From passenger to co-pilot: *the new blueprint for future travel*

Lydia Horbury, Chief Executive at Bus Users UK, says the industry needs to shape up to meet future expectations

Lydia Horbury

The future is ours to create, says Lydia, but this Hoverbus is less futuristic than the name might imply. ***JONATHAN WELCH***

When we're asked to predict the future of transport we conjure up images of gleaming pods, bi-modal vehicles, even the odd hover-bus. Portsmouth, after all, is already making this a reality with First Bus Solent.

The real future, however, is going to be less about chrome and more about comfort, connection, soul. The passenger of 2035 isn't a data point; they're smart, discerning, connected and individual. They expect a service that's every bit as smart, connected and individual as they are.

Shared journey making

The days of the passive passenger waiting at a stop and hoping for the best are gone. The future passenger isn't just on the bus, they're helping to steer it (metaphorically, of course!). They're co-producers. They want to design routes through an app, crowdsource safer stopping points and even shape the on-board experience. This isn't the old, reactive model of feedback or complaint handling – it's a genuine, dynamic power-share. The operators who flourish will be those who have the good business sense and the humility to share the controls.

Velvet rope of accessibility

For too long we've treated accessibility as an inconvenience, a 'bolt-on' compliance issue. The future passenger won't stand for this. They expect accessibility to be invisible, intuitive and, frankly, a bit more stylish.

It's not just a ramp; it's the dignity of a bus that kneels perfectly every time. It's audio announcements that sound like a symphony, not a distressed Dalek. It's app design that feels luxurious for all abilities. This is an elegant design philosophy that, by default, caters to everyone – whatever their needs or requirements; the supermarket shopper, the tourist navigating an unfamiliar city, the parent with a pushchair, the wheelchair user. It's design that enables rather than excludes.

The Zen of 'phygital'

Technology: at once our greatest servant and most infuriating barrier. The future passenger expects a 'phygital' experience – a seamless, warm blend of the physical bus and the digital world. An app that tracks real buses, not ghost ones. AI that shapes the journey, perhaps even holding a connection or, dare we dream, warming your favourite seat.

But digital by default must never become digital only. The smartest system on the planet is useless if it excludes. The future is an app that works beautifully for those who want it, alongside cash, paper tickets and the option to ask a real human being for directions. Technology should behave like a courteous butler, not a bouncer.

Sustainability with soul

We all love an electric bus but the future passenger's idea of green goes much, much further.

Zero-emission fleets is the starting point, not the aspiration. Beyond that, sustainability is about personal well-being. Services reliable enough to tempt people out of cars. Clean air, good lighting, a feeling of safety. Networks that reduce loneliness and knit communities together. Sustainability isn't just about carbon; it's about financial viability and that means passengers.

Because the only truly sustainable bus is the one people actually want to travel on. You can't save the planet if you ignore those who live on it.

Robot in the driving seat

Now to the elephant in the depot: the autonomous bus. It's coming. A world of services that run like clockwork, day and night, with no more late-night gaps or routes cancelled by driver shortages. It's

the ultimate 'on-demand' vision. But the future passenger isn't blinded by technology. They want transport they can count on.

When the bus pulls up, will it notice the person in a wheelchair who needs a little extra time? If someone needs assistance, who will step in? A bus that drives itself is engineering. A bus that makes people feel safe and even cared for is a marvel of service.

The ultimate test

For all our talk of AI, real-time data and autonomous vehicles, the future of transport still hinges on one timeless concept: trust.

Trust isn't built by an algorithm. It's built by a driver who waits that extra second for someone running to the stop. It's built by a clean, safe environment. It's built by honest, accurate, real-time information when things go wrong.

And it's built through investment. Because investing in the people on the frontline – their training, welfare and empowerment – isn't a 'nice to have,' it's an operator's single greatest competitive advantage.

The future is a masterpiece

So what does this future passenger want? They want what we all want – a service that's affordable, safe, reliable and accessible. But also a service that's flexible, connected, integrated; that combines technology and sustainability with comfort; that delivers personalisation, agency, control.

The future isn't a top-down blueprint delivered by 'us' for 'them.' It's a collaborative masterpiece, and we are being invited to pick up a brush. Let's build a network that isn't just smart, but wise. Not just efficient, but empathetic. The future, as they say, is now so let's get to work... //

Lydia Horbury joined Bus Users UK in 2023, and following a spell as the organisation's Director for England, recently took over as Chair from Claire Walters upon her retirement. During her time with the organisation, Lydia has become a recognised voice in the sector, being part of the DfT's Steering Group on Enhanced Partnerships, a chair, board member and advisor for numerous stakeholder and industry bodies, and a driving force behind the charity's mission to improve access to transport.

Never far away

Rules and regulations are always hot topics, and safety should not be forgotten

It's an area we can't get away from: policy, regulation, safety. They're all vital parts of our daily lives, and they shape the industry in many ways. The coach sector is now firmly on the path of acceptance of PSVAR, having in some respects dragged its heels in achieving compliance, and the bus sector has the long road ahead of franchising and the wider scope of the Government's new Buses Bill.

It's not always just the big picture, there are always smaller matters which affect the industry; the oft-recurring issues of coach parking are one, and that's a whole topic in itself. The industry and its vehicles are never far away from a political issue or topic and the potential burden, worry or stress that it can create.

Thankfully, as we've seen elsewhere in this issue, there are plenty of experienced professionals to guide you on your way, ensuring compliance and assisting with knowledge, experience and information. All being well, that way won't lead to the door of the Office of the Traffic Commissioner, which has over recent years has found itself struggling with burdens of staff shortages and large volumes of administration.

The CPT has recently launched a new handbook aimed at helping local authorities and other stakeholders to work with operators, understand the new climate of bus operations and navigate their way sucessfully through the complex and daunting process of outlining their future plans. Produced in association with Frontier Economics and supported by the Department for Transport, the guide provides a useful point of reference for the various shades of Enhanced Partnerships and franchising options now on the table. As we move forwards, it will be vital that those charged with delivering such policies fully understand the real benefits and value but also the real costs, implications and long-term commitments of such policies. Local authorities simply cannot afford to make this a short-term political quick-win.

Another issue which has been discussed at length recently is Scotland's under-22s free travel scheme. Connectivity Minister Jim Fairlie recently confirmed that the Scottish Government will next month legislate for a scheme to take free travel passes away from those responsible for anti-social behaviour on buses, something which has long been sought by those at the sharp end; how effective that decision might be, or whether it will lead to further conflict as young people are asked to pay a fare, remains to be seen, but it's a welcome step in the right direction and a development for others looking at similar schemes elsewhere to keep an eye on.

Another topic which is never far away is safety. It's one which comes in many forms, and as we'll see on the next page, it's one that everyone plays their part in. //

ROBIN PIERRE via UNSPLASH