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Dear Ms Owen

### **Bus Facilities and Service Improvements along the A20**

I am responding on behalf of Passenger Focus to your consultation on 'Bus Facilities and Service Improvements along the A20'.

As the statutory body representing the interests of bus passengers in England (outside of London) our starting point is to focus on the outputs to passengers. The acid test for any proposal will be in terms of the benefits it brings to passengers and how it will improve the delivery of services.

Passenger Focus's research gives us a good understanding of passenger expectations and aspirations. In 2010 we conducted research into passengers' priorities for improvement. Some 3800 passengers across a section of rural, urban and metropolitan areas in England were asked to rank 30 different criteria. The top ten priority areas for the South East are shown below. While this is not specific to Kent or the 'A20' route it does give a feel for the types of improvements passengers want – for comparison purposes we have also shown the national ranking.

Top 10 areas for Improvement – in the South East (in order of importance – 1 being highest priority for improvement)	Ranking South East	Ranking- National
More buses are on time or within five minutes of scheduled time	1	1
Buses run more frequently at a time when you want to use the bus	2	2
Bus fares offer better value for money	3	6
Electronic displays showing the correct time until the next bus at all bus stops	4	12
Accurate timetable and route information at all bus stops	5	8
All passengers are able to get a seat on the bus	6	3
Tickets and passes that allow you to travel on all bus services in your area	7	4



local area		
All bus drivers are helpful and have a positive attitude	8	7
Buses go to a wider range of destinations	9	5
Tickets and passes that allow you to travel on all types of public transport in your local area (not just buses)	10	9

*Source: Bus Passenger Priorities for Improvement. Passenger Focus. March 2010*

It is noticeable that the concept of the ‘core product’ scores heavily – passengers want a reliable and frequent service. Value for money also scores highly with, in particular, a desire for a multi-operator ticket allowing travel on the next bus irrespective of who runs it. Where scores differ from the national average, however, is in terms of information – especially the desire for electronic real-time displays at bus stops.

We also carry out the Bus Passenger Survey (BPS) to find out what passengers think of the current service provided. The March 2013 wave included results for Kent area and can be split between Arriva and Stagecoach. The table below looks at satisfaction for those criteria that best reflect the priorities listed above.

Satisfaction (% passenger satisfied)	Total	Arriva	Stage coach
Overall journey	84	85	84
Punctuality	72	72	71
Value for money	48	41	51
Overall satisfaction with the bus stop	75		
Information provided at the bus stop	64		
Information provided inside the bus	59	61	58
Availability of seats or space to stand	83	84	84
Helpfulness / attitude of driver	72	69	74

*Source: Bus Passenger Survey. Passenger Focus. March 2013*

As part of the survey we also gather comments from passengers about what they feel could be improved. The results emphasise frequency, information and driver attitude. These comments can be seen in full through the open-data tool on our website:

<https://manager.dapresy.com/manager/login.aspx?target=uZpJn%2fJW%2fwZYU90jcLH3f4isCjH5tDYx51%2f71vV5ZMA%3d>

As its name implies the Bus Passenger Survey targets actual passengers onboard buses. It was not designed to cover non users of services. Experience suggests that non users of a service typically have a lower opinion /perception of services than do actual passengers. This could be caused by a number of issues – e.g. the lack of a service in the first place, a previous poor experience when travelling (even if years ago)



or negative publicity - people being far more likely to remember and talk about a poor journey than a good one.

To better understand this issue we carried out research into barriers to bus use (in Milton Keynes) in 2010<sup>1</sup>. This found that:

- Participants would be more likely to use buses if they could be relied on to turn up on time, particularly when making time-critical journeys.
- Services on some routes were thought to be too infrequent to use to get to work, or to return from a night out. In particular, some said they would consider using buses instead of taking taxis if there were more buses after 8pm or if night buses were available.
- In the longer term, more could be done to raise awareness of bus services and promote their use. Many non users had negative perceptions of bus travel. Some also found it hard to know where to start – i.e. to find out about bus times and services in the first place.
- Participants welcomed the introduction of newer, modern buses, but felt that this would not be enough on its own to overcome the negative perceptions created by other barriers.

These provide a useful checklist for the Partnership proposal. The consultation document lists the benefits of the proposal as:

- quicker journey times
- later operation of commercial services in the evening and earlier starts in the mornings; and extension of commercial service on Sundays and Bank Holidays
- installation of CCTV on vehicles
- installation of further smart ticketing products
- fares: a degree of multi-operator ticketing plus fare increases linked with RPI
- passenger information: route information displayed inside buses and a requirement to inform Traveline about known disruption.
- customer charter schemes offering compensation to passengers in the event of delays.

We are pleased that these seem to fit well with the core passenger priorities outlined above. Improvements to frequency and subsequent improvements to punctuality are clearly important to passengers.

Value for money also features strongly in passengers' aspirations. We welcome the efforts to provide more certainty regarding fare increases and multi-operator tickets to apply "as a minimum" to return and 7-day tickets. The benefits of increased frequency

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<sup>1</sup> *Barriers to Bus Use in Milton Keynes. Passenger Focus. December 2010*



and creating a walk-up-and-go service are lost to some extent if your ticket only allows you to travel on some of those services.

We would also look to the partnership to provide greater stability of service. As part of our Bus Passenger Survey we ask passengers for the main reason they chose the bus – some 53% of passengers in the Kent County Council area said that it was because they had no other option. Passengers rely on bus services for work and to access local services – for many people it is an essential part of their lives – and so stability of service is important.

We also agree with the proposal to operate a customer charter scheme offering compensation in the event of delays. To be effective, however, such a scheme must be well communicated to passengers so that they are aware of, and can exercise, their rights.

We would also like to see a commitment to publish more performance data (i.e. punctuality). We note that the proposal requires operators to provide data but restricts publication to Kent-wide averages that could mask poorer performing routes.

Passenger Focus is currently running a pilot programme with operators and local authorities aimed at capturing bus punctuality data and using this to gain a better understanding of what causes delays to buses and the most effective ways of tackling these delays. We believe that making performance information more readily available could also empower passengers to ask questions of operators and local authorities.

Our research in the rail sector shows that rail passengers value the publication of performance data<sup>2</sup>, believing that greater transparency generates greater accountability on the part of the service provider. Providing this for bus services could also help address the perception (identified in our work with non-users) that services are less punctual than they actually are.

Our most recent piece of research<sup>3</sup> looked at the impact of delays on passengers in more depth. It found that better information and a more customer-focused attitude from bus drivers could both help bus passengers when delays and disruption occur.

The research gives a strong sense that bus passengers feel powerless when faced with delays. There is, many feel, no means of finding out what is going on – as one passenger put it: “It’s mental torture sometimes at bus stops working out whether to stay

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<sup>2</sup> Putting Rail Information in the Public Domain. Passenger Focus and the Office of Rail Regulation. May 2011

<sup>3</sup> Bus passengers’ experience of delays and disruption. Passenger Focus. April 2013



or whether to go.” Providing information that empowers passengers to make an informed decision in these circumstances will make a significant difference, and there is a clear preference for real-time departure displays at bus stops. To this end we are pleased to see references in the proposal to real time information – though we ask whether there is still more that can be done in this regard.

The research also showed a significant role for drivers in managing delays. Providing information, demonstrating empathy and expressing regret can help passengers. The more that the partnership proposal can foster a strong customer service ethos the better the results for passengers.

Finally, we are also pleased to see the partnership agreement include qualitative targets within the contractual framework. “Hard” measures of punctuality and service frequency are very important but there is also a need to keep one eye on service quality. Our strong preference is for targets based on what passengers think – the best judge of quality being those who have used the services in question. This could encompass driver attitude as well as such things as personal security, the condition and upkeep of the bus stop and the provision of information.

As you are aware Passenger Focus conducts the Bus Passenger Survey and we would be pleased to discuss how this might play a role in monitoring performance going forward.

Yours sincerely

Mike Hewitson  
Passenger Focus