

Smoking policies for public service vehicles in Oxfordshire, United Kingdom

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Abstract

Objective - To ascertain company policies on smoking by passengers on all buses and coaches operating in a geographically defined area.

Design - Postal questionnaire with telephone follow up of non-responders.

Subjects - All 57 companies operating public service vehicles in the county of Oxfordshire, England, in March 1991.

Results - Fifty-six companies responded. Twenty-one companies operated only smoke-free vehicles. A further nine ran smoke-free minibuses but allowed smoking on other vehicles. Five companies had no restrictions. Companies operating minibuses in addition to other public service vehicles were significantly more likely to run smoke-free coaches and double-decker buses ($p < 0.01$).

Conclusions - Companies running public service vehicles are becoming smoke-free because of awareness of the business benefits and consumer pressure, but legislation is required to ensure that all passengers are protected from environmental tobacco smoke.

(*Tobacco Control* 1992; 1: 268-71)

Introduction

Environmental tobacco smoke has been considered to be a nuisance for many years but has recently come into prominence as a health hazard.¹ Short term exposure causes irritation of the eyes, which become red and itchy with increased lachrymation; nose, which becomes blocked; and respiratory tract, leading to sore throat and coughing.¹ Repeated exposure in the long term causes lung cancer in adults² and respiratory infections in children and probably contributes to coronary heart disease.³ Pregnant women have also been advised to avoid environmental tobacco smoke as it may cause intrauterine growth retardation.^{2,3}

Recently, smoke-free public transport has been advocated both to protect non-smokers from environmental tobacco smoke^{3,4} and to help dispel the myth of smoking being the norm, because it has been a minority behaviour among all social groups in the United Kingdom since 1982.^{5,6} Sixty per cent of the British public favour legislation to ban smoking on public transport,⁷ and a poll of British Members of Parliament in 1989 found 74% supported such a ban.⁸

By 1987 legislation to restrict smoking on public transport had been enacted in 15 countries in the European region of the World Health Organisation (WHO).⁹ Since May 1990 smoking on public transport facilities in Ireland has been restricted by law.³ Smoking in federal interstate buses and coaches was banned in Australia in 1988¹⁰: smoking is now banned on most forms of transport there, including taxi journeys in most states.³ Although smoking by drivers, conductors, and inspectors of public service vehicles in the United Kingdom is illegal, except in certain circumstances,¹¹ there is no national statutory control over smoking by passengers on trains, coaches, buses, or taxis. Taxi drivers may ask their passengers not to smoke whereas transport operators are allowed to impose their own restrictions, but these have no legal force.

WHO proposed the theme "Smoke-free public transport" for the 1991 World No-Tobacco Day. We therefore undertook a survey of bus and coach companies in the county of Oxfordshire, United Kingdom, to ascertain their policies on smoking by passengers.

Methods

A letter was sent in March 1991 to each bus or coach company thought to operate public service vehicles in the county of Oxfordshire (area 260782 hectares, population 550000) reminding the company that it is illegal for staff on public service vehicles to smoke in the vehicle except in certain circumstances¹¹ and asking that a questionnaire be completed. Non-responders were contacted by telephone and answers to the questionnaire were sought during that contact. A random sample of responders were also telephoned to confirm that written responses accorded with actual practice.

The term "bus" (originally "omnibus," a Latin word meaning "for all") is used for public transport within a town, whereas coaches are used for travelling longer distances. A coach typically seats around 50 passengers, whereas a minibus has between about 14 and 25 seats. Double-decker buses differ by having two enclosed decks connected by a staircase within the bus. None of these vehicles has any internal divisions, apart from the internal roof or floor in a double-decker bus and an incompletely separated compartment for the driver.

The companies were divided into three

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Table 1 Numbers (percentages) of eligible companies returning the questionnaire and their smoking policies

	Group A*	Group B†	Group C‡	All
Companies returning questionnaires	17 (81)	7 (78)	16 (62)	40 (71)
Companies answering telephone enquiries only	4 (19)	2 (22)	10 (38)	16 (29)
All companies	21 (100)	9 (100)	26 (100)	56 (100)

* Operating only smoke-free public service vehicles.

† Operating smoke-free minibuses but allowing smoking on other vehicles.

‡ Operating no smoke-free vehicles.

For group A v group C, $\chi^2 = 2.18$, $df = 1$; NS.

Table 2 Numbers (percentages) of companies operating different types of public service vehicles and their smoking policies

	Coaches only	Coaches and double-decker buses	Minibuses and coaches	Minibuses, coaches and double-decker buses	Minibuses only
Group A*	2 (13)	1 (14)	5 (31)	10 (71)	3 (75)
Group B†	N/A	N/A	5 (31)	4 (29)	N/A
Group C‡	13 (87)	6 (86)	6 (38)	(0)	1 (25)
All companies	15 (100)	7 (100)	16 (100)	14 (100)	4 (100)

* Operating only smoke-free vehicles.

† Operating smoke-free minibuses but permitted smoking on other vehicles.

‡ Operating no smoke-free vehicles.

groups according to their smoking policy for each type of public service vehicle. (Comments volunteered about practice during private hire were ignored as hirers can choose to ban smoking.) Group A allowed no smoking anywhere on any of their vehicles; group B operated totally smoke-free minibuses but allowed smoking in at least part of other vehicles; group C operated no smoke-free vehicles.

Results were analysed manually and groups compared using χ^2 tests.

Companies identified by the survey as operating only smoke-free vehicles were then written to individually to enquire about the benefits and problems of this policy.

Results

Of the 69 companies contacted, 46 replied by post and in a further 22 the questionnaire was completed during a telephone interview. No reply was forthcoming from one company. Twelve of the companies contacted were found not to operate public service vehicles in the county.

Twenty-one of the 56 eligible companies (38%) were classified as being in group A because they ran only smoke-free vehicles. A further nine (16%) were placed in group B as their minibuses were totally smoke-free but smoking was allowed on other vehicles. The remaining 26 were classified as group C, operating no smoke-free vehicles. A higher proportion of companies operating smoke-free vehicles (groups A and B) than other companies (group C) returned the questionnaire (table 1) but the differences were not significant.

Seventy-nine per cent (27/34) of the companies operating minibuses banned smoking on these vehicles, compared with 52% (11/21) operating double-decker buses and 35% (18/52) operating coaches (table 2). All public

service vehicles were smoke-free in 50% of companies operating both minibuses and other vehicles, whereas only 14% of companies not operating minibuses banned smoking ($p < 0.01$) (table 3).

When smoking was allowed the extent of restrictions varied widely. Three companies had no restrictions on smoking on minibuses. Smoking was not permitted by any company on the lower deck of double-decker buses, but the proportion of upstairs seats where smoking was allowed varied from 25%–100%. Apart from smoke-free coaches, smoking was permitted on coaches on a median of 33% of seats (range 20%–100%). Five companies had no restrictions at all.

Of the 56 companies, one quarter had a written policy on smoking. Three companies in group B (33%) and four in group C (15%) were considering changing their policy in the next year. One respondent in group B commented that they planned to change because smoke fills the whole coach. One company in group C intended to increase the non-smoking area progressively until coaches become smoke-free.

Cleaning costs were mentioned as being "dramatically reduced" by some of the companies that ran completely smoke-free services. One company said: "When we introduced a no

Table 3 Influence of operating minibuses on smoking policy for other public service vehicles. Values are numbers (percentages) of companies

	Companies operating minibuses and other vehicles	Companies not operating minibuses
All vehicles smoke-free	15 (50)	3 (14)
Smoking permitted on some or all vehicles	15 (50)	19 (86)
Total	30 (100)	22 (100)

$\chi^2 = 7.36$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.01$.

smoking policy it was welcomed by almost all of our regular passengers and we received very few complaints."

Discussion

We have shown that 38% of companies operating public service vehicles in Oxfordshire were entirely smoke-free and an additional 16% ran smoke-free minibuses. We believe questionnaires were answered correctly as all checks confirmed the original answers. In view of the 98% response rate from eligible companies, we think that this survey gives an accurate picture of the smoking policy on public service vehicles in Oxfordshire in spring 1991. We have been unable to find another systematic survey with which to compare our results, so we cannot comment on whether our findings are typical for the United Kingdom as a whole.

After this survey publicity was given through the local media to companies operating totally smoke-free vehicles, particularly to companies that had recently initiated such a policy. Recent correspondence has indicated that at least two further companies are banning smoking (one in response to a follow up letter from us; one running coaches on long distance routes) and another has made its experimental ban permanent. This Swindon-based company, initially troubled by problems with enforcement, conducted a survey of 1601 customers during its six-month initial smoking ban. It found that 773 (48%) were in favour and 236 (14.7%) against the ban. A further 592 (37%) had no strong feelings (letter of 6 May 1992 from J Owen, Thamesdown Transport Ltd).

Restrictions on smoking on public transport have existed in the United Kingdom for many years. London Regional Transport has never permitted smoking on the lower deck of its double-decker buses. After several years of limiting it to the rear portion upstairs, smoking has not been permitted at all since 14 February 1991. Trains run by London Regional Transport have been smoke-free since 1984. Every month Action on Smoking and Health receives reports of more bus companies going smoke-free. The most recent, National Express Coaches, became smoke-free in November 1992. This company operates the main inter-city bus network in the United Kingdom, carrying 12 million passengers annually.

A few companies have introduced smoke-free policies through the enthusiasm of an individual manager, but in most cases smoking has been banned because of consumer pressure. For example, a coach company operating in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire became smoke-free in June 1992 because the previous policy of permitting smoking in the rear seats of their 120 coaches had become increasingly unpopular. Before taking the decision, the company conducted a survey which showed an overwhelming majority, including many smokers, in favour of smoke-free journeys.¹²

Smoke-free transport results in increased comfort for most passengers and reduced

exposure to hazardous substances for both passengers and staff. Apart from decreased cleaning costs, benefits for the company can also include an increase in passenger traffic, as happened to the first of the two bus companies to offer smoke-free coaches between Oxford and London (oral communication, Oxford Tube Ltd).

Disadvantages can include friction and verbal or physical abuse by smokers who wish to smoke or other passengers who wish smokers to observe the smoking ban. Indeed, companies responding to letters suggesting the introduction of smoke-free buses often cite this fear as a reason for not banning smoking (letter of 25 October 1991 from JA Lowrie, and letter of 7 April 1992 from BR Burch, Nottingham City Transport Ltd). However, most companies that run smoke-free public service vehicles have not found it to be a major problem. Another potential disadvantage, also often exaggerated, is the loss of passengers who wish to smoke en route. Of the 1061 customers questioned in the Swindon company survey mentioned previously, only four said that they had travelled less because of the ban (letter of 6 May 1992 from J Owen, Thamesdown Transport Ltd).

Smoking has been banned on most minibuses in Oxfordshire, presumably because the spread of smoke into non-smoking areas is particularly noticeable and these vehicles tend to be used for shorter journeys, thus inconveniencing smokers less. Interestingly, companies operating minibuses were also more likely to ban smoking on their other vehicles: their awareness of the benefits to passengers and their companies of smoke-free transport and the few problems encountered perhaps enabled them to make this change more readily than coach companies without such positive experiences.

Since we conducted this survey the Department of the Environment in the United Kingdom has published a code of practice on smoking in public places.¹³ It states that smoking should be prohibited in places the public attend out of necessity and in public places frequented by young people. Unfortunately, the code has no legal force and public transport vehicles fall outside the department's remit; it is unlikely to influence the manager who wrote on the questionnaire "I believe in freedom of choice" and therefore allows smoking on all seats on his coaches. The most effective tool to ensure clean air for all passengers will be government legislation to make smoking on public transport illegal, a move eagerly awaited by several of the companies in this survey. In the meantime, customers remain the most potent force for change.

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- 11 Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) Regulations 1990, clauses 4.(3)(b), 4.(4)(a), and 4.(4)(b).
- 12 Bartons stub it out. *Nottingham Herald and Post* 1992 June 17.
- 13 Department of the Environment. *Smoking in public places: guidance for owners and managers of places visited by the public*. London: HMSO, 1991.

Translations of abstract

Politiques sur le tabagisme dans les transports publics routiers dans l'Oxfordshire, Royaume-Uni

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Résumé

Objectif: Recenser les restrictions au tabagisme des voyageurs mises en place par les compagnies de transport dans tous les bus et les cars circulant dans une zone géographique clairement délimitée.

Méthode: Envoi d'un questionnaire suivi d'un contact téléphonique avec les personnes qui n'ont pas répondu.

Sujets: Les 57 compagnies de transports publics du comté d'Oxfordshire, Angleterre, en mars 1991.

Résultats: Cinquante-six compagnies ont répondu. Vingt et une interdisent de fumer dans tous leurs véhicules. Neuf compagnies font circuler des minibus non-fumeurs mais il est permis de fumer dans les autres véhicules. Cinq compagnies n'appliquent aucune restriction. Les compagnies qui faisaient circuler des minibus en plus des autres véhicules de service public avaient nettement plus tendance à interdire de fumer dans les cars ou les bus à impériale ($p < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Un nombre croissant de compagnies de transports publics adoptent des politiques non-fumeurs suite à la prise de conscience des bénéfices commerciaux et de la demande des passagers, mais des mesures législatives restent nécessaires pour assurer la protection de tous les passagers contre le tabagisme passif.

Las normas sobre la prohibición de fumar en los vehículos de servicio público en Oxfordshire, Reino Unido

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Resumen

Objetivo: Evaluar las normas de política de la empresa en relación con la prohibición de fumar a los pasajeros en todos los autobuses que operan en una zona geográfica definida.

Diseño: Cuestionario postal, con seguimiento telefónico de los que no respondieron.

Sujetos: Las 57 empresas que operan vehículos de servicio público en el condado de Oxfordshire, Inglaterra, en marzo de 1991.

Resultados: Respondieron 56 empresas. Veintidós operaban solo vehículos donde estaba prohibido fumar. Otras nueve operaban microbuses donde se prohibía fumar, pero permitían fumar en otros vehículos. Cinco empresas no imponían restricciones. Las empresas que operaban microbuses además de otros vehículos de servicio público tenían significativamente más probabilidades de operar otros vehículos donde se prohibía fumar ($p < 0,01$).

Conclusión: Las empresas que operan vehículos de servicio público están adoptando la norma de prohibir fumar en estos porque han cobrado conciencia de los beneficios empresariales y la presión de los consumidores, pero se requiere legislación para asegurar que todos los pasajeros sean protegidos del humo de tabaco ambiental.

The Chinese translation will be published in the next issue.