Dear School,

As will already be aware, the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant effect on everyone’s lives and has raised a number of challenges for all of us in terms of adapting to new ways of working and living, with the ultimate aim of keeping everyone safe on the journey towards a new kind of normal.

At First Glasgow, we’re proud to have been able to keep the city and surrounding areas moving through the delivery of essential journeys throughout lockdown and, as businesses and schools begin to reopen, we’re welcoming back more and more customers as they set out on their own journeys towards a new normal at work or school.

The vast majority of the services that we operate are now back running at their pre-covid levels in terms of how frequent each route runs. However, with physical distancing in place to keep everyone safe while they travel on public transport, each of our buses at the present time, and for the foreseeable future, has restricted capacity on board at a level of approximately 50%. To put this into a plain context, our single decker buses can each only hold a maximum of 17-20 passengers, while our double decker fleet can only take a maximum of roughly 34-38 passengers.

Given that we only have around half of the normal seating capacity available to use, and with our entire fleet already in use, there is a very real risk that large numbers of pupils will not be able to board their initial bus of choice, or indeed a subsequent trip that follows on our busiest routes, and they therefore risk being stranded at the bus stop. We expect this situation to be at its most prevalent during the morning and afternoon peaks at school entry/exit times.

With that in mind, we decided to contact schools along many of our bus routes to make them aware of this issue upfront and to advise that schools make plans for this information to be communicated internally to students and to further cascade this information out to the parents of attending pupils.

The capacity restrictions that we’re dealing with are one of the biggest challenges that we’ve ever faced, and we cannot stress enough how important it is that parents realise the strain that bus networks will come under when schools return. We’d therefore appreciate any assistance that schools may be able to give via their own communication channels to get the message out to parents not to just assume that their children will be able to hop on the first bus that comes along.

While this situation is far from ideal, I can assure you that we’re doing absolutely everything possible to mitigate the effects of instances of full buses, and our service network will therefore continue to be reviewed regularly in an attempt to adapt to ever changing demand.

In the meantime, we do have a number of new journey planning and real time data tools that can be accessed through our website and app to help passengers check exactly how busy a bus is as it operates along the route, as well as a space checker function to help plan ahead and travel at quieter times. These are:

**First Bus App:** Now shows on a live basis, exactly where buses are on a route, with each bus on the map also showing how many free seats there are on board – it even tells you whether or not the wheelchair space is available. When a bus reaches its maximum capacity, it will show as ‘full’ on the app map and the screen on the front of the bus of the affected trip will show ‘Bus Full due to Social Distancing’.

**First Bus Space Checker**: This function is a new feature only on our website for the moment, but it helps customers to plan their travel movements up to 7 days in advance and identify on the routes that they intend to use when buses are busy and quiet. This works by analysing the data from each service from the previous week and generating a ‘capacity heat map’ that shows when the routes are at their busiest, and when they tend to be quieter. The function is designed to help spread passenger demand across the route and encourage travel at quieter times, thereby helping to reduce instances of buses becoming full where possible, through advance customer planning.

I hope that the above information is helpful in outlining the challenges we as a bus operator are currently facing with physical distancing in force, as well as the advances in journey planning methods and frequent network reviews that we’ve introduced to try and mitigate instances of buses becoming full where possible. If you have any questions on our services, or if I can assist any further, please do get in touch.

Robert Burns

Stakeholder Engagement Officer (Scotland)