

Transcript of 'Hop on the (Electric) Bus'

Season 3, Episode 27, Transforming Tomorrow

Paul: Just a warning. This episode does contain some mild strong language.

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello, and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: We all know electric vehicles in public transport can be a powerful route to tackling emissions, but how do you make it work financially, at scale and for the consumer?

[Theme music]

Paul: Do you like taking the bus, Jan?

Jan: I do like taking the bus. Usually I cycle, but I take the bus if it's really windy or really, really wet.

Paul: Do you reckon you could take your bike on a bus?

Jan: Uh, not really, 'cause it's not a foldy one, but you know, on some buses, I'm sure you can take a foldy one.

Paul: Buses in some parts of the world, particularly in Canada where I'm thinking of, bike racks on the front...

Jan: ...ooh, yes...

Paul: ...you can hang at least two or three bikes on. And it's quite common for people to do the long part of the journey on the bus, with the bike on the front, and then get off and ride the last little bits.

Jan: Sounds very good.

Paul: Why don't you have them?

Jan: [short laugh] Um, well I don't know why we don't have them.

Paul: Can you sort that out for me?

Jan: I'll do my best. [laughs]

Paul: Thank you. Right, that's alright...

Jan: ...I'll talk to a bus company.

Paul: Yeah, we'll see what we can do about that.

So yeah, buses, you're a fan?

Jan: Um, I am and I really like it at the moment, uh, we've been taking the bus up into the Lakes...

Paul: ...mm-hmm.

Jan: ...um, which is, if you like, just the, because the fares are fixed. It's a really cheap way to get up into the Lakes. There's no parking. And, particularly if they're a double decker bus, you can sit on the top and see everything, so you know what's not to like?

Paul: Yeah, because there is, for those people who are not from Lancaster or the surrounds, there is a direct bus that goes all the way from Lancaster up through Kendal, into the Lakes...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...at, uh, Keswick, I think it finishes up, isn't it...?

Jan: ...yes, indeed...

Paul: ...so, it's a nice, nice journey there. One, one...

Jan: ...what about you, Paul? Are you a, a bussy man?

Paul: Uh, I don't take buses very often. No, just because of where I live and where I go. There's not a great bus service where I live. But whenever we're in Scotland, in Edinburgh, we use the buses a lot up there...

Jan: ...oh, yeah. Edinburgh buses are good...

Paul: ...Edinburgh buses are very good buses, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jan: There's many other places that will have very good buses as well, Paul.

Paul: I'm sure none of them as good as Edinburgh, but yes, there are. [Jan laughs] There are [laughs] there are nice bus companies around.

And the, the thing about the Lothian Buses, which is the main operator out of Edinburgh, that's a local company. It's not owned by one of the big national companies, such as Stagecoach, who are very well-known for operating.

And, but there's not many of those around.

Jan: No, and I used to do some work for FirstGroup, um, that, uh, used to be sort of basically Aberdeen buses, but then when, uh, the bus company got sold off, um, it turned into, eventually turned into being part of a big multinational. And that sort of, I don't know, that seems odd to have a multinational to run a local bus company.

Paul: Yes, what do they know about what's happening...?

Jan: ...well, I don't know what it adds, I don't know what it adds.

Paul: No, but it, it's, it's more and more common. Certainly where I'm from, there were a local bus company called BDT, or Barrow District Travel until the late eighties, early nineties, and then it became taken over. And we've had Stagecoach ever since...

Jan: ...oh, yeah...

Paul: ...in there. And yes, that's it, I think most places will probably tell a similar tale.

Jan: Yeah. Although Stagecoach is a family-owned business, at least it used to be, um, best of my knowledge, founded by two Scots.

Paul: But, family-owned businesses, as we've discussed on this podcast the past, doesn't mean it's a small little firm...

Jan: ...no, that's true..

Paul: ...who've invested in local things...

Jan: ...that's very true...

Paul: ...you can have a family business that's one of the biggest companies in the world.

Jan: Yes, indeed.

Paul: Yes. But why are we talking about buses...?

Jan: ...I have no idea...

Paul: ...why have we taken this roundabout journey...?

Jan: ...I have no idea...

Paul: ...and lots of buses do that, by the way. [Jan laughs] I wanna go straight from A to B, but it takes me via C, D, E, and F...

Jan: ...well, sometimes going to C, D, E and F are nice places to go.

Paul: Not if you're in a rush.

Jan: True.

Paul: Yeah, yeah.

Jan: Right.

Paul: But let's talk with someone who knows more about buses than we do.

Jan: It, that wouldn't be hard [laughs] to find somebody in that place...

Paul: ...I feel we've had a very insightful conversation about buses just now. I think that we know enough.

Jan: Dear listeners, I'll leave you to make the judgment.

Paul: Mm-hmm. Let's talk to the CEO of Warrington's Own Buses in Cheshire. A Lancaster University graduate, someone who actually studied here for a short period of time at the same time as me. Um, much to his misfortune someone who previously worked for FirstGroup, who's worked for National Express and who is in charge of Warrington's Own Buses.

And under his stewardship, I'm sure he'll tell you it's all down to him, they won the Sustainability Award at the Route One Awards 2025 for their fleet of 105 EV buses.

Jan: Well, there's so much to unpack there.

Paul: There is, so let's say hello to Ben Wakerley. Hello, Ben.

Ben: Hiya, you alright? [Jan laughs]

Paul: Ben. Are you the best bus company in the land? Jan's suggesting that maybe you're better than Edinburgh and anywhere else?

Ben: Uh, well Edinburgh is very good. They're, uh, got a lot of friends who work there. That is a good bus company. And you were right. I was quite impressed

by your knowledge there. It is a municipally-owned bus company in the same way as Warrington Buses.

Paul: Yeah, I, notice how he avoided the question there? He doesn't want to tell us whether... [Jan laughs]

Ben: ...oh yeah. We're definitely the best one though, yeah, yeah.

Paul: In which case may I suggest you're not doing the publicity side of your job [Ben laughs] very well. 'Cause you just should have come straight out with it.

Now, Ben, I know a little bit about your journey from being a Lancaster grad to where you are now as your as CEO at Warrington's Own Buses. Can you tell us, though, about it?

Ben: Uh, yeah, so I was here between, uh, here at Lancaster University between 2000 and 2003. And I've just been on a nostalgic journey around the campus. It's strange how, you know, when things change and you think, you know, surely they should have asked my permission to change [Jan laughs] certain things. How did that not happen? You know, they built a whole new building. Management School looks amazing. And you think, well, you know, like almost like the planning process, I should be part of that. But never mind... [laughs]

Paul: We'll bring it up at the next university council meeting.

Ben: Yes, please, please do. Um, yeah, so it's changed a, a lot in that time, but it, it must have a real impact on you, those years at university because it feels like home. It feels like you're walking around your home, which...

Jan: ...yeah, that's nice...

Ben: ...three years is not that long, but it, I think it's the age that you're at or something, it just has a, a big effect. So, um, yeah, it's really nice to be here. And, um, I, I suppose whilst I was here, I was trying to just experiment with different things that I liked.

Um, I've always, always been interested in buses and transport, uh, but I was also interested in radio. And, um, I feel like, you know, like at the beginning of a board meeting, you're supposed to declare an interest, aren't you? A conflict of interest. [Jan laughs]

And I feel like knowing Paul is a bit of a conflict of interest there. It should be noted down.

Jan: Yes.

Ben: [laughs] Um, so yeah, so we knew each other through that, but I was always trying different things and I liked music and, and that kind of thing. But I think really, I didn't know this at the time, but really underneath it all, I think the thing that I was interested in was leadership, and management. So I've always, always put myself forward for things and, um, was Head Boy at school and, and that kind of thing.

So I think that's, um, I'm predisposed to that and so basically coming out of university it was like, well, whichever one I was gonna do, I think I would've ended up doing the leadership of whichever one of the things that I was going to do.

But because I'd already been driving buses, FirstGroup said, why don't you come and work for us?

Jan: Aah, that's interesting. So...

Paul: ...I dare say there's very, very few students, who as their part-time job outside of their studies drive a bus.

Jan: But it's a really good thing to do for a part-time study in terms of, you know, flexible hours. You know...

Paul: ...would you trust the average 18, 19, 20-year-old to be your bus driver?

Jan: Oh, I see where you're going...

Ben: ...and bear in mind, Ben was not necessarily your average 18, 19, or 20-year-old...

Jan: ...he was above average, is that what you're saying...?

[Ben laughs]

Paul: He was something. But yeah, I, I just find it really odd. And I remember at the time thinking it was really weird, but also thinking, there's no doubt this man's gonna go and work on the buses.

Jan: So how long did you drive a bus, and do you still get to drive a bus even though you're the CEO.

Ben: Yes. I'm, I was, I think it, I think it was around 2001, 2002, something like that, that I passed my bus driving test while I was, uh, on holiday from university.

You get quite long holidays, don't you, from, from uni...

Jan: ...yeah...

Ben: ...so, um, it was a good way of earning money, and, you know, um, I mean, the truth is I would've done it for free. [Jan laughs] I really didn't need to be paid. It was just a case of wanting to do it.

Um, so [chuckles] I didn't tell them that though. Um, so, yeah, I drove buses all around North Manchester and really enjoyed it. My dad always used to say that university was one thing, but driving a bus around Eccles is a better, in some ways a better education [laughs] of what's going on, um, in the world.

So, um, yeah. Um, I do occasionally, drive buses. I had a vintage bus until a couple years ago, um, that I used to take to shows and that kind of thing. So yeah, I do try and get out there.

Paul: There, there are bus obsessives, and then there's Ben. Not many bus obsessive become CEO of a bus company.

Jan: Oh. But it's a perfect thing to do then. So, so we know buses are your interest, what about sustainability? Where does that come in your, your list of things that you are, you're fascinated by?

Ben: Um, I think it's probably, I think possibly we're in a place where humans, we're sort of doing more harm than good, I think, overall, And, and I think we kind of need some wisdom around it. Uh, it's, it's, and it's really difficult because you've got these short-term aims that are legitimate aims that people want.

We've also got this long-term problem where we're not really managing the Earth properly, I would say. And it's how, I think it's kind of like the challenge for our times, is how do you overcome the short-termism and the, probably the more dysfunctional parts of the human mind [laughs], the human ego that says, I want to do this thing and I'm gonna do it, and it's, you know, to hell with the consequences of it.

But then you watch a David Attenborough programme on a Sunday and it breaks your heart, and you know, it's, you know, it's not right. Um, so I, I think

it, it's, I suppose what interests me is really the leadership of it. 'Cause the leadership of it is really tricky because there's a lot of people saying at the moment, well, um, Britain is small, so why should Britain, um, lead on this at its own expense, uh, when you know we're paying more for electricity than we should.

And, I think that's completely right. That, that argument is completely right. But at the same, and you know, we're small, so what effect can we really have? And, and that's the conundrum, isn't it? We can try and lead on it, but are we leading at our own expense? And I'm not saying I know the answer to that, but I think it's an interesting problem.

Paul: I guess public transport seems to be an obvious part of any kind sustainability, environmental solution, overarching project. It, taking the train, taking a bus is gonna be better than driving a car or going in a plane.

So do you feel that sustainability fits naturally in with public transport?

Ben: Yeah, I do because public transport has always been part of the answer to this. Even a diesel, even on diesel a, a diesel bus is far better in terms of impact than the 50 to a hundred cars that might need to replace that diesel bus.

Um, and, and I think buses are removing congestion as well. And, but you know, speeding up the journeys for everybody else as well, because if everyone's sitting in congestion in their car, then obviously that's more time with that engine running, um, that we want to try and, um, decrease.

And I think we've got to a point where our cities and towns need to be moving better. They need to be moving more, more, they need to be more free-flowing. London's a, a really good example of that. Road speeds in London are right down, um, from where they were, and, um, that's not good.

Um, so it's, yeah, I think it's how do we speed things up? How do we, uh, get cars off the road, and how do we have that grown up debate? And try, try and take the emotion and the emotive arguments that seem to dominate everything at the moment, and try to, like I said, have a bit of wisdom.

Jan: And it's quite interesting because there's sort of, at various times the political winds have sort of blown that actually, if you're on the bus somehow you've failed or you've, you know, lost, you're not successful or whatever.

It seems to me that there's a cultural thing about public transport as well, um, and do you experience that when people are thinking about, in Warrington, about their own buses?

That they actually, you know, it belongs to them through the council as a community, and people are really engaged with the buses?

Ben: Well, I think there was that Margaret Thatcher quote, wasn't there...?

Jan: ...that's what I was thinking of, yeah... [Jan and Ben laugh]

Ben: ...yeah, thanks for that, Maggie. [Jan and Ben laugh]

Yeah, um, it's interesting isn't it? Because if you go to certain cities, um, you get different cultures, don't, you? In London everybody takes the bus, don't they? So, it's, I suppose it's how do you bring that out, and how do you make public transport join up better with itself, with other modes? How do you, uh, interchange modes?

And I think it's, uh, the push and pull factors as well, that matter. Because people think, people hold London up as this great bus network, and it is a great bus network, and I used to work there and, and it's really good. But they did take some hard decisions as well. You know, things like a congestion charge. It's hard to...

Jan: ...yeah...

Ben: ...that's a hard sell, um, to the public. Um, nobody wants to sign up to that. But, you know, it's important. Things like, uh, the workplace parking levy in Nottingham. Very interesting, creating these push and pull factors and, and that that's what we need to do. But it turns into this kind of, um, big argument about liberty, [laughs] which is, um, probably over the top.

It doesn't need to go that far. We just need to, um, have the sensible, rational discussion about how do we make public transport more attractive.

Paul: You were thinking of Margaret Thatcher's quote. I was thinking of the Inbetweeners, and a, a phrase for people who use the bus from there.

Jan: Which is?

Paul: I'll say it, [Jan laughs] but I, I warn people in, advance for language. Bus wankers. Yeah.

Ben: But as I recall from that episode, it does blow up in his face, doesn't it? Because, uh, doesn't his car break down and they end up, um, getting in?

Paul: Yeah, exactly, yes. But that is the phrase that is used in said episode. But yeah, it came back to bite them. Are you suggesting that the passengers on your buses are likely to attack people driving past in their cars?

Ben: Uh, this is one of the bits you'll have to cut out, Paul. [everyone laughs]

Jan: It's really interesting because you've got, because that mode, you've got the choice about mode, and because cars are emotionally maybe really attractive to people, although sitting in a car, in a traffic jam is less so. So I guess that's part of it.

But for a public transport company, uh, there must be more to being environmentally sustainable than saying we're better than that lot. So what are the kind of issues come to the fore in, in the bus world, in around sustainability?

Ben: I think, one of the issues just on the car-specific part of, of the equation. I think once you've made the decision that you're gonna buy a car, there's a sunk cost isn't there?

And that sunk cost isn't really taken into consideration when people consider, um, what, or it's not always taken into consideration when people decide what mode they're going to use.

So for example, people say, well, it's cheaper to drive somewhere. Well, it isn't, it isn't cheaper. Even, you know, with, if you chose a, company, a bus company with, you know, relatively high fares, which we're not, but if you chose one like that, it's still far cheaper than operating a car for a year.

But obviously once you've taken the plunge into that, it's then how do you convince someone back out of it? Uh, so that's a tricky, um, a tricky argument.

Um, and fares, fares don't always drive it. Um, there's, there's an interesting guy called Thomas Ableman, um, in sort of around the public transport sector. And he was talking about this thing called a, a Laffer curve, which is like a demand-type curve, I think it was used for tax origin. But it's to do with if you reduce fares, can you get enough people on board to, um, overcome the lost revenue from those fares?

And, short answer is you can't, it's very difficult. So I always come back to the conclusion that if you want to up the numbers apart from operating the company as well as you can, do need bus priority, do need to speed up the journeys and you need car restraint. Need to recognise the true cost and the true impact of a car in motoring, but we need to do it in a way where it's not a war on the motorist, it's, it's just recognising that that it actually has an impact.

Paul: A lot of it, for me, comes down to convenience when it comes to buses. Where the buses go to from, whether they can get me to where I want to go to. And how often they run, that's obviously the thing. And it is gonna be a balance for the company there, isn't it?

'Cause people might say, [sighs] there's only one bus an hour. I can't, that's not gonna fit in with my timescale. But the bus company'd come back and say, yes, that bus operates half capacity. If we were to run two of them, we're spending twice on the resources we're not getting them full.

It's hard to find that balance there as well, isn't it?

Ben: That's right. And, and it becomes, it *can* become a downward spiral. And that's what you've got to try and avoid when, um, operating buses, is you want a positive upward spiral of getting more people on board, um, and trying to build up the buses that are there.

I mean, generally speaking, I think the privatised bus companies have done a, an incredible job of matching the, the level of service to the demand that's out there. I mean, that, that's why you end up with an hourly frequency if, if people aren't using it.

So it is a case of how do you get the public back out and, and choosing to, uh, use a bus.

Jan: And that's sort of quite, sort of, you know, global ideas and global issues about public transport. What about electric buses? 'Cause that's a technology in the, the bus that's providing the public transport system, so...

Paul: ...he's got 105 of them, don't you know.

Jan: He *has* got 105 of them... [laughs]

Paul: ...probably, in his home, knowing him, in his home garage, that's it, they'll just all be parked there...

Jan: ...so can you tell us about, you know, why Warrington's Own Buses went for electric buses, um, what kind of features they have, whether there's challenges in going down that, that route?

Ben: I think, um, it really started when Warrington Borough Council among, among, who are the owners of, uh, Warrington's Own Buses, um, they declared a climate emergency.

And so they were looking at, um, different options and the government have been funding, um, zero emission buses, or the funding of ofm some of the difference between the cost of a conventional diesel bus and, um, the equivalent electric bus, and also the infrastructure that, that you need. 'Cause you need quite a lot of infrastructure to make it work, you need quite a lot of power.

Um, so, um, Warrington wanted to get ahead of that game, wanted to get the, um, benefits of, um, the emissions. I, I've written down some stats, 'cause I thought it might come up. Um, so, um, bus travel is 5% of all travel in Warrington, cars are 74% of all travel in Warrington. But, uh, in terms of pollution we were at 11% NOx, 5.7% of particulate matter, amongst other uh, downsides.

So, um, bringing in the, um, zebra buses, the electric buses, um, has saved per annum 50,000 kilogrammes of NOx, 1000 kilogrammes of particulate matter, and 7,000 tonnes of CO2. So in terms of non, not only is it a big upgrade for the bus company and for the passengers, but for people who live in the area, that's a huge economic, uh, benefit and a health benefit.

Paul: Are there challenges come with it as well, though, changing over from that diesel fleet to an electric fleet?

Ben: Uh, well I had hair before I, uh, [everyone laughs] before I started doing it, so...

Paul: ...I remember that, from years ago...

Ben: Yeah, um, so yeah, I mean, um, yes. I think one of the hardest things is the grid connection, and I think that's one of the real constraints around electric vehicles, is everyone, you know, well not everyone, but people want to move towards electric vehicles, um, but you need the power.

Uh, you know, if you've got a family-owned small bus company out somewhere in the rural area, Wales is a good example, Wales has got a lot of that. And, you

know, if you, you need, our, our power requirement is, uh, six MVA, per night that we, that's the size of our grid connection, it's pretty big.

And, it, depending on if you're pushing that grid connection over the sort of availability of, of what's in the area that you're trying to have your electric charging, you can end up with a huge difference in, in capital cost.

Um, because obviously upstream they need more power stations and transformers and cables and things like that. So there's all of that side of thing, which is a bit of a, it's probably choking, uh, the, the potential rollout of it. That, that's something that needs addressing.

Jan: And, uh, if you're driving, how long can you drive an electric bus before you have to plug it back in?

Ben: It depends, um, is the politician's answer to that. [Jan and Ben laugh] Um, it's, it's very weather dependent...

Jan: ...ah, yeah, cold would, would drain it fast...

Ben: ...yes. I mean, on average, I would say we are doing something like 250 miles, something like that on a full charge. But it depends because if you've got, um, bad, cold weather, um, the heaters are on, uh, you've gotta keep your passengers warm, and the driver.

So that is a, a big drain. And, and that could be as much as 15% difference, I would say...

Jan: ...ah, yeah...

Ben: ...on, on range. Also the landscape that you're operating in and your operating territory, you know, if it's undulating, then you're gonna have, um, you know, more, more, Cheshire is very flat, the Cheshire plain. So, uh, our, our, um, sort of landscape is, is probably a bit easier. So we can charge our buses up overnight and we can get a full day out of our buses, if everything's going well.

Paul: How far would you used to get out of a diesel bus from one fill of petrol before it needed to be refuelled?

Ben: In our case, in Warrington, probably, well, probably more than that. Um, but, um, it didn't, we didn't have to do a major change of our schedules to go electric. So it was a bit of tweaking, but nothing fundamental where we were having to send more buses out or, or that kind of thing.

But I, I read in the news today that, um, HGVs, and lorries and things, um, for registrations of HGVs last year, only one in 70 were not a diesel. Everything else was, just remained as a diesel and, and only one in 70 was electric.

And I think a big part of the reason for that is not just the, the, uh, charging the vehicle up, but it's the fact that you need fast power somewhere else. [laughs] It, when you get to the end of your delivery, you need to be able to charge it up quickly.

Jan: Yeah. Filling a tanker, super-fast.

Ben: Exactly. Yeah, you carry the fuel around with you.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: This is the kind of question I think you'd have known even before you became a CEO of a bus company: about how many miles day does a bus do?

Ben: It depends. Um, it depends on your operating territory. We probably do about 80 miles, a hundred miles a day per bus, something like that. But a London bus can be out all day and all night, come in for some fuel, go back out and, yeah.

Pau: So when you talk about 250 miles, which I thought really is no inconvenience at all then, if you're doing around eighty to a hundred miles a day for a bus. And it then goes and parks back in the shed or, I'm sure you've got proper name for it, overnight. It's fine. It's not, like you say, having to be drawn out of service just to get charged again, so there's no problem with that.

Ben: Yeah. And people are experimenting with different types of refuelling, uh, in, in terms of electricity. So some people are using, um, sort of, a out on the road pantograph on top of the bus, like a train would have, where it, um, will take, they call that opportunity charging. So, there's a bit of that going on in certain places.

Um, some places are trying to use hydrogen. There's still a bit of that going on...

Jan: ...ah, right, yeah...

Ben: ...um, but I think electricity is, is coming out as the dominant mode.

Jan: And, um, just so that you're not the only sad person here, I get very excited when I'm on a bus and I realise it's an electric bus. Also, when I first

was in a taxi and I thought, oh, it's an electric taxi and I want to engage the taxi driver in a conversation, whether they like it or not. [Ben laughs]

So, um, so what kind of, um, you know, what kind of response have you had from your customers, and do you see having an electric bus part of, you know, the, the way you communicate and work with your customers?

Ben: Well, since rolling out the fleet, we have had passenger growth, which, which is good...

Jan: ...ah, that's fascinating, yeah...

Ben: ...um, we are, um, I think we were ninth highest passenger growth last year in, in, uh, the country. Um, so that was good, 'cause um, you know, we, we need that, Warrington needs that.

Um, so, um, I think there was a lot of interest in the buses. I mean, I've, I've got a podcast-unfriendly photograph of one of our buses here, but [short laugh] you can see that they're neon yellow, and you can't miss it. And, it says 'better by electric' goes on the cantrail and, and things.

So we do tell people. We don't, I would, I say, we don't really scream that it's an electric bus, because I don't really think that people would choose to use a vehicle, a bus, based on its, um, power. I, I don't think that would be a choice, um, that they would make.

Um, but I still think it's, tell people. And I also sometimes get a bit cold on when companies describe their product to people. I always get a bit cold on that because I think does, you know, is your product the thing that's the most important, or is it what that person needs that's the most important? And it's what that person needs, I would suggest.

So it's, um, yeah, so it's not something that we've, we've had launch, launches and, you know, the mayor coming to cut the ribbon and, and things like that. So we've done, done a fair bit. But yeah, we have had growth.

Paul: It's interesting what you say about electrification having an increase in, uh, passengers, 'cause that's in the thing that's been seen for years on railway lines. When railway lines become electrified, passenger numbers increase. There's no good reason why that should happen. Train services aren't necessarily any better or worse because of it, but it's just seen as an effect.

And it sounds like, what you're saying, is you see something similar there, with buses.

Ben: Yeah. I suppose it's at the same time you're, you're making an upgrade, aren't you?

So I think our average fleet age was about 12 years old before we made this change. And so you go from 12 to zero, um, and that does give you a better experience...

Jan: ...yeah...

Ben: ...and things like, um, uh, accessibility is far better on these buses. We've got two, two wheelchair spaces. We've got, um, screens in each direction, so if you're in a wheelchair space, you can always see where the bus is.

And, um, buses nowadays have to have, um, announcements to tell you, so if you can't see, then at least you can hear. Or if you're partially sighted, you can hear the, where you are and that, and that kind of thing. So they are a lot more accessible.

Jan: And in this area, I had ride quality in mind. Because, um, there's nothing worse than hopping on a bus, and if a bus driver's a bit keen to get on, sort of having to lurch away to a seat, whereas you know, does electric vehicles have a smoother ride quality, they're driven well?

Ben: I, I think there's, there's, uh, they're more, buses are thought to be rattly, aren't they? Uh, in the past. And that's obviously because there's a, a six-cylinder diesel engine [Jan laughs] at one end of it that, especially when it's idling, will rattle...

Jan: ...yeah...

Ben: ...um, so not having that, uh, movement does make them smooth. It makes, to me, that makes them seem smoother.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: I have, my memories of buses, in the main part, when I used to go to college, I would be on a bus for a 30, 40-minute ride every morning. And yet, downstairs on the double decker bus, sat above the rear wheel arch, you were shaking up, down, left, right. And that's just when it's sat there idling, let alone when it actually starts going.

But it does seep into your mind, and it makes me wonder if the young people who are starting to use buses now, who come across them when they're electric, this is their experience of them.

That's gonna stick in their mind. And therefore in 10, 15 years' time, their perception of what buses is gonna be totally different to what our perception of from that time ago when we were driving them.

Jan: Yeah.

Ben: Yeah. I mean certain things like the fact that you can, we've got a really good app. Um, a lot of the bus companies have, have good apps now, and, um, you can see where your bus is...

Jan: ...yeah, I like that...

Ben: ...so if it is running 10 minutes late, you, you know it's coming, you can see where it is. You can then pay for the ticket on the app. You can share your journey and, and these kinds of things. So it's, um, yes, it's a different world from what it was.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: This brings me onto next thing. Is it, what are the challenges for getting people onto buses from private transport, in their cars? You talk about benefits of using things like the apps, and all these kind of encouraging factors.

Are there other ones of these you're using, and are there other challenges you've had to address in trying to increase those numbers?

Ben: I think a good bus route is one where there's a lot of chimney pots around. There's a high population density. Usually it's because there's a history of bus routes.

I think you, did you mention the Lake, at the top, did you mention the, uh, buses in the late district and things like that...?

Jan: ...uh, yeah...

Ben: ...and, uh, you know, the triple five bus route...?

Jan: ...yes, indeed...

Ben: ...round the Lake District, one of the most scenic bus journeys in the country. Been going for donkeys' years, that route. So obviously the, the reputation of, of bus travel, um, matters.

And, and one of the biggest things is car ownership. The, the amount of car ownership. If you have an area with low car ownership, um, and the university's a great example, I mean, I got the number one bus here, um, today and, um, for old times' sake [laughs] and, uh, and full of students, and I'm guessing that none of them own a car. And so that really does help, to, to get people onto buses.

Uh, I mentioned earlier the sunk cost is, is, um, hard to overcome. But also I think planning, uh, planning strategy, it really matters. If you look at a housing estate, we seem to be building houses on every available scrap of land in, in England at the moment, um, so to meet demand.

And the way those houses are built really matters. Because on some new estates, you can't get a bus into the, um, into the housing estate. So if you can't actually get in, then that is gonna be the case for hundreds of years that that area is not gonna be served by a bus.

And also the way that the, the houses are positioned. Because, um, you know, back in the day of terraced houses, the terraced house would face the road and then you'd come outta the house and get on the bus.

In a lot of the housing estates, the orientation is that the front of the house faces into the estate, and then to get around to the, say the trunk road can be quite a walk. So those kinds of decisions aren't always promoting bus use. And so I think they're important.

Paul: Yeah. I'm on an estate where you cannot get a bus there. My nearest bus stop is about a 10-minute walk away. Which, some parts of the country, a 10-minute walk would seem like nothing, but if you were in London and you had to walk 10 minutes to your nearest bus stop, it'd be crazy...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...it was designed, there's no way you could drive a bus on there if you want to. One, there's a weak bridge that lorries, et cetera, over a certain weight can't go over. And then there's also a chicane, which if, I'd love to see a bus try and negotiate it...

Jan: [laughing] ...at speed...

Paul: ...yeah, yeah. Anything greater than five miles an hour would be interesting, let's just say that. There'd be, you know, buses all over the place, just carnage, carnage...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...it's an interesting point you make there. You do see lots of estates going up, sometimes on the outskirts of towns where there's no bus routes going in that direction. Or sometimes even within established parts of towns, but where there's no, like you say, no access for buses to get there. That's yeah, a really good point

Ben: I think as well, um, town centres are, um, a, a problem really. Because a lot of buses obviously go to the town centre, don't they, or the city centre. Um, but if we push our, um, shops and things like that out into retail parks. Retail parks are built around cars. Um, so you know, that's fine if you've got a car, but if you haven't, they're not always the most accessible.

And again, you think of retail parks and think of buses going around those retail parks, you don't really, 'cause they're not really that accessible to buses. So it's another example of how we try, you know, we're sort of building things around the car. And then some people say, well, we've got a problem, everyone's, everywhere's congested. Well, yeah, 'cause we've sort of planned that in the way we've gone about it.

Jan: So I really like your, your stories about our, our electric buses and, um, and thinking about transportation in this way. What future challenges do you see coming for your business, um, in terms of how to make it even more sustainable?

Ben: The whole bus industry is going through a, a real change at the moment. So, um, the Labour government have brought in, um, a buses Bill...

Jan: ...ah, right...

Ben: ...uh, buses Act now. It came in in 2025. Um, so that changed the landscape and think it's pretty clear that more, or greater regulation, is probably here for, for now.

Um, and the way that's shaping up is that, um, some, some of your listeners may be familiar with Manchester and Andy Burnham, has got something called Bee Network, which has basically unified the buses under a, a franchising scheme.

Um, so that's quite a high profile, uh, example of how things are changing, because Liverpool City region are going through their process with that. And, um, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, places like that are following, Birmingham and the Midlands will follow.

And the idea is that I think those metropolitan areas are looking at London and saying, well, London's had franchising for years. We would like that, um, in a bid to, um, get greater control.

I think the interesting eye that I'm keeping on that is funding. Because I think they're, they're pretty pricey. I mean, they're good, uh, the Bee Network is good, no, no doubt about it, but it's pricey.

And um, I think it's interesting how passenger growth is being held up as the main sort of KPI. Perhaps, um, you know, a, a private company might say profit is, is, uh, the main KPI. Maybe it's a balance between the two. I think the profit on things like the Bee Network has probably gone down, but growth has increased. So, which is right? I mean it depends where you sit on, on it, doesn't it...? [short laugh]

Jan: ...yeah...

Ben: ...um, so I think the metropolitan areas will have franchising, um, and the rest the sort of provinces and the shires will probably have what they call an enhanced partnership, or an enhanced partnership plus, which is, um, a partnership between the local authority and the bus operators in that area to try and set minimum standards and, you know, better ticketing options and, and things like that.

So I think you're gonna have change, well, we're going through that change at the moment to, to do that. And it's, it's probably gonna signal greater control from the, a more demanding government. 'Cause I think they're saying, well, you know, we, we're, probably, government's probably subsidising 50% of the bus operation cost and they want something back for their 50%. I think that's kind of where we are, and where the balance of power is going in that direction at the moment.

Paul: Obviously, your company's an award winner when it comes to your EV buses. As we pointed out at the at the start, so I'm guessing...

Ben: ...you're making me blush, Paul...

Paul: ...ah, that's fine, Ben. That's what I came here to do, to make you embarrassed, and sit there. [everyone laughs]

Um, therefore, it seems like you are at the forefront of this. But where do other bus companies stand when it comes to adopting, um, electric buses? Are there more following in your wheel tracks? Are there others that are already out there doing just what you're doing?

Ben: Yeah. Um, London is probably the furthest ahead. Um, and these franchise areas that are coming in are, um, often coming in with, uh, electric vehicles and, and that kind of thing, hydrogen vehicles, to try and, um, bring that environmental benefit at the same time.

But obviously it does put the pressure on the cost of operation, um, or capital cost of the bus anyway. So, I think yeah, there there's a move to electric vehicles happening in those in, in and alongside those franchise areas.

Paul: And you've talked about Manchester and the Bee Network where you've obviously got trams, buses, everything that fits in nicely together. It must be a lot harder in an area, even just like Warrington, which is, you know, it's decent urban novation, but connecting bus networks with trains so that everything times together nicely, that must be a, a difficult thing to try and work on.

Ben: Yeah, I mean, sometimes it is, depending on the area, it's as simple as making sure that the, I mean, when I got to Warrington, our buses didn't serve Warrington Bank Quay Station, which is the main intercity rail station.

So, um, we corrected that within about six months of, of me being there because you need people to be able to switch modes, don't you? I mean, that's, that's one of the things that London does so well, is you can switch between the two. Now I think a lot of people say you have to franchise an area in order to get that. I don't think you do have to necessarily franchise it. You just need to work together.

And the bus industry's done some good stuff on that. Um, there's a product called PlusBus that you can buy where you, um, can add a bus ticket to your train ticket to be able to switch modes, and that's helpful. So I think more, more of that.

And, you know, the government has this three-pound fare, uh, fare cap at the moment, that I've, I've been in favour of that for a while. Um, we have to be careful how we try and exit it because, um, don't want a cliff edge where

people think it's too expensive and stop using it. But while you've got it, I think it's a good way of generating, um, passenger growth.

Jan: Yeah, I, I was recently in, in Scotland going from Leuchars Station up to St. Andrews, charged me five pounds ten. I almost had a kitten. [laughs] It's, it's just so...

Paul: ...I thought you were old enough to get the free bus pass now...

Jan: Uh, thank you. Thank you.

Paul: Oh, no, no, that was the next one wasn't it? [Jan laughs] Sorry, I have, getting mixed up. Sorry, Jan.

Jan: Sorry. Just excuse us, Ben, I'm going to kick this man under the table. So, can you wrap up before I try to murder you? [laughs]

Paul: Well, that's a challenge. Yes. Who dies first? Am I killed, or...?

So do you have, Warrington's Own Buses then, any other changes that are planned? You've got all the electric buses. Is there a next step for you when it comes to your sustainability agenda? Or you feel that at the moment you are where you can be?

Ben: I think we're pretty good. Uh, we've got, um, our, we've got a renewable energy tariff with Octopus. Um, so we buy all our power that's, um, not harmed, not harmed the planet while we've been buying it. And we are, um, obviously running an electric fleet.

I think trying to get other areas to have charging infrastructure would help. Um, one of the things that's happening in Cheshire, Warrington is devolution. And I think that's an opportunity for a company like Warrington, Warrington's Own Buses to um, see what we could do in, in the other areas. But, gotta have the infrastructure and the infrastructure takes planning and time and investment. Um, so I think, um, rolling that out would, would be good.

Paul: I've got two more questions. One of which, we know what your favourite bus ride is, Jan, because you talked, well, I assume it's your favourite bus ride 'cause you talked about, so...

Jan: ...yep...

Paul: ...wonderfully about the 555. Have you got a favourite bus ride, Ben?

Ben: It was nice to get the number one bus back to the, to the uni, uh, today...

Paul: ...yeah, it's alright, come on, [Ben laughs] we're not kidding anyone, it's not exactly the most scenic of routes between Lancaster city centre and the University.

Ben: Yeah, I found it scenic. Um, and also the, you know, passes the Booths supermarket, you don't get them everywhere, do you? [laughs] Um, and, uh, I like the number eight bus in, in, goes from Bolton to Manchester. Again I mean, it depends how much scenery you want in Moses Gate or Swinton or somewhere, but um...

Paul: I'm guessing that's got more nostalgia to it for you as well...?

Ben: ...yes...

Paul: ...and did, did you ever ride, did you ever drive that route? The Manchester to Bolton route?

Ben: Um, I didn't unfortunately, but I did drive it in my vintage bus, uh, that I had until a couple weeks ago. But there, um, a friend of mine, um, in the industry, a guy called Alex Warner, um, who writes for Passenger Transport Magazine, he has a company called Great Scenic Journeys, which is all about scenic bus journeys, of which the triple five is in there. And, uh, some of our routes that go through Cheshire are, um, on there as well. Like our 9 and 9A bus that go to things like the, um, Anderton Boat Lift, that's worth, [laughs] worth having a look if you're in Cheshire.

You, are you familiar with that?

Paul: I am. On the canal, yes.

Ben: Yeah, it's quite a contraption, uh, that thing. So, um, yeah, that's, uh, it's one of our scenic routes, but there are some really good ones out there, and his website has loads of details on them.

Jan: We'll put that in the show notes, 'cause I think folk will be interested.

Paul: And just, finally, can you say the word 'bus' for me?

Ben: No. [everyone laughs]

Paul: I didn't think so. Anyone who's listened to the last 45 minutes will, will have noticed that Ben doesn't say 'bus', he says something different. And that's all to do with the fact he's from Bolton.

[Note: for those with access to the transcript only, Ben's pronunciation of 'bus' is closer to 'buzz'.]

Paul: Ben, thank you so much for bringing your expertise, and your love of Buses in to talk to us.

Ben: Yeah, thanks for having me.

[Theme music]

Paul: There's so much to consider about buses, public transport generally, and how we get people from cars to, to sit on the bus, sit on the train, isn't there, Jan?

Jan: But what I like is, it's sort of like, it's like peeling back an onion. So you've got um, how you might do transport in general. Then there's systems and planning and where people are and where they want to get to. Then there's mode choice, car, not-car, et cetera.

Um, so yeah, it was really something, um, I mean, running a bus company is complicated, but understanding how buses fit within a transport system is more complicated still, I think.

Paul: My biggest worry for any bus company that Ben runs is he's gonna be tempted just to spend all of his day saying, I don't want to do any of this important work to keep the company running. I just go, wanna go and drive a bus.

Jan: Well, it's nice to see somebody who actually likes their product. 'Cause sometimes you, you see, um, heads of companies and they're not interested in their product. So remaining interested and committed to your product, I think's a really good leadership characteristic as well.

Paul: There's some really important numbers that Ben mentioned about the amount of pollution, but also I liked the that you can do 250 miles into a charge for one of the buses, and that's two or three times as hours as it needs to go in a day anyway.

The concern that people might have when it comes to buses is, oh, the electric, that means it's gonna be out of service for half the day, 'cause it's gonna need to change.

But in Warrington that's not the case. Uh, he said London might be different because their buses are running 24 hours a day, long routes, here, there and

everywhere. So that might be a different case. But for somewhere like Warrington which is a lot more similar to most of the country than London is then, yeah, that's brilliant.

Jan: And then I also really liked, um, uh, the sunk cost fallacy, partly 'cause it's an accounting concept, as you might know, that would make me joyous in the extreme...

Ben: ...yeah, I'm gonna have a word with him after this, [Jan laughs] about bringing accounting into this podcast. Ben should have known better...

Jan: ...bless him, bless him. Um, because once you have that car, then it's very hard not to use it. And I suppose, um, I was, was in, um, Birmingham during the lockdown and we, we ended up not having a car and we got used to living without a car.

And so when we moved, um, up to Lancaster, we decided we needed one to go to the hills, but it would be really rare for us now to use it to go to the shops or come and go from work. So once you get out of, out of sorts in terms of thinking about the car as way to move, it certainly means that you, you spend a bit more time on public transport.

Paul: Did it work though? Because I know people who've been in similar situations who've said, we'll buy a car specifically for long journeys and then, 'oh, but it's there'. It's so much more convenient, let's just go and get in the car.

Jan: No, it has to be really quite lousy weather for us to get in it...

Paul: ...very good...

Jan: ...yeah, yeah...

Paul: ...well done. I, I'm proud of you [Jan laughs] and your, your bus...

Jan: ... parking, parking on the campus. It's not only the cost, it's finding a car park...

Paul: ...yes...

Jan: ...so we're certainly being incentivised against doing that, which, you know, I, I in general approve of.

Paul: Yes. Anyone who's ever driven around Lancaster, as well, knows the one-way system...

Jan: ...it's mad...

Paul: ...and isn't particularly fond of it, I'm sure. So, there are issues there. And, yeah, it's good to see that there are other companies that are going the same way. There's others that are looking at how to do it, and there's further ways for bus companies to adapt, even beyond just buying the electric buses. There's considerations that are there.

And Ben, you know, said we're doing well, we're doing a good job. But he also came up with things that could still be done.

Jan: Yeah. No, I thought, I thought it was great. Very great. I enjoyed that. What are we gonna do next?

Paul: [weary voice] You'll be happy. We're gonna do analytics.

Jan: Woohoo. I'm there. [laughs]

Paul: Yes, I'll, I'll put a bed in the corner. You can go and talk to someone about analytics...

Jan: ...you'll love it...

Paul: ...I'm not a big fan of analytics.

Jan: You'll love it. You'll love it, trust me.

Paul: We'll discover all about sustainability analytics, and hopefully some interesting, important things. And, if there aren't, you'll be held responsible.

We're going to be joined by Dan Lavinkas, who's the founder and CEO of Citera in Montreal, Canada. And that's a company deals with consultations around emissions, et cetera. And a lot of analytics goes into that.

So that'll be a fascinating conversation.

Jan: And not wholly dissimilar to what we've just chatted about as well.

Paul: Indeed, indeed. Well, I look forward to it. Until then, thank you very much for listening. It's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

Jan: And goodbye from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]