

SHANE HYMERS — FASTRACK

The introduction of the Gravesend electric Fastrack bus programme has required innovation at every level, from planning and infrastructure to community engagement and service delivery. Building a 24-hour reliable service has meant overcoming a range of technical, environmental and cultural challenges.

ELECTRIC FUTURE

"I sort of fell into bus transport while driving one as a student job," says Shane Hymers, Network Development Manager at Kent County Council. He had expected a legal job while studying Business, Politics and Law at Manchester University, not to manage an electric bus network.

Fastrack began in 2006 to connect housing developments with destinations like Bluewater Shopping Centre, Ebbsfleet Garden City, and major schools. Designed to plug gaps in rail provision, it has become a model for strategic transport. The upcoming "A route" extension between Gravesend and Dartford adds a further 21km (13.2 miles). Fastrack will operate with 28 electric buses featuring wireless charging, onboard tables, and a 24-hour service.

"It is about more than going from A to B," Shane says. "The system will support local economies and strengthen communities." He sees Fastrack as part of a healthier, greener and more connected way of living. "It is not just transport, it is active travel." Studies show bus users walk more, spend more in high streets, and feel less isolated.

"Throughout the pandemic we kept the full service running," he says with pride, "so ridership bounced back better than elsewhere." Post-Covid, Fastrack had to adapt, as hybrid work and single-trip travel became the norm.

Marketing is currently targeting leisure and family use. Campaigns such as "Your Fastrack" and promoting family tickets are helping re-shape demand.

STRUCTURE

Fastrack is operated like a Local Authority Trading Company (LATCo), allowing profits to be reinvested. The structure gave it resilience during the pandemic and flexibility in delivery. It employs around 80 people.

Backed by the government's Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) scheme, the business case is strong. The council receives 22p per kilometre operated for being zero emission, compared with 6p for diesel. "The numbers stack up," says Shane. "We even have the option to sell energy to other public vehicles."

Delivery has not been smooth. "Kent's terrain is a blessing and a curse," he says. Former quarry sites allow for straight, purpose-built roads, but chalk instability, protected species, and even Viking ship remains have caused delays. Still, "Gravesend backed the vision throughout, and you can feel that support."

INNOVATION

Charging is primarily using an overhead pantograph, common in mainland Europe but not in the UK. It touches the roof of the bus, re-charging in about six minutes while passengers board. "Topping up little and often is key," Shane says, which extends battery life and keeps operations efficient.

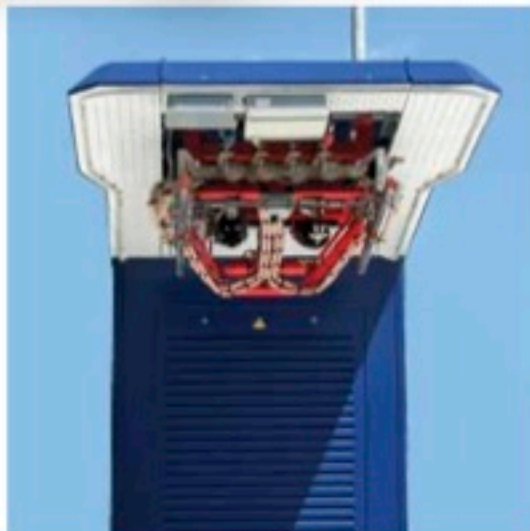
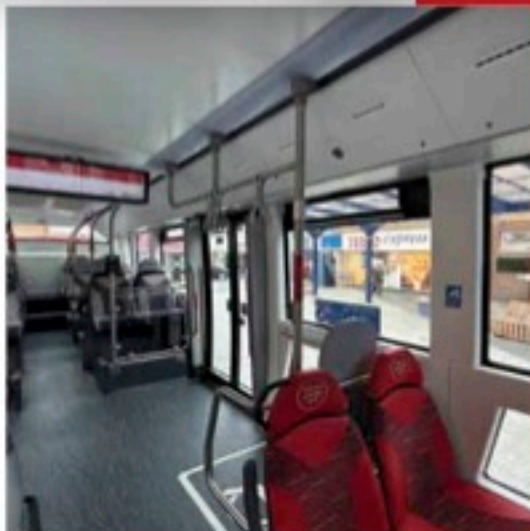
CULTURE AND FUTURE

Each Fastrack bus can remove up to sixty cars from the road, but perception remains a barrier. "Interestingly, people say they do not use buses but they will use Fastrack," Shane says. Comfort, frequency and ownership are key. "We want people to feel it belongs to them."

He sees a shift among younger generations. "Usership is replacing ownership. The car is not the status symbol it was. However, we need to make buses cheaper, faster, and easier to understand."



Shane Hymers



Technology is only part of the story. "Even with automation, empathy and patience still define good drivers, and that is what we have. That will not change anytime soon."

Looking ahead, Shane sees a need for teaching new skills to a more diverse cohort. "We have a good driver mix, but engineering is still very male. We need people who can code and use a ratchet."

Shane sees great future potential in hydrogen and autonomous vehicles. For now, as Fastrack approaches full-service operation, Shane's priority is to reroute public perceptions and get everyone on board the bus revolution.



Emma Plowman has been a bus driver since 2012. "They are lovely to drive," she says as the bus pulls into Gravesend. It is 33°C and the air-conditioning is working hard to keep the temperature cool.

Emma points out the mood lighting, extra driver space, and no mirrors. "It takes a bit of getting used to," she explains, grinning. Instead of mirrors, cameras feed screens around the cab, and sensors alert the driver to cyclists or pedestrians coming too close.

The ride is smooth, the seats are comfortable, and the single-decker feels spacious. It holds the equivalent of a double-decker, with space for two wheelchairs, encouraging accessible travel for everyone. "I love being a bus driver, chatting to people, and every day is different," Emma says with pride.

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