

# Day trippers return

Chalkwell is slowly getting back into the day tour market after an absence during the lockdown

Chalkwell is pleased to announce its coaches are back out providing day trips once more



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**C**halkwell's Day Break package has been running for a number of years and over that time it has proved one of the Sittingbourne-based operator's most popular offerings. However, 2020 has turned out to be different for the obvious reason. Despite a steep drop-off of services, Jenny Barham, the operator's Head of Sales and Marketing, said the day trip market now seems to be returning.

Sadly, like operators across the country Chalkwell had to stop most of its operations in mid-March as the travel restrictions for lockdown were put in place. Jenny said: "The last day trip we sent out was on 6 March. We didn't do another until 18 July."

After a bleak few months, there are suggestions things are getting better business-wise at Chalkwell. Jenny said: "It looks like 2021 is looking good, with all of the postponements we have until then."



Although day trips are starting to return, private hire is still down

The operator is already starting to get people onboard its day trip coaches this year, with the first going out in mid-July and similar trips are still being made. Jenny said: "For us, it's more of a confidence building exercise. It's about getting people

out and about and travelling again; and in comfort more than anything. Our customers have been missing the social interaction with each other and even with our drivers too; they have good rapport with them."

## Return to journeys

Jenny told *Bus and Coach Buyer* that the company's first trips back have gone well. However, it has not all been plain sailing since then. As the operator bit the bullet and returned to providing day trips when lockdown restrictions on travel were made more lenient, there was a frustrating occurrence. Jenny explained: "The group departments at attractions seem to be victims of the furlough. Most frustrating are those who just will not entertain group visitors. There are a few who say they are no longer able to take them. There are several that say they don't want to know. They say they are adhering to government guidelines."

The groups Chalkwell is taking are significantly reduced in size compared to pre-pandemic times. With social distancing in place, it can only take in the region of 23 passengers on a 49-seat coach. This adds to the frustration for Jenny, who said of the

attractions who are refusing coach groups: “But they would be happy to take visitors who arrive by car, with five cars with four people onboard.”

This is not the case across the board thankfully: “Other places are more than accommodating. It looks like some are interpreting the government guidance in different ways to others.”

Is passenger demand coming back to what it was before lockdown? “Yes and no. A lot of what we had planned has been postponed into 2021, largely in a hope the world is back to a new normal by then.”

In terms of what kind of daybreaks Chalkwell’s customers are going for, the most popular ones are those out to places in the open air. Jenny said: “With face masks required in enclosed areas, people are looking at places like gardens and market places. Seaside resorts have lost a lot of appeal because of overcrowding. But it tends to be towns and cities; people like to be out and about in the fresh air.”

It is a heatwave as this is written, so being out in the summer sunshine is appealing. However, glorious sunny days are a rarity in the UK and autumn is only a couple of months away. How will that affect day trips? “Hopefully by the time the weather starts to turn we may have more flexibility,” Jenny said, referring to possible changes to government pandemic guidance.

She continued: “Come winter we are looking to do Christmas markets. Although they have been dropping like flies.”

### COVID-secure

Making sure passengers are happy and confident to get back on a coach is key, Jenny believes. Chalkwell has gone through a number of processes to ensure its fleet is COVID-secure and to reassure its passengers. She said: “We have produced a guide to travel, it’s on our website. And for every Day Break tour we send a revised travel document.”

The operator has also achieved the Visit Britain ‘We’re Good to Go’ accreditation, a nationally recognised set of standards assuring tourists that all necessary COVID-related safety precautions have been taken. Jenny said: “Every passenger gets a copy of the ‘We’re Good to Go’ certificate with a COVID-secure guide sent through to them.”

Chalkwell has put in place a revised cleaning regime, with a fogging machine bought aboard to ensure the vehicle is thoroughly cleaned and viruses dealt with.

When passengers board its coaches, social distancing is in play. Jenny said: “Our 23 passengers on a 49-seater seems to work. But it does take the number down. We have had no change to the prices of our Day Breaks. We have a very loyal



customer base. If we did change the prices, they would understand, but we’re not like that. These people come back year after year.”

If a passenger arrives without their own face mask, Chalkwell has a stock of these. For extra safety, seats behind the driver are not in use. There has been more focus on wiping down touch-points on its



**It looks like some are interpreting the government guidance in different ways to others**



coaches and drivers are given cleaning supplies, allowing them to give the vehicle interior a quick clean while the passengers are at their destination.

### Passengers positive

Passengers have taken well to the recently returned day trips, according to Jenny. “Feedback has been really positive. It’s about building on that now.”

Getting passengers’ confidence to travel back is key at the moment. Jenny said: “Before they go on tours, we telephone them to make sure they are still happy to travel. So far, everyone has been fine. I imagine there is a nervousness, there’s bound to be, it’s been a scary time. We are trying to alleviate that with a bit of hand holding. At the end of the day, these people are our friends.

“In January, we invited people to come meet us at our site. They have backed our Day Breaks for years and we talked to those people and listened to what they had to say. We like to give back to them, make sure they are alright. Even during the lockdown, we gave them a call. Sometimes you’re the only people they speak to. It was lovely to do that. They are not our customers, they are our friends.”

Jenny admitted that the operation is running on slightly less patronage than it would like, but then again so is the whole industry. It has not entirely been off the road over the past few months, with a couple of coaches out on private hires since March. To drum up some more business, Chalkwell is about to send out a big batch of mail marketing.

With holidays abroad put in potential jeopardy with quarantines snapped into action in short notice, some tourism bodies have suggested a surge in holidays at home, so-called staycations. Is that something Jenny believes will prove



The company’s coaches have been cleaned even more extensively than before

**If your customer base is half as good as ours, they will come back**

popular? "I think so. I'm thinking from our point of view, with eyes on the Day Break package, passengers need to know they are going to be safe and well. They don't want the hassle of flying and when going to European destinations there is the risk of quarantine and lockdown. So I think they will be staying more in the UK. It will boost the economy here. For passengers it's more of a comfort blanket, holidaying in the UK. I really do think this is what we will see this year and next year."

Day trips may be one of the busier sides of the business in upcoming months compared to private hire, according to Jenny. She said: "Private hire has not gone up. A good majority of private hire is related to schools."

The school holiday period was another time Chalkwell is usually busy. Jenny said: "That was another large area for us, when we would be transporting international students visiting. But there has been no international travel; visits are very few and far between. Hopefully that business will start to come back."

Despite this fall-off of work, the business has managed to keep going through the government's furlough scheme, with several of its staff on that. It also operates local buses, a service it has maintained throughout the pandemic, albeit at a



reduced capacity in the early stages of the lockdown. It has also maintained a group of staff in the office.

**Light on the horizon**

There seems to be light breaking on the horizon for Chalkwell. Jenny said: "Slowly and surely the work is starting to trickle back."

She believes it will not exactly be business as usual though, saying: "Coach travel will be different, there's no two ways about it. The way we live our lives, how we go to places and do things, everything will be different. I'm hoping in time, people will feel like they want to travel on coaches."

Something she sees as a benefit coaches have over other modes of transport in these times is that social distancing is possible onboard. "But on aeroplanes, trains and the Tube, they are packed to the gunnels. We need to drum home that coaches are safe; that we can move them around in a COVID-secure and green environment. And we can keep the group all together and move in one go."

Difficult times can dampen anyone's mood, but some people seem to keep a shining, upbeat temperament no matter what. Jenny seems to be one of these positive, optimistic souls. Speaking about how operators can keep a similarly positive outlook, she said: "Stick with it. Don't be beaten by anybody. There are people out there that are willing to help. We had to postpone and rearrange trips and it did get disheartening. Our customer base is fantastic. If your customer base is half as good as ours, they will come back."

"We are all in it together. There is not one operator doing better than another. Now is not the time to undercut. We are sharing advice and helping others out." ■



Keeping in touch with passengers is very important to Chalkwell, with its staff phoning customers before their trips