

JONATHAN BRAY



In the silence of my lonely room

The government wants to tackle loneliness. Is this an opportunity for public transport to be part of the solution to another problem?

► Follow social media and you follow corporations and government departments beating an infographic-rich path towards a series of worthwhile steps to a more diverse and holistic view of the people they serve and the people they employ to serve them. Recently, mental health, diversity, equality, and suicide prevention have all featured prominently in the transport sector. Well next up could be loneliness.

Hitherto it had passed me by but this government is big on loneliness (insert your own joke here). However, a recent conversation with some senior Department for Transport officials put me straight. Not only is there an overall loneliness minister, Tracey Crouch (also a junior minister at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) there's a lead minister for loneliness at the DfT (Nusrat Ghani).

Why all the attention on loneliness now? Because loneliness kills people faster than obesity and as effectively as smoking. As our society atomises and ages the deep dark debilitating shadow of loneliness is spreading. More than nine million people say they always or often feel lonely and 200,000 older people have not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month. The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness has generated the momentum to give the government the spur and confidence to make it a priority and it came together in a speech by the PM back in January.

It seems to me that there could be an

opportunity here for public transport to be part of the solution to yet another problem. After all it gets people out and about by means of a shared and social space. Admittedly, the average British bus or train is not necessarily alive to the sound of happy chatter. British reserve, bolstered by the mobile phone and sealed in by noise cancelling headphones has seen to that.

But, notwithstanding this, is there another card here for public transport to play? A village or council estate without a bus becomes that bit more isolated - especially its young and its old. A key, but often underplayed argument,

“More than nine million people say they always or often feel lonely”



Tracey Crouch,
minister for
loneliness

for the national concessionary travel scheme is that it's a free pass out of lonely rooms and heads and out into the material world. The transport industry has played its part in tackling the taboo around talking about mental health. Perhaps it's the turn of loneliness next?

It's the good life

Scandinavia has the best bus commercials. If you don't believe me check them out on YouTube (though be warned, not all are safe for work!). Middle-aged balding bus driver as sex symbol, a bus beating a formula one car fair and square on a *Top Gear*-style airfield runway, as well as buses knocking spots off autonomous cars as the embodiment of the future of transport. Sure there's an element of irony there but mainly there's confidence - if not downright braggadocio. This is the bus - come and get us.

If buses market themselves like Tesco or Primark in Britain, they sell themselves more like BMW in Scandinavia. In Sweden, they turned that attitude into a target - doubling public transport use in a decade. Public transport is more than the bus of course and not all Swedish regions are going to make that target - but many will. Gothenburg is one of them.

Sweden's second largest city was its industrial port city. Now it's much more than that - tech town, university city and great place to visit - with a vision of the good life for its growing population and labour markets. The good life means less traffic and more people on public transport so they are going all in on bold marketing and promotion to get more people to give the bus - and the rest of public transport - a try.

Through bold marketing the intention is that everybody is going to have seen their push to get people on the bus - either at the roadside or digitally. It also includes giving away hundreds of thousands of free travel passes - valid for two weeks and available for anytime use right across the region. And it's working. Of the 500,000 people who took up the free offer, 100,000 stuck with public transport use afterwards - a high conversion rate for any marketing offer.

Next up is a campaign to highlight the benefits of taking the bus at a time when there is major construction and regeneration work in the city. To highlight this they took one of

“Buses in Scandinavia are a means to an end - and that end is the good life”



the main streets, emptied it and installed a bus alongside the equivalent number of cars that would be needed to carry the same number of passengers. And of course they also gave out more free passes (and have a free coffee on us as well). The message was 'we take less space when we travel together'. Sure these kind of promotions cost money - but this is speculating to accumulate. Accumulate passengers primarily. Because buses in Scandinavia are a means to an end - and that end is the good life.

A foggy day in London Town

Around a third of rail trips are now made on devolved or partly devolved railways yet the Rail Delivery Group seems to have a blind spot when it comes to what is the biggest and best thing to have happened on rail in recent times. The latest occurrence being the RDG's consultation on fares reform which in its prompted multiple choice format corrals respondents into a world where there is no

regional variation in fare levels (there already are such variations to reflect the strengths of different economies and local priorities) and where all decisions on fares are either taken centrally or by wise and benevolent train operators (already not the case as devolved authorities have varying degrees of influence over fares already).

This blind spot meant that no part of the prompted discussion is the case for greater integration of rail fares with other forms of public transport in the city regions. The integration of London Overground fares with wider public transport provision in London is a great example of the benefits of this. Nobody would dream of arguing now for a reversal of what's happened on fares with the Overground. Surely many urban rail users (and that's a lot of rail users) would like to see something similar with the pricing of local rail services integrated with wider simpler multi-modal public transport ticketing?

So why this persistent blind spot in



ABOVE: 'Epic Bus Ad' from Denmark's Midttrafik

reflecting the reality and success of devolution in a meaningful way? Another example being the launch of last year's 'In Partnership for Prosperity' campaign and manifesto where our involvement (as one of the biggest investors in the railways after national government) was being asked the day before if we could put out some supportive tweets. At a time when the rail industry is sorely trying the patience of passengers and politicians alike, surely it would be wise for the industry to stop sidelining the realities of devolution, and on key issues like fares, do more talking with the regions and devolved nations - and less talking at them. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.