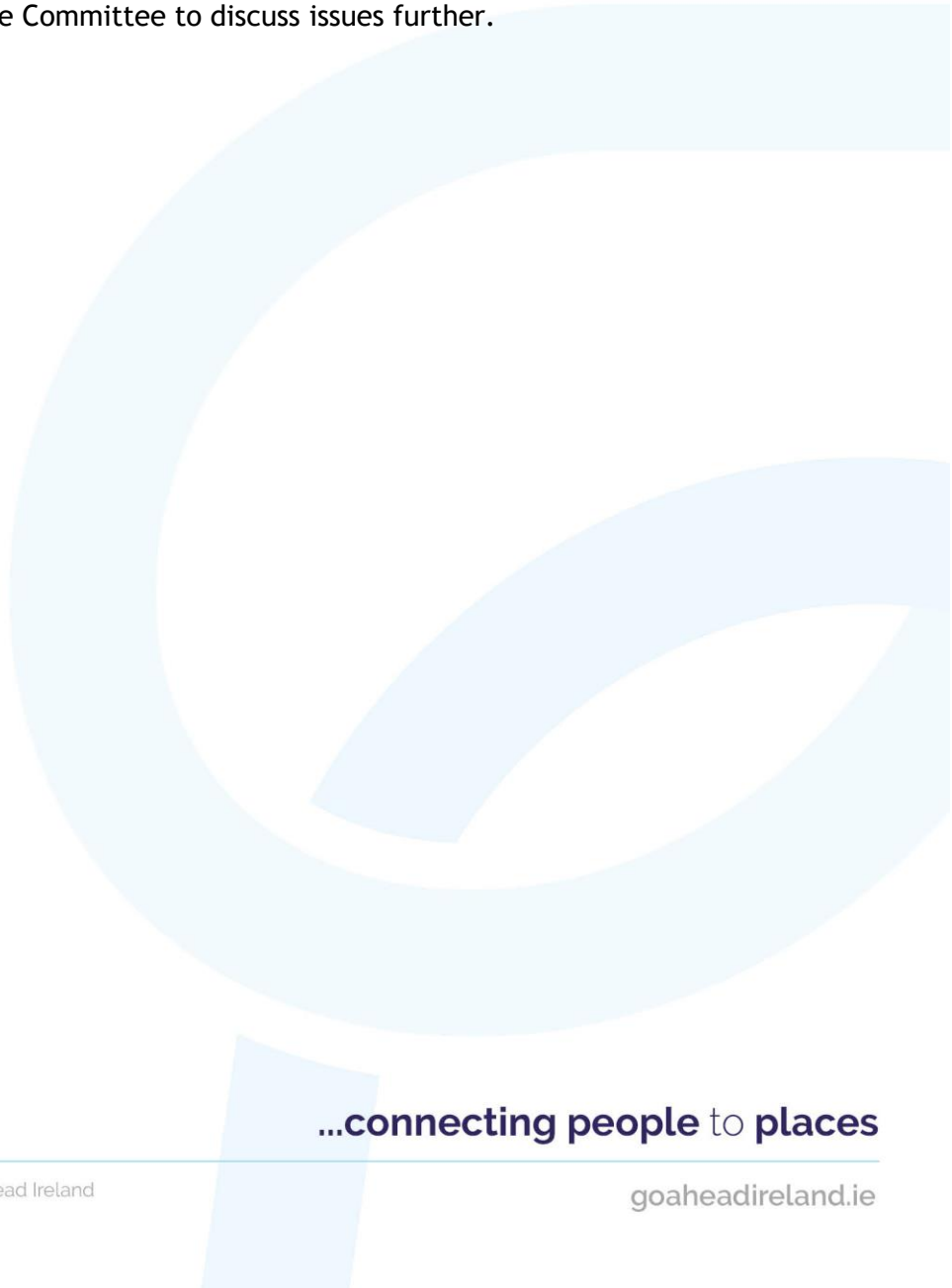
At this juncture we are working on plans for the remainder of 2020 and beyond to ensure capacity on public transport can be slowly and safely increased to levels closer to pre Covid-19 levels to allow capacity to meet the demand that will inevitably return.

Equally it is important that public transport is not perceived to be an unsafe mode of transport in the future as we would not want to see a modal shift to private cars and it is therefore essential that buses and other public transport modes are kept central to any plans as the economy and society as a whole emerges from this pandemic.

Enclosed with this letter is our submission to the committee and equally if required we would be happy to meet with the Committee to discuss issues further.

Yours sincerely,

Ed Wills
Managing Director
Go-Ahead Ireland



The Go-Ahead Group plc

Go-Ahead Ireland

Written Submission to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

1st July 2020

Impact of Covid-19 on public transport services

Introduction

The Go-Ahead Group is a leading international transportation company with bus and train operations in the UK, Ireland, Norway, Germany and Singapore. The group is UK based and is the largest bus operator in London with extensive operations in other parts of the UK.

We adopt a collaborative approach with our partners and operate in a manner which creates long term partnerships, creating value for all our stakeholders and customers, communities, colleagues, Government and shareholders.

In August 2017 Go-Ahead was awarded a contract by the National Transport Authority (NTA) to operate 24 bus routes in the Dublin metropolitan area, being the first competitively tendered contract of its type. In March 2018, a further contract was awarded by the NTA to operate six commuter services from Kildare and Naas into Dublin.

Our initial services commenced operation in September 2018 and by January 2020 we had fully mobilised operations and had recruited a team of 570 colleagues to deliver services.

Our services are provided under contract to the NTA. The contract specifies the timetables, fares, routes and other aspects of the services provided. Go-Ahead is responsible for delivering the services according to the contract, ensuring punctual, reliable, clean and friendly buses.

Covid-19

The emergence of Covid-19 had an immediate and significant impact on our business, notably at the point of the lockdown commencing. The restriction on travel and the requirement to only make essential journeys reduced passengers' volumes to 10% of the pre Covid-19 levels.

Given our services have continued throughout the crisis we had to react quickly to reshape our operation from the ground up, whilst putting appropriate measures in place to help reduce the risk to our colleagues and our passengers.

Throughout this time, we have worked extremely closely with the NTA, SIPTU Trade Union and other transport operators to ensure a co-ordinated and consistent approach has been taken in the planning and roll out of additional safety, cleaning and other operational measures.

All of these changes, some of which were introduced in the space of a few days have been designed to help reduce risk and protect colleagues and passengers, whilst continuing to ensure bus services were provided for essential workers, who depended upon our services the most.

Our submission does not focus on areas which are under the remit of the NTA, notably revenue and infrastructure investments but focusses on issues where we have more direct influence such as service delivery and capacity monitoring.

Impact of Covid-19 on staffing

During the initial lockdown (mid-April) we reached a peak of staff absence for self-isolation at 68, which is 14% of our colleagues. During this period, we were operating a "Saturday Plus" schedule which ensured a full operation could still be delivered.

The number of staff self-isolating reduced steadily from this point and as of the 1st July there is only one staff member still in self isolation. Two drivers tested positive for Covid-19 during this period, both have made a full recovery and have returned to work.

Working with the NTA and SIPTU a range of measures were introduced to help reduce the risk to all our teams across the business. Home working where possible was made mandatory and for drivers and other front-line colleagues, PPE, additional cleaning measures and social distancing measures have been introduced.

If a second wave occurred and the level of self-isolation among colleagues returned to, or above the peak level, it would become extremely difficult to deliver the required full service to provide the capacity that is needed to cope with social distancing measures.

Capacity of public transport

It has been evident throughout the crisis to date that maintaining the capacity of the transport network is essential to ensure social distancing can be maintained. As the economy reopens and travel is increasing, it is critical that transport networks have the capacity to cope with the anticipated and actual demand being experienced. This may mean additional capacity being necessary through additional buses.

The move to 50% capacity alongside the mandatory requirement to wear a face covering is welcome, although plans now need to be considered for when schools are due to return as this will place significant pressure on current capacities, even at 50%.

Social distancing requirements - use of face coverings

Given the design of vehicles social distancing is challenging by default. Signage and measures were introduced across the fleet to reduce the capacity to approximately 20% of the actual vehicle capacity.

Since the introduction of face coverings, we have been able to increase capacity to 50%. Compliance on usage stand at about 55% across our services from the surveying undertaken to date. Drivers are encouraging customers to wear face coverings, and this is generally

being well received. Additionally, the work the NTA is undertaking to encourage usage is welcome.

Whilst drivers must lead by example, it is sometimes uncomfortable and potentially distracting if a driver is required to wear a face covering throughout the duration of their driving duty. Whilst we fully support and are encouraging colleagues to wear face coverings the fact that many drivers benefit from protective screens and need to concentrate on their driving means that a dispensation to wearing face coverings throughout the working day should be considered.

It is important to note however that plans must be discussed and put in place for public transport to emerge from this crisis with a positive image. It cannot be the case that public transport is viewed as a risky or undesirable place to be, as this in turn could push people towards private car usage, which ultimately is not sustainable. Alongside this, a plan must also be put in place that ultimately allows public transport to return to pre-covid levels of capacity as this will help ensure public transport can play its full part in a sustainable future.

Service Delivery

Service delivery became and has remained extremely challenging since the beginning of the lockdown period. As a company the NTA measures us on two core KPI's for service delivery; "Reliability" (scheduled KM operated) and "Punctuality" (arrival at each individual bus stop no more than 1min early or 5min59sec late).

These two measures have a direct impact on a passenger's experience of bus services and are arguably the most important deliverables under our contract. These measures are therefore critical during the Covid-19 crisis as reliable and punctual bus services are essential for key workers and in helping to keep society moving.

Service delivery at the outset of the lockdown became extremely challenging. Timetables are designed to cope with heavy traffic levels and high customers volumes and when these two factors disappeared maintaining a punctual service whilst avoiding early running became particularly challenging.

Additionally, as an increasing proportion of our team went into self-isolation, our ability to operate all scheduled journeys was increasingly put under pressure as there was only a finite number of drivers available to operate scheduled services.

The introduction of “Saturday Plus” schedules on the 1st April enabled us to better match timetables to the traffic and passenger levels being experienced and also helped to ensure we had sufficient driver coverage to operate our scheduled timetables. The changes introduced were essential in matching resource to demand and helped enable us to deliver an extremely punctual and reliable service during this period.

The reintroduction of a Monday-Friday schedule aligned well with an increased level of travel from passengers. It has become evident that having sufficient capacity in place will be essential to help maintain effective social distancing as we emerge from the pandemic and to help reduce the risk of a second wave.

Our ability to continue to deliver a high standard of service depends partly on car usage remaining at or below pre-covid-19 levels and it is therefore essential that measures are considered to help prevent private car usage increasing and competing with the finite road space available.

While we applaud local authority schemes to encourage sustainable travel via active travel, the impact on bus services must be considered before such schemes are introduced to ensure the objectives of all transport modes are achieved.

Comments on Additional areas of interest

Go-Ahead has been impressed with the handling of actions from a public transport perspective that have a direct impact on us. The NTA has held regular briefing meetings involving all major operators and whilst difficult decisions have had to be taken, they have been made on a collaborative and consultative basis.

Upon reflection it is difficult to point specifically to any actions that could have been done differently. The situation we faced was new to everyone involved and I think on balance the decisions made were right given the circumstances.

As a relatively new operator in Ireland, it has been extremely encouraging to see the coordinated approach that has been taken in the handling of this crisis and the good level of communication that has been present throughout.

It is vital that steps are taken to determine ways that public transport capacity can be safely increased over the coming months. The reopening of schools will place significant pressure on the transport network and only increased capacity, or the operation of additional services, will enable demand to be satisfied when schools return at the very end of August 2020.

Looking to the future it would be beneficial to form a working group to enable the learnings from this crisis to be captured so that a structured plan can be developed if a further pandemic does unfortunately occur.

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