

# What passengers think

Feedback from passenger research has influenced the statutory bus users' watchdog, Passenger Focus, in its response to Nexus' QCS consultation. Mel Holley reports

The proposed Quality Contracts Scheme (QCS) by Nexus in Tyne & Wear has, notes Passenger Focus (PF), "led to heated discussions, many of which concern issues of principle as well as costs."

As the statutory body representing the interests of bus passengers in England (outside London), PF has published its response to Nexus' public consultation on the proposed QCS, which would see the entire commercial network replaced by a 10-year franchise.

Says PF: "Our approach in this submission has been to focus on outputs for passengers. This stance is based on qualitative research with passengers which explored their understanding of the bus 'world' and what role they wanted within it."

"What came through strongly was that passengers cared much more about the service provided than the structure or inputs required to deliver this."

Passengers liked and expected operators and local authorities to work together, says PF. Passengers were, though, less interested in the precise model of doing so – the legal nuances between a Quality Partnership and a QCS not being top on their minds. "However, they were clear that any agreements needed to be backed up by 'teeth', should performance not meet passengers' expectations."

Because of this, PF's submission looks at "what passengers have told us they want and how well the QCS proposal aligns with, and delivers, these aspirations."

Based on PF research, it presents a table showing passengers' priorities for improvement in the north-east, and it includes rankings from other areas.

As is now well known, passenger satisfaction scores in the Nexus region, at 87%, are higher than any other 'Met' except Merseyside, also on 87%. Scores in the other seven categories, from punctuality to bus stops, are also higher than the other 'Mets'.

Another table also compares passenger satisfaction results in Nexus' area for Go-Ahead and Stagecoach, compared with all operators in Nexus' area. They are on a par with the 'total Nexus' results, with overall journey satisfaction scores of 86-87%. The second place goes to punctuality at 75-77%.

## Performance

PF "is pleased to see the emphasis" within the QCS on performance. In 2010 it conducted research into bus passengers' priorities for improvement. They were asked to rank 30 different criteria. The top three priorities in the north-east were punctuality, getting a seat and frequency.

"For the past two years we have been working with operators and authorities to understand more about when, where and why buses are delayed, and what can be done

to help them run on time," says PF.

Its interim report looked at the way data on performance was gathered and used. It found that Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) technology is "potentially a very rich source of information so we welcome its inclusion in the proposal."

"However, while it may tell you when and where buses are late (or, indeed, early) it will not tell you why. To get full value from the data it may still be necessary to supplement this with manual checks."

In Tyne & Wear, for example, Go North East followed up analysis of punctuality data for route 56 with a meeting of three regular drivers and two supervisors. This produced an extensive list of pinch points and helped create an action plan for improving punctuality on the route.

"Even where sufficient data exists, we found that some operators and authorities struggle to take advantage of its potential," adds PF. "Often there is no dedicated resource for analysing data and the particular statistical and problem-solving skills required are not always available among

the staff to whom the task falls, a problem compounded by staff sickness and turnover.

"We believe that the QCS proposal must ensure that there is sufficient 'back-office' support and expertise to achieve this."

## Satisfaction

PF says it is pleased to see the QCS proposal contains targets for customer quality/satisfaction. "Hard measures of punctuality and service frequency are very important," it says, "but there is also a need to keep one eye on service quality."

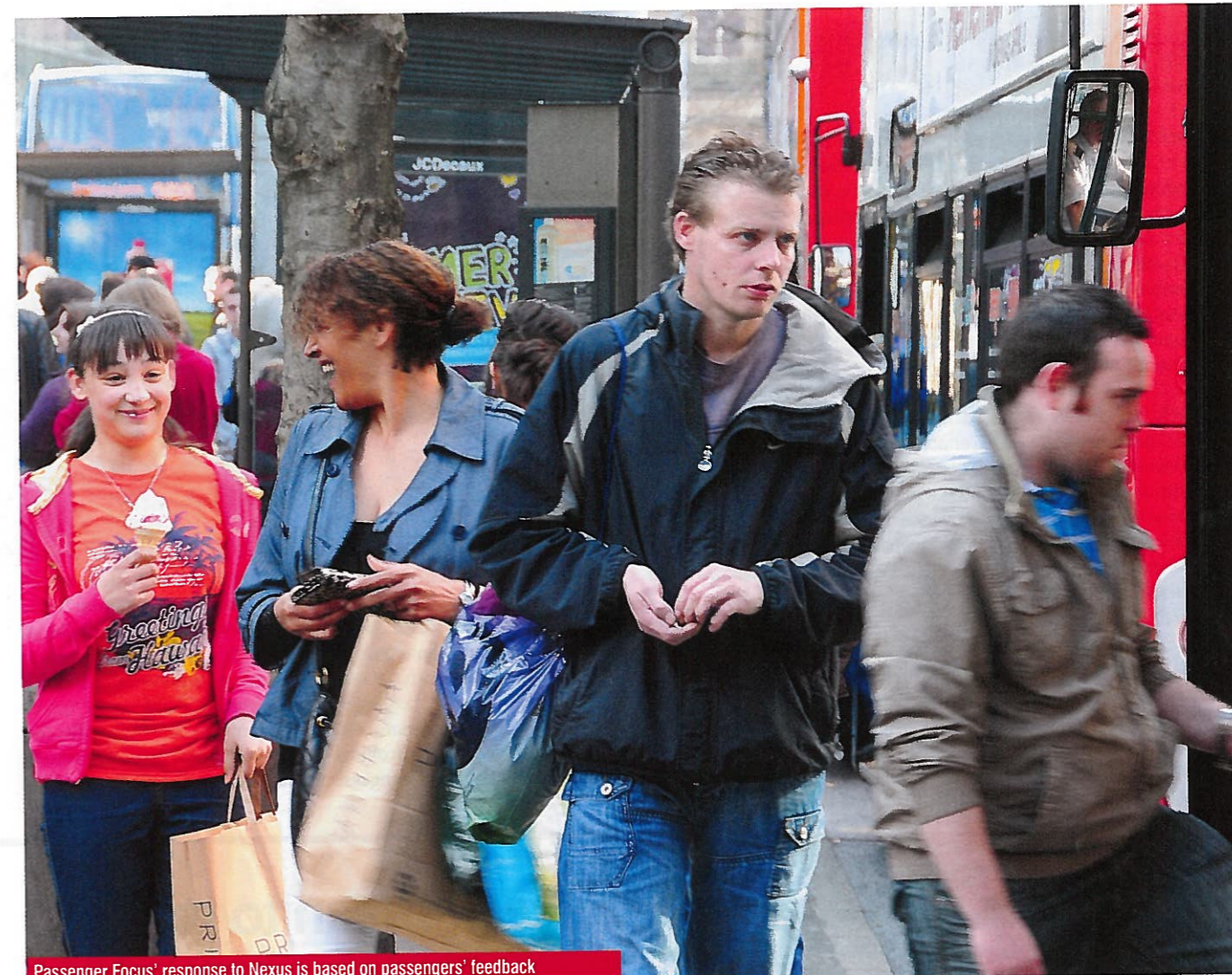
"Our strong preference is for targets based on what passengers think – the best judge of quality being those who have used the services in question. This could encompass driver attitude (the fourth highest priority of improvement in our research) and also such things as personal security, the condition and upkeep of the bus stop and the provision of information."

Passenger Focus conducts the Bus Passenger Survey. This provides an independent measure of satisfaction. The March 2013 survey included results for the Tyne & Wear area, both as a whole and for Go North East and Stagecoach North East services.

## Fares and ticketing

The Bus Passenger Survey results show that one of the lower areas of satisfaction surrounds value for money – at least among those paying for tickets – while PF's priorities research found that it was the seventh highest priority for improvement.

Its report, *Bus Passenger Views on Value for Money*, looked in more depth at what had the



Passenger Focus' response to Nexus is based on passengers' feedback

biggest influence on value for money perception and, importantly, what might help to improve things.

The key findings again emphasise the 'core' product. When passengers buy a ticket they expect a punctual, reliable service and a seat in return. Focusing on performance should also improve perceptions of value for money, says PF.

The price of fares will always be an "important consideration" for passengers. There will be winners and losers from the proposed QCS zonal structure. While the overall average fare paid across Tyne & Wear would fall by 2.5% (3p), in total 69% of adult fares will cost less than now, 12% will cost the same, 17% will cost up to 50p more and 2% will cost over 50p more, based on today's prices, says the QCS proposal.

Passengers' views on this will be driven by the category into which they fall – those paying less will be happy, those paying more not.

"It will be important to explain to those passengers paying more why this is the case and, crucially, what improvements they are getting in return," says PF.

This sense of value for money is one of the key measures for passengers and is something PF includes within its own bus and rail passenger satisfaction surveys. "We believe that the QCS ought to monitor value for money perceptions as it gives a more rounded assessment than just the cost of fares."

## Other aspects

Real time information, engagement with users and non-users and encouraging people to use buses are also covered by PF's 4,400-word response. In short, passengers always want more information, especially about delays, as they then feel more empowered to decide what to do about the journey they are making.

A part of the QCS is to

encourage non-users onto buses and PF cautions that "experience suggests that non-users of a service typically have a lower opinion/perception of services than do actual passengers."

This can be caused by a number of issues – e.g. the lack of a service, a previous poor experience (even

if years ago), or negative publicity. To better understand this issue PF carried out research into barriers to bus use in 2010. It found that one crucial aspect was that people would be more likely to use buses if they could be relied on to turn up on time, particularly when making time-critical journeys. **R1**

## routeone comment

PF has not seen the detail of the alternative Quality Partnership proposals put forward by the North East Bus Operators' Association (NEBOA), and is therefore not in a position to compare/contrast the benefits arising from the two models.

Therefore, its comments look solely at the QCS in isolation and, it says, "should not be used to make or infer any criticism or support of alternative models."

What is clear is that punctuality is the number one concern of passengers. Worryingly, there is nothing practical in Nexus' proposals that will do anything substantial to deliver significant improvements in this, irrespective of who owns or runs the buses.



"Just as well 'driver attitude' is only the 4th highest priority, eh, big nose?!"