



## The Go-Ahead Group – Chatty Bus

### WHO WE ARE

The Go-Ahead Group is an international bus and rail operator and one of the UK's leading public transport providers. We operate bus services in the UK, Ireland and Singapore and are the largest operator of bus services in London.

### OVERVIEW and OBJECTIVES

Chatty bus is an initiative that seeks to combat loneliness across the UK. It was started by the Go-Ahead Group in January 2019 in response to the government's loneliness strategy. Research at this time revealed that three in 10 Brits go one day a week without speaking to anyone close to them.

The objectives of the project include:

- Combating loneliness in Go-Ahead's regions across all age ranges
- Championing the bus as a safe, friendly space for people to be able to communicate
- Demonstrating the social importance of the bus

### APPROACH

Go-Ahead has eleven bus operating companies in the UK – spanning from the North East, South West, London and Brighton – and works under a devolved operating model. Each bus operator has taken the 'chatty bus' initiative and branding and shaped it to suit the local needs of their communities.

The aim was to create a long-running campaign that would help bus companies to focus on the loneliness needs of their local area. Bus company East Yorkshire has a network of 'chatty champions' who go onto buses on set dates to create conversations with people on the buses and create a community spirit.

Some of our companies, including Go South Coast, have placed buses in town centres and had 'conversation starter' pieces – such as a piano and a joint venture with guide dogs – to encourage people in the town centre to come over and have a conversation with its chatty bus ambassadors.

Meanwhile, Brighton & Hove Buses and Go East Anglia have focused on their student communities, with Brighton & Hove even designing its own bus in conjunction with a local artist.

During the course of the pandemic, 'Chatty Bus' has been needed more than ever to ensure people do not feel isolated. Some of our companies set up phone lines to keep in touch with older communities, who were more likely to be isolated during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021.

Moreover, the initiative was not only external, but internal, with numerous campaigns to encourage bus colleagues to chat to each other and be more open about their mental health. Go North East, for example,

joined forces with the Newcastle United Foundation, who came to depots to talk to bus drivers about the importance of mental health as part of their 'Be a Game Changer' campaign.

Go-Ahead Group has also trained mental health ambassadors at all its UK and Irish operating companies, to continue to promote a culture where mental health is not seen as taboo.

## **RESULTS**

Feedback from stakeholder and passengers has indicated that the campaign has highlighted the importance of the bus in social inclusion for many. The campaign also was featured in numerous high-profile media outlets, including the BBC.

Go East Anglia, for example, has been working with Norwich leaders and businesses to combat loneliness across the city. Over the last two years its subsidiary company Konectbus has become increasingly connected with the local community – including leading 'chatty bus days' in Norwich city centre for people to come over and chat. It has also produced videos of the impact it has made for people across Norfolk – an area where rural bus services are incredibly important, and often people's only lifeline to healthcare, work and services if they do not have access to a car.

Konectbus has recently focused on universities – with more than 50% of students feeling lonely or isolated at some point while studying. The bus company plans to hold regular events at the University of East Anglia's Norwich campus to help students realise the importance of opening up – especially about their mental health.

A recent event in January 2022 saw students receive a free goody bag and hot drink while listening to key speakers from the region, including a former Norwich City footballer Jeremy Goss, representatives from a range of mental health charities, the Lord Mayor and High Sheriff of Norwich and the Norwich Together Alliance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Chatty bus is an ongoing project that is making an ever-increasing difference to people's lives across regions in the UK. Only a few years ago, loneliness was considered a taboo topic and wasn't often mentioned in conversation at a personal or policy level. The government's loneliness strategy coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted even further how communities must rally together to ensure everyone feels supported.

The last three years of chatty bus have been instrumental in laying the groundwork for what will be a project we hope to see continue for years to come. As restrictions begin to ease, more and more of our companies are resuming in-face activities to help their communities. Many are also working with local businesses to highlight where people can get further support.