

Fares please for a ride into future of buses

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From being the Cinderella of public transport, there's a new dawn for buses as people become more conscious of the environmental benefits. People are being attracted by new passenger friendly buses, more reliable and regular services and cleaner vehicles. That's the view of the new boss of the Confederation of Public Transport. CLIVE WHITE met him.

Giles Fearnley knows there are still huge challenges ahead for the bus industry. The business has made great strides in recent years to attract people back to the buses.

But the boss of Keighley & District and new President of the Confederation of Passenger Transport is aware more needs to be done to ensure the growth continues.

At the top are the rising costs of fuel and the tackling of traffic congestion to keep buses on the move and running on time.

Unlike the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of the bus, the industry today has no car-less captive audience whose major form of transport is the double-decker.

Bus bosses like Giles Fearnley, who runs Keighley and district, part of the international transport empire, Transdev, knows he has to fight to tempt passengers to abandon their cars and take to the bus.

The revival in the use of the bus over the last ten to 15 years has involved huge investment and bold decisions.

And Mr Fearnley's business has been among the pioneers in the field.

But there's no let-up in the need to improve the quality of the fleets and the services provided, says Mr Fearnley, who has a family pedigree in the industry.

He has been made President of the Confederation of Passenger Transport, making him the third generation of his family in the post.

He has called for the industry to be better valued and believes the challenges for the future will be equally as demanding as those tackled over the last couple of decades.

Mr Fearnley is proud of the big strides that have been made to revive the industry especially in the Bradford and Keighley area. "Bus use was declining through the 1970s, '80s and into the '90s," he said. "The answer was to focus on passengers and find out what they wanted.

"We had to turn things round and fight for passengers. If we hadn't have won them back, the industry would have gone down the plughole.

"We are now operating higher quality services, with state-of the-art buses, improved training of staff, improved cleanliness and we market our services better.

"In 2007 there were three percent more people travelling by bus nationwide than in the previous year.

"We have also turned the tide locally with a one or two percent growth year-on-year - that's a significant growth."

Mr Fearnley said reliability, too, was at the crux of success ensuring that buses were there when passengers wanted them and that the service was regarded as good value for money.

It was now vital to face up to the new challenges for the future which centred on congestion, which impacted on the reliability of services, the cost of fuel and to press the environmental value of using public transport, he said.

"Fuel costs are desperate at the moment and the easy option is to push the extra costs onto fares. But that is not the way forward," he said.

"The big question is how do we absorb those fuel costs?"

"Making vehicles more fuel efficient - buses get between five and six miles to the gallon - is important and having cleaner and more environmentally friendly engines is essential."

Convincing local authorities to be more bus-friendly in the battle against congestion was important when designing new routes, particularly in setting up bus lanes, he said.

New technology, too, was helping buses maintain their reliability especially with the fitting of "transponders", a device which activated traffic lights to turn green if a bus was not running to time because of congestion.

But overall it was the quality of staff which was crucial to the industry. Keighley and district employed 300 and operated 90 buses, he felt.

"It is our staff at the sharp end who deliver our success and make or break the customer's experience," he said.

"From our drivers we require massive multi-tasking, driving to the highest standards, staying calm despite increasing congestion, being responsible for the well-being of passengers and dealing with anything thrown at them.

"I'm increasingly concerned that the driver's job is not understood and is not held in high enough regard within our communities generally.

"They need to know their work is appreciated and the pressures on them understood.

"They need to feel their work is valued by the entire community, including business and politicians."

He believes the industry had a great future which involved working with Government and local authorities and being aware of the green agenda.

"Buses are the way to relieve congestion and we have the product that is equipped for that in the 21st century, " he added.

'There's a bus renaissance in the UK'

Buses are entering a new heyday believes Ray Wilkes, secretary of the West Yorkshire Campaign for Better Transport.

He says 60 towns and cities in the UK are showing a bus renaissance.

It was happening in places like Brighton which started the soonest on good bus policies, he said. And Keighley & District had been quick to follow with improved vehicles and services and was helping spearhead the new revival in bus use, he said.

It was a company which believed in buses as a major form of public transport not as a "last resort" and was working with the local authority to demand they manage the service.

It had already involved Bradford Council introducing priority lanes, such as on Manningham Lane and it was hoped to see more in the longer term.

He stressed there was also a need to better manage car parking in a way which encouraged people to use the bus rather than leave their car all day in the city.

"We should be aiming for a service such as in Brighton where you go to the stop and a bus appears - it's as frequent as that. The buses are extremely well used and the services attract all social classes," said Mr Wilkes, who is also chairman of Keighley Bus-Users Group.

The revival was helped by the public's greater awareness of air pollution, the problems of traffic congestion and global warming. And it was important to respond to those issues, he said.

"But it is vital that the buses are clean, the drivers are well trained and the service is regular and reliable," he added.