

JONATHAN BRAY



Lothian - municipal and entrepreneurial

Edinburgh is a city where every kind of person uses the bus and where everyone owns their local bus company, Lothian Buses

► It's good to be in the warmth of the good value Lothian Buses cafe at their Shandwick Place TravelHub. Outside a pitiless January morning wind has chased the buses down nearby Princes Street. The commuters on board the buses are happy to be cocooned (for just that little bit longer) against the cold, behind mostly steamed up windows. They leave the windows steamed up as they've seen the views before, and there aren't too many visitors aboard keen to see the brazen theatricality of the Edinburgh skyline imprint itself on the winter dawn. At this time of year this is an Edinburgh as free of tourists from exotic places as it's ever going to be. The exotic (to the non-local) can instead be found in the mysterious sounding origins of some of the bus routes: Hunter's Tryst, The Jewel, Silverknowes.

Sitting in the Lothian Buses liveried cafe, decorated with pictures of the forebears of the buses passing outside, it seems a good place to reflect on the chat I'd had with Lothian's MD, Sarah Boyd, the previous day and to write my ode to Lothian Buses. So why should we love Lothian Buses? Well let me count the ways.

Edinburgh is a city where every kind of person uses the bus. There isn't the stigma that's attached to bus travel in many other parts of the country. Quite the opposite, using buses is a social norm in Edinburgh. It's easy for a city to fall out of the habit of using the bus, and once that habit is gone it's very hard to get it back. Pre-Covid Lothian was doing one better and growing the habit (patronage went

up from 109 million to 124 million in the 10 years to 2019). One way that Lothian has kept all social classes on board is ensuring that the buses are clean and well maintained. As Sarah told me, you should ask yourself would you want to sit on that seat. I've travelled, under sufferance, on plenty of grubby buses in my time, but never in Edinburgh. Well maintained is also easy to do if you bought higher end buses in the first place, which Lothian tend to do.

Whilst we are covering off the basics of what a good urban bus network should do, let's also tick the box marked simplicity. Lothian has bucked an industry trend of seeking to make buses stand out on the streets through branding that aims to sell the attractions of the service, or route, with the aim of tempting



Sarah Boyd

non-users across the threshold. Branding that also seeks to challenge pre-conceptions. There's a case for this. When done well. But it can also look shouty and confusing when there are lots of buses looking to stand out in urban centres. It can also end up positioning the bus as something akin to a mid-market supermarket. Lothian Buses don't look like they are trying to be Sainsbury's on wheels. They look like what they are: a public service done well that belongs to the city it serves. The livery keeps it simple - as do the simple contactless flat fares, the audio-visual announcements, the stop information, the app. It all means that someone unfamiliar with the city can have the confidence to give the buses a go - and not be let down when they do. And with the leisure market emerging from Covid far more strongly than commuting, having a service that visitors feel comfortable using really matters.

As Sarah Boyd told me, Lothian is also a company that isn't afraid to try new things (or to pull out of them if they don't work out). New things like the tri-axle ADL/Volvo leviathans that can Hoover up more than a hundred passengers at a time whilst making a statement about who these city streets are for. Or the expansion (the Lothian Country and East Coast Buses networks) beyond the city's borders to move into more semi-urban and rural territories largely abandoned by the private sector both east and west of the city. In some ways Lothian (with over a century of municipal ownership behind it) is reminiscent of the responsible but enterprising municipally and locally-owned operators that are common in countries like Switzerland and Germany.

As a municipal, Lothian's future is bound up in the future of the city it serves. Ask people about Lothian Buses and many will say its biggest problem is reliability because of the congestion on the roads. Most people look up at the skyline and the buildings when they are in Edinburgh but look down at the streets and you can see street clutter, battered roads and too much space for too many cars. The tram extension down Leith Walk shows how new public transport infrastructure can be the catalyst for fixing tired and car-dominated streetscapes in a way that is sensitive to the city's historic built environment.

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strategies at various stages of development designed to support this goal - including a city centre movement strategy and a public transport strategy. A city centre Low Emission Zone is already in place and will start to be enforced from June. But, as Sarah says, there is no single silver bullet that will fix everything across the network - it's about having a targeted package of measures which benefits the bus network as a whole.

Edinburgh is also a place where people want to be and this creates twin challenges of recruiting and retaining staff in a competitive labour market whilst ensuring that the bus network keeps pace with a city that's growing. This includes serving from the start developments like West Edinburgh where there are plans to build 11,000 new homes. One of the things that has been holding Lothian back (which is currently getting 90% of pre-Covid patronage on 80% of the pre-Covid network) is shortage of drivers. In response Lothian has combined a competitive package of pay and benefits with streamlining

of the process of getting new recruits qualified to drive vehicles (the time it takes to get an applicant into class has been reduced from four weeks to one week).

The next big challenge is the decarbonisation of the fleet which will require the transformation of both fleet and depots between now and 2035. A sign of things to come will be in the spring when, the first of an initial fleet of 50 new Volvo BZL electric double deck buses enter service.

Meanwhile, away from the buses the success of the well put together Newhaven extension of the Edinburgh tram has drawn the sting from the saga of the botched procurement of the initial route (where an interminable public inquiry has now firmly bolted the door after that particular horse left the stable). This opens the way for the next stage to emerge from the shadows (a north-south link from Granton to Dalkeith). Edinburgh is also criss-crossed by a dense network of former, freight and mothballed railway lines which could play a part in this extension, and more besides, in the

future. All of which opens up the prospect of giving Scotland's capital more of the integrated bus, tram and rail network that it needs.

It's time to come back to the present and venture out of the cafe and into the cold again. Outside a constant flow of buses (the green country buses reminiscent of London's former Greenline network) is punctuated by the bass and treble notes of the rumbling trams and their bells. Time to explore more of the UK city where the buses are used by everyone. And where everyone owns them too. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► For decades Jonathan Bray has been at the forefront of making progressive change happen on transport - from stopping the national roads programme in its tracks in the 1990s to getting buses back under public control in the 2020s. He is an advisor to the Welsh Government on bus franchising and an independent advisor. www.jonathan-bray.com