

Bus service reviews: consulting on changes to local services

A best practice toolkit

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1. Introduction

Passenger Focus represents the interests of bus passengers in England (outside of London). Our research on bus passenger priorities¹ and bus passenger satisfaction² emphasises the importance that passengers place on a frequent, reliable service.

Passenger Focus recognises the exceedingly difficult situation in which local authorities find themselves. They are facing a reduction in income and must find savings from somewhere – bus services being but one of many competing public services. This report is not a campaign for more funds, however welcome that might be, but an attempt to help local authorities with their challenging task.

Connecting with passengers early enough can help make changes that least inconvenience those who rely on them. We carried out some research into the effects of service changes on passengers, and used the information to put together this guide to effective consultation. We hope this will be useful to you.

2. Background

Around two-thirds of all journeys made using public transport in Great Britain are by bus – making bus by far the most frequently used mode of public transport. In total there were 4.6 billion bus journeys in England in 2010-11, with some 2.3bn of these being outside of London³.

Just over half (53.5 per cent) of all bus operating revenue comes from fares – the remainder comes from public sources, either in the form of direct subsidy (19.9 per cent) or through concessionary travel schemes (18.8 per cent) or through the Bus Services Operating Grant (7.8 per cent)⁴.

In October 2010 the coalition Government's Spending Review set out three significant decisions that could have a significant impact on this public funding and hence on passengers:

- an overall 28 per cent reduction in local authority revenue expenditure from 2011-12
- changes in the formula for concessionary travel reimbursement from 2011-12
- a 20 per cent reduction in the Bus Service Operators' Grant (BSOG) from 2012-13.

In November 2010, the House of Commons Transport Committee launched an inquiry looking into the impact of these decisions on bus services. Passenger Focus represents the interests of bus passengers in England (outside of London). Our research on bus passenger

¹ *Bus Passenger Priorities for Improvement*. Passenger Focus. March 2010

² *Bus Passenger Survey*. Passenger Focus.

³ DfT Transport Statistics – table BUS0108

⁴ DfT Transport Statistics: 2010-11. Table BUS0501

priorities⁵ and bus passenger satisfaction⁶ emphasises the importance that passengers place on a frequent, reliable service. So as part of our submission⁷ to the Transport Committee we contacted all local authorities asking whether they were planning cuts to services, how they had reached their decision and the extent to which they had consulted (or were going to consult) passengers in this process. We discovered a variety of approaches with some local authorities having a well-defined process for engaging with passengers while others were more akin to an announcement of impending changes.

This was a theme picked up by the Transport Committee in its report, *Bus Services after the Spending Review*⁸. It saw the combination of cuts to revenue expenditure and to BSOG as well as the possible implications of changes to the concessionary fares guidance as creating 'the greatest financial challenge for the English bus industry for a generation'. It concluded that the combined impact of these funding changes will, in some parts of the country, have a disproportionately adverse impact on the provision of local bus services and the level of bus fares.

The committee recommended that Passenger Focus should develop a 'consultation toolkit' for local authorities. This should "provide best practice guidance on how local authorities can hold meaningful consultation processes with local communities about bus service proposals".

3. Process and methodology

This report sets out Passenger Focus's toolkit on consultation. It is based on our own observations during the 2011/12 round of cuts and on conversations with local authorities and operators.

We fully acknowledge that local authorities are best placed to decide how much of their budget they want to spend on the provision of local services: councillors are elected with a mandate to make such decisions as well as being held to account for the consequences via the ballot-box. Passenger Focus also recognises the exceedingly difficult situation in which local authorities find themselves. They are facing a reduction in income and must find savings from somewhere – bus services being but one of many competing public services.

This report is not a campaign for more funds, however welcome that might be, but an attempt to help local authorities with their challenging task.

As part of its initial submission to the Transport Committee, Passenger Focus wrote to all 88 local authorities as well as trawling their websites to see whether, on what and how they were consulting passengers about cuts to bus services. We found many examples of

⁵ *Bus Passenger Priorities for Improvement*. Passenger Focus. March 2010

⁶ *Bus Passenger Survey*. Passenger Focus.

⁷ *Bus Services After the Spending Review*. Passenger Focus. 2011

⁸ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/transport-committee/inquiries/bus-services/>

excellent engagement with passengers. We also identified instances where decisions were effectively just announced or where respondents found it hard to identify the potential impact of the changes.

From the information gathered we identified a number of examples where we felt consultation was well handled. Examples of such good practice are provided later in this document. We then carried out a series of interviews with authorities to draw out the common themes and principles underpinning a successful exercise. During these interviews we were particularly keen to build up a picture of how authorities planned and managed the process and how they used the results in their ongoing deliberations.

Throughout November and December 2011, we met or spoke with the following transport authorities:

- Surrey
- Worcestershire
- Norfolk
- Essex
- Thurrock
- Suffolk.

We would like to thank officers for their close co-operation and willingness to share best practice examples.

In addition we met with Metrobus in Surrey to better understand the excellent work carried out with Surrey County Council. We again thank members of the Metrobus team for their contribution and support.

The results of our investigations are covered in the next chapter. We set out what we see as the key principles of consultation and use case studies to illustrate how these were achieved or delivered.

We do not pretend that this list is exhaustive or exclusive – there will be other examples of good practice which we have not seen. Nor does exclusion from this report imply any criticism of local authorities we did not interview.

4. Consultation on changes to bus service provision

Our suggested toolkit is separated into four main sections:

- Collate
- Consult
- Consider
- Communicate.

Each of these sections contains a broad set of steps to follow. Within each step we include case study examples from authorities across the country and, where applicable, supporting evidence from our research.

The guidance is not intended to be prescriptive. We do not believe that there is a single ‘one size fits all’ solution. It will be important that authorities design a proportionate process suitable for their particular circumstances.

Stage One: Collate – formulate proposals

Passenger Focus was asked to look at the specific act of consultation rather than the detailed transport planning and policy work involved with identifying the options that are to be consulted on.

However, our investigations have shown that the consultation stage is significantly enhanced if the local authority can show how it came to its proposals and can demonstrate that other options have been considered. While good information will not guarantee a good consultation, insufficient detail will almost certainly result in a poorer consultation.

Key principles and approaches:

- *Ensure that there is robust information on which to formulate proposals and to make decisions – this should include:*
 - *An awareness of what services are already provided, who uses them and the impact of withdrawing them.*
 - *How the impacts of any reductions in budget could be mitigated – e.g. is there a way costs could be reduced or of providing other forms of transport such as demand-responsive transport or taxis? One way of doing this is to start by establishing a clear methodology for determining priorities and options.*
- *Informal early dialogue with local bus operators can result in imaginative options which can be presented during subsequent, formal consultation.*

Well in advance of the Government’s announcement about the Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, Surrey County Council decided to embark on a phased countywide bus review. This looked at all services, contracted and commercial, within an area of the county over a three year period, against a medium term budget plan of reducing bus service support from £11m per annum to £7m at the end of the review period.

By doing so it effectively turned the national financial crisis into an opportunity to review its entire subsidised bus network, and to do so in full consultation with passengers and local

groups. The review, which covered the county in a number of phases, is the most thorough and inclusive exercise we have yet come across at Passenger Focus.

From the outset it identified that just 'salami slicing' the network, based on poorest usage or highest cost per passenger journey, could lead to an unbalanced and illogical residual network which did not take proper account of social need.

One of its particular aims was to see if any existing sponsored routes could be made partly or wholly commercial. As part of the review, Surrey asked the operators for any proposals – with one eye on reducing subsidy but with a clear aspiration of preserving services where possible.

Surrey's consultation materials drew heavily on the conversations it had had with operators about their ideas for changing the network, and placed less emphasis on the cost and usage of particular routes.

Surrey feels its engagement with operators has had a positive effect with operators in East Surrey making three strategic services either wholly or partly commercial, resulting in a major subsidy saving.

It is always enlightening to get views 'from the other side of the fence' and so we also asked an operator in the Surrey area for its take on this process.

Metrobus valued the opportunity to discuss proposals with Surrey County Council. It felt there was sometimes a reluctance on the part of local authorities (NB it was not specifically referring to Surrey) to change supported services – possibly due to a natural desire to avoid complaints from users or elected members. A more formal review offered the opportunity to overcome such resistance and to see whether services were being provided in the most efficient way.

Following the review Metrobus was able to identify potential cost savings. On one route the proposed changes meant that fewer vehicles were needed in the peak, significantly reducing the cost of operation. As a result it could run a daytime Monday-Saturday service on a commercial basis. This wasn't without its risks – some established links were broken and passengers on one estate had to walk further to reach their nearest shop - but overall it was felt to be a more efficient service.

One benefit for Surrey County Council was that it was able to introduce a number of new Sunday services (many of which had been taken off in previous funding cuts) which was really a result of the strength of the comments made through the consultation. The level of interest in Sunday service provision through the consultation exercise surprised Surrey County Council and Metrobus. As a result Surrey County Council managed to put some new services in whilst reducing the budget. The cost of running infrequent but important Sunday services is relatively cheap compared with all day service requiring more vehicles as in higher-frequency peak periods.

Overall the restructure did break some established links but equally new valuable links were created, some of which had been asked for in the consultation process. Both Surrey County Council and Metrobus worked through the consultation feedback which helped improve the overall proposals of authority and operator alike.

For example, one route was retendered but restructured under the operator's proposal to run with one less bus, almost halving the subsidy in the process. This reduced a quieter section of route from three buses per hour (bph) to two, but increased the service along a busier section from two bph to three bph. New roads were served in a large estate, which has proved to be a very popular move.

Worcestershire County Council also worked with bus operators on route optimisation. This was in response to a reduction in budget and the need to identify savings rather than the wider review carried out by Surrey, but it too had some success:

- A review of vehicle requirements for the '302' and '303' services found that the same level of service could be provided with one fewer vehicle. This reduction in operating cost meant the service could be operated commercially with First Bus from September 2011.
- Service 758 was reviewed by Yarrantons (the commercial operator) which proposed a timetable that removed all subsidy from the route. Several journeys were subsidised before September 2011, but now the entire service is commercial. This has protected a valuable rural arterial service.

However, efficiency savings alone did not reduce expenditure enough to make the required savings and therefore consideration had to be given to further cost savings through service reductions and the withdrawal of services. To help determine which services should be retained, each service was scored against the following performance indicators:

- the actual cost per passenger carried
- the average number of passengers on each journey
- the deprivation index for the areas serviced
- the car ownership of the areas served
- the primary journey purpose
- the availability of alternative services for the journey.

From this, Worcestershire identified a list of proposed changes and reductions which would be put to public consultation. The value of the pre-engagement with operators is seen in the fact that this list was smaller than might otherwise have been required.

Norfolk County Council also started from the position of having to make a cut in budget. In formulating its proposals it also looked at services on a route by route basis, using a number of specific criteria:

- Who is using the services?
 - the number of users on a particular route
 - levels of income of those who use the route
 - levels of car ownership within the area of the route
 - the age range of people within the area of the route
 - the proportion of residents on the route who may be experiencing difficult social conditions.

- The impact of changes to routes
 - availability of alternative transport, i.e. rail, other bus or community-based transport services
 - whether the route offers journeys to work or education
 - whether the route is used by many older or disabled people
 - whether frequency can be reduced, rather than the whole service.

- Other considerations
 - whether the bus operator would be able to run the service without the council's financial support
 - whether renegotiation around cost of services was possible
 - whether services could be replaced with a 'demand-responsive' or 'feeder' arrangement e.g. involving community transport providers
 - value for money, comparing cost of service with passenger usage
 - whether fares could be raised
 - whether services on Sundays or during later evenings, when usage is much lower, could be removed rather than removing services entirely.

This analysis was used to identify which services would be withdrawn and which would remain. As in Worcestershire, those services identified for withdrawal would be consulted on.

Alongside the written consultation was a series of events in town centres across the county to engage users and potential users of services in the area. Two important messages were helpful in minimising negativity around this consultation:

- The council's continued investment in public transport – for example, the shift to a mixed offer of scheduled services and newer transport delivery models such as demand-responsive transport, community transport schemes, volunteer schemes and car clubs

- And the commitment to an ongoing dialogue with providers to minimise impact of the subsidy reductions.

Essex County Council tried a different approach in the Dengie Peninsula in May 2011. This was designed to give parish councils the lead role in identifying the needs of residents, and deciding priorities. A group was set up consisting of an independent chair, representatives from each of the parishes affected by potential changes to services, and two supporting officers from Essex County Council.

Five detailed options were formulated. Each parish affected by the changes provided a response to the options. The response from each parish was reflected in the results of an online survey, set up primarily to engage with 'harder to reach' groups.

Members of the group felt they had a clearer understanding about each other's needs, plus the procurement and decision processes carried out by the council. They also appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the process and have ownership of the services. For its part the county council has a clearer understanding of the various needs of each of the parishes and was better able to design the network to best meet this. This worked well in this particular area due to the strong interest in local transport and very active and dedicated volunteers.

Stage 2: Consult - when, what, who and how

Many books have been written on how to engage with consumers and customers. Boiling the different theories down invariably identifies four core components: when to consult, what to consult on, who to ask and how to carry it out.

Key principles:

When:

- *It is important that consultation takes place as soon as the authority is ready and able to put sufficient information into the public domain to enable an effective and informed dialogue*
- *The consultation should be designed to influence the final decision of elected members*
- *The consultation exercise should be scheduled as early as possible in the process as these two factors allow*
- *It is important not to confuse consultation with notification – asking people when everything is settled is not consultation*
- *The Government recommends allowing 12 weeks for consultation. Where a shorter consultation is run, the reason for not allowing 12 weeks should be given.*

It is acknowledged that the timing of the original round of cuts wasn't completely in the gift of local authorities. Councils had little time to react to the Spending Review decision before the budget-setting process was on top of them. This was bound to have a big impact on the timing of any consultation. The short timescales imposed by the spending review also had an impact on the decisions made – savings are maximised if cuts are made at the start of a

year rather than part way through it; the less time there is to make the saving the more potentially severe the cuts have to be. This too will have had an impact on the timing of any consultation.

In future, however, it ought to be more possible to factor in a robust consultation process in any future budget setting rounds.

Consulting on a countywide basis can present a considerable logistical challenge. One advantage of the wider approach adopted by Surrey County Council was that it allowed the review to be broken into three phases:

- Phase one (changes started in September 2010): North Surrey (Elmbridge, Runnymede and Spelthorne) and East Woking as well as Reigate and Banstead
- Phase two (changes started September 2011): Surrey Heath, West Woking (including some services into Guildford) and Tandridge
- Phase three (planned for September 2012): Epsom, Mole Valley, and Waverley including some services in Guildford

What:

- *Provide the context: explain why changes are being considered*
- *Explain the impact on 'me' - make it as specific and tangible as possible by including:*
 - *details of all services from which funding will be withdrawn*
 - *which services will remain*
 - *what other facilities may be withdrawn/closed – e.g. information at bus stops, travel centres.*
- *Provide a sense of scale: if options are being presented give some indication of how many people it affects*
- *Include details of alternative options explored and the reasons for not putting them forward. If alternative modes of transport are to be provided then tell passengers e.g. demand-responsive transport, taxi*
- *Provide a timetable of the process that is being followed.*

Worcestershire County Council produced a leaflet entitled *Proposals for Reducing Subsidised Bus Services* as part of its public consultation in 2011.

This gave a sense of the scale of the existing investment: £4 million each year used to support subsidised passenger transport services, spread across 115 contracts, enabling approximately 4.6 million passenger journeys per annum. It also explained the need to find savings over the next four years as a result of spending pressures and national and local budget reductions. While some of these savings had already been found through efficiency and operational reviews, it explained that there was still a need to reduce costs further through service reductions.

The leaflet then set out an indicative list of services that would be affected by the cuts. Bus services were shown by district (with cross-boundary routes appearing in more than one district). The leaflet also explained the process by which these particular services had been identified (i.e. the criteria set out in Stage One, above).

Importantly it also pointed out that this was an indicative list and that it was subject to the consultation and to further work with local bus operators – in other words that it wasn't set in stone.

Surrey County Council also set its review of bus services into a wider context. It explained that costs in the bus industry had been rising much faster than general inflation and that many bus services had stopped being commercially viable, requiring Surrey County Council to spend much more in order to keep the network running. The bus review, it went on to say, provided an opportunity to take a fresh look at the whole network, where people are travelling to and how often - the aim being to focus investment on the areas or travel opportunities where it is needed the most.

As mentioned, Surrey split the review into three phases. Consultation on the last phase (phase three covering Epsom, Mole Valley and Waverley, including some services in Guildford) ran for a 12 week period from 1 November 2011 to 31 January 2012. The consultation set out the proposed changes and a timetable for future action – in this case a decision by the council in June 2012.

We again thought there would be merit in taking a look at the consultation process from an operator's perspective. Metrobus pointed out that tendering is a competitive process and that operators put a lot of work into identifying efficiencies on routes and services and on turning these into specific proposals for the authority. There was a concern that sharing these proposals in public, rather than on a commercially confidential basis with the authority, could result in one operator's 'good idea' being adopted by another company. In essence, one operator might do all the work but another one might win the actual tender to provide those services. We acknowledge these concerns but, from a passengers' perspective, the emphasis must be on providing the optimum level of service to passengers. There must be enough information in the public domain to ensure a good consultation exercise.

Who:

- *Target those who use the affected services and those who rely on or benefit from them.*
- *It is essential that interested parties are identified early on in the process so that consultation exercises can be designed and targeted accordingly. When consultation exercises need to reach a diverse audience, several approaches may be required.*
- *Be proactive when disseminating consultation documents. Careful consideration should be given to how to alert potential consultees to the consultation exercise and how to get views from relevant sectors of the community and the economy.*

The obvious target audience for service cuts are the bus passengers using the service. In theory these could be easily be targeted by materials at stops and on buses. Where options would lead to new services being introduced or existing services being extended, consultation with non-users or users of other services may be needed.

There is also merit in consulting other sections of the community, including local businesses and generators of bus trips such as health, education and retail establishments.

In addition to approaching bus passengers, residents and local businesses individually, local authorities should also include parish and town councils, district councils and local ward councillors.

In Thurrock the consultation aimed to involve all individuals in the borough. The consultation form was posted to all residential addresses in Thurrock. All commercial businesses along the proposed routes were targeted as well as all major commercial businesses such as large supermarkets.

Worcestershire County Council adopted various consultation methods to ensure that the consultation process was as inclusive as possible. It approached a wide range of stakeholders such as local residents, parish and town councils, schools, district councils and local members. A total of 10,000 hard copy questionnaires were distributed.

Council meetings or road shows can be effective in gathering views but there will inevitably be some passengers or groups who will be under-represented; for instance passengers from rural areas may not be able to attend a town hall evening meeting, especially if it ends after the last bus home has left. Care must be taken to ensure that the intelligence gleaned from such meetings is balanced with other sources to ensure as broad a representation as possible.

How:

- *A variety of different approaches may be required to reach a diverse audience – it is unlikely that a single method/approach will provide sufficient information*
- *Community organisations can help provide an effective way of reaching people or groups whose voice might otherwise go unheard*
- *Even when timing is tight and the consultation needs to fit into fixed timetables (e.g. a budget cycle) there may still be alternative ways of gathering views*
- *Any consultation material needs to be effectively targeted and distributed so that those who rely on the affected services and those who contribute to them have all been made aware of the consultation and their opportunity to influence the process.*

Thurrock Council used various methods to get residents and passengers involved in the consultation:

- A3 posters were distributed widely at all local libraries and local housing offices and a large display was set up to promote the consultation in the foyer and reception area of Thurrock Civic Offices
- Adverts were placed in newspapers
- Questionnaires were:
 - distributed to most residential and commercial addresses within Thurrock and to those who attended Bus User Group meetings
 - made available in public buildings, including libraries, local centres and the civic offices
 - sent out with explanatory letters to community forums, residents' associations and hard-to-reach groups.
- Websites: the leaflet and questionnaire were available to read and fill in online on both the Council's intranet and the public website.

A crucial part of any consultation is how the questions are phrased. If you ask passengers whether their bus should be withdrawn they will say no. In an environment in which cuts will have to be made this may be natural but may not be particularly helpful in making difficult decisions.

Similarly councils should avoid putting issues together in a way which results in a 'popularity contest' between different users. For example, it is not helpful if it is implied that less transport spend on buses means more spent on improving life for motorists, as both have needs that the council should consider separately. In this way council can avoid policies to

improve social inclusion and access to employment, and essential services for those without a car, being subject to what can effectively be a veto by those with a car.

Central Bedfordshire approached this by looking carefully at its consultation questionnaire. It sought views on what people saw as priority areas for spending on buses. For example, was it more important to provide bus services that went to hospitals or was the priority to provide services on Sundays or more services in the evening? The aim was to find the relative priorities of a range of different options. This moved the debate away from 'service X versus service Y' towards a sense of overall priorities.

This approach does not detract from the ultimate need for passengers to have a say on proposals that directly affect their bus but it can help local authorities develop and justify proposals.

Central Bedfordshire's questionnaire also asked people for views on alternative means of providing services. It explained that there may not be sufficient demand to justify provision of conventional bus services in some locations and at some times and asked for views on alternative ways of providing demand-responsive transport. People were asked to rank a number of different proposals – for example, using taxis as buses on defined routes, promoting car clubs/car sharing schemes, or subsidising taxi fares for some passengers in some areas.

As mentioned earlier, Worcestershire County Council's initial consultation listed those services earmarked for withdrawal. It also, however, asked for views on the methodology that had used to identify those services. Respondents were asked to rank the relative importance of several criteria that might be used to define or measure the relative value of a bus service. These included:

- the actual cost per passenger carried
- the average number of passengers on each journey
- the deprivation index for the areas served
- primary journey purpose, and
- the availability of alternative services.

Stage 3: Consider

There is a huge difference between consultation and notification. If consultation is to work there has to be a genuine opportunity to influence the final decision. Quite frankly, consulting simply to 'tick a box' wastes everyone's time.

Key principles:

- *Programme timescales must build sufficient time into the process to allow for analysing responses*
- *Plans should identify sufficient resource and expertise to do the analysis*
- *Reports should explain how / where the original proposals have been modified in the light of the responses received. If nothing whatsoever has changed then it begs the question of whether it was notification rather than consultation.*

It is crucial that sufficient time is allowed to analyse responses. Rushing out a decision and a report a few days after the consultation closes will do little to persuade sceptics that the process is genuine.

Allocating enough time has the added benefit of allowing further discussion with operators prior to making any final decisions. As part of its 'Big Conversation' initiative, Norfolk County Council set out a number of areas in which it could make savings. One concerned closing the travel information desk at Norwich bus station and changing the hours the travel centre was open. The response to the consultation showed that the desk was a worthwhile service and was valued by users. Norfolk County Council was able to reach an agreement whereby National Express took over the operation of the information desk.

Building sufficient time into the process can even allow an authority to go back to the public with some further questions. When analysing the results from Worcestershire County Council's initial consultation, there was a clear indication that respondents preferred a reduction in service levels rather than a complete withdrawal of services. To reflect this, revised proposals were drawn up to reduce the number of bus services from 72 to 25. However, these meant that a number of other routes, which had not been featured in the original consultation, would now be affected and face reductions in the hours of operation and frequency. To better understand and consolidate the outcomes before submitting any final recommendations to councillors, a short additional consultation was planned (20 April to 18 May 2011).

This gave people a simple choice between option A (72 routes withdrawn) and option B (25 routes withdrawn with other services operating at a reduced level). There was almost unanimous support for option B.

Operators are naturally interested in the way that responses are analysed and acted upon. Metrobus felt that care had to be taken in filtering responses as there was a natural inclination to resist change and for passengers losing a service to be more vocal more than those gaining one. They felt that it was important that this be factored into discussions when routes were being changed.

Stage 4: Communicate

There are two distinct elements to this stage. The first concerns feedback on the consultation itself while the second is more pragmatic and looks at how passengers are informed of any specific changes to their own service.

Communication surrounding the consultation process itself

Good consultation is not a one-way process. Having asked people for their views, it is important to provide them with some feedback on what was said and what has been decided. Emphasising the value of consultation can help encourage future engagement.

Key principles:

- *Summarise the comments received. This is often a qualitative rather than a quantitative exercise*
- *Summarise/explain the outcome – what has been decided following the consultation*
- *Show how / where the original proposals have been modified in the light of the responses received*
- *Set out a timeline for what happens next.*

Worcestershire County Council posted an extensive report on its website showing the results of the questionnaire carried out during the consultation.⁹ Cabinet papers – setting out the decisions made - are also on the website.

Norfolk County Council likewise published a report on the consultation and the action it was taking. This was also publicised via the media.

Notifying passengers of specific changes to their bus service

This is separate from the consultation exercise – operators are required to give the Traffic Commissioners 56 days' notice of any change to a service. It is important that passengers, who may rely on these services to get to work or to access important services, are also given as much notice as possible to rearrange their lives.

Key principle:

Work with operators to ensure clear and timely notification of service changes to passengers. The earlier that passengers know, the earlier they can begin to make alternative arrangements

⁹ Worcester County Council, *Interim Report on 12 week consultation on Proposals for Reducing Subsidised Bus Services*, April 2011, <http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/cms/transport-and-highways/transport-review/public-transport-review.aspx>

With so many alterations to bus services expected it is vitally important that authorities and operators communicate any changes to passengers well before they take effect.

Worcestershire County Council produces a *Bus Bulletin* and sends it out electronically or by post to councillors, emergency services, bus operators, large employers, stakeholder, local clubs and societies, and members of the general public who have provided their details. This sets out broad details of changes. Due to the scale of the public consultation and the changes, posters were also sent out, showing how to get hold of this information, to council offices, parish clerks, libraries, doctors' surgeries, large employers and bus operators as well as being put up at bus stops. Staff were on hand to discuss changes with individuals who rang.

In *Bus Service Changes*, published in October 2010, Passenger Focus reported on passengers' attitudes to service changes. More than six out of ten (62 per cent) wanted to be given at least four weeks' notice of major changes.

The same research looked at how passengers wished to be informed. Three quarters (76 per cent) felt that posting a notice at the bus stop would be the most helpful way to let them know about a major change, with 61 per cent supporting the idea of a notice inside the bus and 46 per cent local newspaper articles. The research asked what additional information about any changes should be communicated to passengers. The key results are below:

Bus service changes. May 2010	Minor change	Major Change
Date when the change comes into effect	82%	82%
Reasons why the change is taking place	54%	55%
Suggested alternative routes to use once the change comes into effect	49%	46%
Contact number for complaints or enquiries about the proposed change	30%	34%
None of these	4%	5%

Having information at the bus stop is clearly an important issue for passengers. However, we also know from research that many stops do not have timetables on display in the first place¹⁰ - a problem likely to be compounded by the programme of cuts, some of which have been to the provision of information.

¹⁰ *Bus Passenger Survey*. Passenger Focus. July 2010

5. Conclusion

Some of the evidence given to the Transport Committee's inquiry by local authorities questioned the value of consultation. It was argued that engaging with the end users of services creates additional work, adds to costs and doesn't really help improve decisions as passengers simply object to cuts irrespective of the reasons provided. The gist of all this being: why bother consulting?

We do not agree. Many local authorities, operating under similar time and resource constraints, still managed to consult effectively. Councils were able to ask questions in a more imaginative way which reduced the 'just say no' kneejerk reaction. There is undoubtedly a cost in consulting, both in the act itself and also in terms of any delay it causes to the speed with which savings can be made (as we mentioned above the shorter the time in which savings can be accrued the more severe the cuts may have to be in the first place).

However, there is also a cost in not consulting: time and effort taken in responding to queries and questions can make a failure to consult a false economy. Some authorities also changed their proposals for the better as a result of consultation – something that brings cost benefits in the longer term.

In any case, it is at least arguable that failing to consult properly before cutting bus services opens up the threat of legal action. In August 2011 Cambridgeshire County Council agreed to review its decision to cut all supported services, and to conduct a much fuller consultation, in the face of a legal challenge.

However, consultation shouldn't just be carried out on a 'because we have to' basis. We believe that good engagement and consultation actually results in a better final outcome for both the local authority and the passenger. In particular it can help:

- ensure that the authority's data on which it will make any decisions is accurate – especially in assessing the impact of changes
- identify any potential alternatives or ways of saving money, and even improvements to the bus network, not just from passengers but also from bus companies
- identify ways in which the impact of changes can be mitigated.

We can see examples of this throughout our report. The consultations carried out by Worcestershire and Central Bedfordshire gave both councils a proper sense of the type of services that each community saw as priorities for subsidy. Worcestershire significantly changed its proposals in the light of passengers' opinions.

Surrey, Worcestershire and Norfolk County Councils were able to work with operators to reduce the impact of budget reductions on passengers. This does not just have to involve

the actual running of buses – in Norfolk’s case the information desk at Norwich bus station is now being run by an operator.

Consultation also provides a context within which difficult subjects can be addressed. Authorities, such as Surrey County Council, that make a proactive decision to review bus services retain more freedom and flexibility to adapt their services than those who wait until they are forced to do so.

We realise that timescales and specific ‘events’ create their own pressure and can require a more pragmatic approach in order to ‘get the job done’. But even at such times there is scope to adopt some of the recommendations above – this is one of the reasons why the toolkit is designed in stages rather than as a complete cycle.

However, it is not solely for use when considering cuts – we think there is real merit in consulting with passengers about service provision in any event. Passenger Focus’s research on bus passengers’ priorities for improvement indicates that more frequent services running at times when people want to use them and buses going to a wider range of destinations rank second and fifth respectively. The timetable clearly matters to passengers. The more that local authorities consult, the more chance that the timetable will meet passengers’ needs.

Finally, we would like to reiterate our earlier comment about this report not being an exhaustive or exclusive list of best practice. We are keen to hear from other local authorities about their own experiences of consulting and to help build up our collection of best practice.

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