

Giving passengers a voice in bus services

October 2013



Foreword

We know from previous Passenger Focus research that bus passengers want a bus service that is punctual, reliable and offers value for money. But do they know, or indeed really care, about how their local bus service is planned, funded and provided?

Bus services across Britain are largely provided either on a purely commercial basis by many different bus operators or through 'tendered' supported services financed by a local transport authority or Passenger Transport Executive.

Outside of London, where bus services are provided on a franchise-type basis, bus operators and the resident local transport authority aim to work together to provide a sustainable bus network for passengers that enables residents to get to places of work, leisure and education.

In some areas of the country bus operators and transport authorities work very well together in partnership to deliver not only profitable bus services for the operator, but a network of routes that can attract new customers through investment in key areas such as modern vehicles, multi-operator ticketing, attractive fare deals and real-time passenger information.

This close working between transport authorities and operators is often delivered through a partnership approach, whether this is informal or more structured, across specific parts of the local bus network or key bus routes.

However there is often a tension between the competing aims of local politicians and commercial bus operators who sometimes see very different visions of local bus service provision. The tension is largely driven by what many see as operator profits being put before the needs of local residents against the backdrop of falling patronage in many areas of the country.

In recent years the debate about how local transport authorities can arrest the decline in bus patronage has intensified. Some have chosen to work more closely with operators through more structured partnership working. Other options available to authorities through legislation include 'franchising' through a Quality Contract arrangement which would enable the authority to set fare levels, ticketing deals and decide where and when buses run locally.

Local newspaper headlines in cities such as Sheffield, Leeds and Newcastle can testify to the heated debates between town hall transport politicians and commercial bus operators. But again, do passengers really care about how their bus service is managed or provided as long as it turns up on time, gets them to their destination on time and provides good value for money?

This new research from Passenger Focus explores what passengers know about the structure of their local bus service and network and what they think would serve them best – effective local partnerships or franchise-style Quality Contract provision.

What is clear from this research is that passengers know very little about the way that bus services are determined for them. They often assume that local transport authorities and Passenger Transport Executives exercise some form of control.

Passengers are largely trusting of local transport authorities and Passenger Transport Executives to look after their interests as a local passenger. Interestingly, passengers are less trusting of local bus operators, however local bus user groups and representatives sometimes felt that operators should be given more commercial freedom to generate better services for passengers.

There is also a clear desire for passengers' views to be given more weight in any decisions about local service provision, a view echoed by local bus passenger representatives.

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

Passenger Focus

Passenger Engagement and
Consultation Research:

Bus service provision

Market Research Report

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1. Management summary

1.1 Background and methodology

There are currently discussions within the bus industry around the way that bus service provision is determined and how the broad spectrum of passengers' views is represented in decisions that affect them.

Arrangements for providing bus services between local authorities, Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) and bus operators vary from region to region, and in some areas local transport authorities are seeking to set up Quality Partnerships or Contracts with bus operators in a bid to address falling bus patronage.

As part of its remit to represent the needs and views of bus passengers, Passenger Focus conducted research seeking to better understand:

- the passenger perspective on the way bus services are determined and monitored, and the way any associated contracts are awarded or partnerships are set up
- how passengers might best contribute to decisions related to the provision of bus services.

Research was therefore conducted in January and February 2013, among passengers travelling on different bus routes for a range of journey purposes in two areas: Leeds (where services are co-ordinated by the West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive), and Cambridge (where the local council is the co-ordinator). The views of a number of bus user group representatives were also sought.

This report provides the findings from this research; a similar report is also available covering equivalent research on passenger involvement in the determination of rail franchises¹.

1.2 Key findings

- Passengers currently know very little about the way that bus services are determined. Any knowledge they do have is assumed from their experiences using buses, their knowledge of other industries or the provision of other local services:
 - It is often assumed that local authorities or PTEs have some control over the provision of bus services and, in the areas surveyed, passengers had faith that local transport authorities generally work in the passengers' best interest.
User groups agree that local authorities and PTEs have passengers' interests at heart, but that sometimes their intentions and influence can be undermined by budget constraints.

¹ Available on the Passenger Focus website:

<http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/publications/giving-passengers-a-voice-in-rail-services>

- Bus operating companies are less trusted to consider passengers' needs, as passengers are aware that they are commercial organisations which operate as such. However user groups argue that if operators run commercially viable businesses, this is ultimately beneficial to passengers because it protects the provision of services.
- There is a clear desire amongst both passengers and user groups that passengers' views and needs should be given more weight in the appointment of operators and other decisions. They agree that the operation of bus services must be accountable to passengers.
- Passengers feel it is crucial that their views are considered:
 - passengers generally view bus services as a public service, and as such feel a sense of entitlement to these services and also to some opportunity to influence how they are determined
 - it is therefore important that passengers are informed or see evidence that their views are heard
 - whilst in the areas researched there was some trust in local transport authorities to represent passengers' needs, passengers themselves are also keen to be given the opportunity to engage.
- However, bus passengers currently perceive no involvement for themselves in influencing the provision of bus services:
 - the industry is seen to be lacking in communication in either direction
 - there is great cynicism as to whether the passenger viewpoint is listened to even when it is received.
- There are some key opportunities for consulting with bus passengers, all of which are important to encourage increased engagement and constructive feedback. Passengers feel they would benefit from both periodic consultation when a change in service provision is imminent, and from ongoing monitoring of service levels:
 - passengers should be informed when a change is coming, and be invited to give their views on a tangible proposition
 - when decisions have been made, passengers should be informed what has been decided and when the change will be implemented
 - feedback about the service should be encouraged on an ongoing basis, and bus operators should act proactively on existing passenger data in the form of passenger feedback and complaints.
- The best methods for gathering passenger views depend upon the circumstance and a range of appropriate methods should be employed:
 - when specific changes are proposed both users and non-users should be alerted via leaflets, with websites, helplines and, potentially, public meetings for further information
 - for ongoing service monitoring, a mixture of passenger surveys and effective analysis of complaints, together with mystery shopping inspections

- importantly, it should be made easy for passengers to take part
 - user groups could play a bigger role in facilitating engagement.
- In theory, greater passenger influence in decisions relating to the determination of bus services could be achieved by a commercial service provider operating without any contract or partnership agreement. However, passengers generally feel there is a need for a regulator, authority, or some other body to whom bus operators are held accountable on passengers' behalf.
- The Quality Partnership model of bus service provision was generally popular with passengers, as long as it included contractual obligations with penalties for failing to meet minimum standards. The idea of a socially-minded local transport authority and an operationally-experienced commercial operator working together to reach an agreement is appealing to passengers, if it is also underpinned contractually.

2. Background

The controversy in autumn 2012 around the West Coast rail franchise tendering process highlighted the strong views that passengers can have about the provision of public transport services.

There are ongoing discussions in some areas around the way that bus services are determined, with some local transport authorities seeking to set up Quality Partnerships or Contracts with bus operators in a bid to address falling bus patronage. There are also more general concerns as to how the broad spectrum of passengers' views is represented in decisions that affect them.

Passenger Focus seeks to ensure that the needs and views of bus passengers (in England outside of London) and rail passengers are considered as part of any decisions around bus service provision or rail franchise agreements.

It has used the recent pause in the rail franchise competition process to seek to better understand:

- the passenger perspective on the way bus and rail services are determined and monitored, and the way contracts are awarded
- how passengers might best contribute to the consultation process involved in these decisions.

Passenger Focus therefore commissioned the independent market research agency BDRC Continental to conduct research into these issues. Qualitative research was undertaken in January and February 2013, comprising group discussions among:

- bus passengers making leisure and commuter journeys in Leeds and Cambridge
- rail passengers making business and leisure journeys on the East and West Coast Mainlines
- rail passengers making commuter journeys on the Greater Anglia line from Colchester to London.

Additionally, a number of representatives of bus and rail user groups were interviewed, to understand how their perspective and approach might differ from or concur with individual passengers' views. These conversations were conducted as one-to-one, in-depth telephone interviews. A full breakdown of the sample interviewed for the project is provided in Appendix A.

This report describes the findings from this research which relate to bus passengers, their views on the way services are determined and operated, and their role in this. It begins (section 3) by looking at the interaction between passengers and commercial bus operators in a general sense, as this provides the context in which passengers could be engaged further in consultations about bus service provision.

Section 4 then covers passengers' current understanding and views around the way in which bus services are determined, followed by findings on the points at which passengers could be involved in a constructive way, and how to involve them.

3. Interaction between passengers and the bus industry

3.1 Passenger interaction with the bus industry, in general

In general, passengers' engagement with the bus industry is low. Although many passengers are heavily reliant on the bus services they use, and are opinionated about them, their interaction with the industry at large rarely reaches beyond the day to day experience of using 'their' bus.

Most passengers feel that there is a lack of communication between the bus industry and its passengers, both in terms of any general ongoing dialogue as well as specific information required at times of change (for example when changing timetables, fares or even routes) and during disruption. This can be a source of frustration, making passengers feel that they are not a primary consideration of the operator. This can leave passengers feeling unvalued and to some extent helpless since they are often very reliant on bus services.

"[There are] frequent timetable changes and again no information. You only find out when the bus doesn't turn up. There have been three big changes in a year on my route."

(Cambridge – commuter)

"You don't get told why it's changed, it's just changed... You never get told why, and if you catch that service, you're basically stuffed."

(Leeds – commuter)

The existence of few customer touchpoints also limits passengers' engagement with, and awareness of, their bus operator. Touchpoints for bus passengers are even fewer than for other modes of public transport, as bus journeys tend to require little planning (therefore many passengers simply arrive at the bus stop without any prior engagement with information sources) and the vast majority of journeys reported did not start or end at a bus station.

For most passengers, their only interaction with a bus operator is through the bus driver; this in itself is often felt to be unsatisfactory. Across the sample, passengers generally felt that drivers are not a reliable source of information and tend to offer a poor level of customer service. This not only misses an opportunity to cultivate passenger engagement with the industry but, in the worst cases, also has the potential to damage any which does exist.

"If they're driving a bus [and are grumpy/rude]...it doesn't inspire much confidence."

(Leeds – commuter)

Passengers do feel that the overall service level could be improved if bus operators communicated more with their passengers. There is an expectation that communication with passengers should be routine, as it appears to be in other industries. It will be important to improve communication between the bus industry and passengers if

meaningful engagement and consultation is to be achieved as to how local bus services are provided.

“I think a new company would have to work hard at giving out information. More information or some information would be an improvement.”

(Cambridge – leisure)

When asked about their bus services, several areas came up as important to passengers and which they would like to see addressed by operators – some of which centre around the quality of communication. These include:

- fares, which passengers generally feel are expensive
- other issues relating to ticketing, including payment on the bus where drivers have a lack of change/refuse notes, and ample notice of changes to ticketing products
- frequency of services (there are varying levels of concern with this, depending on the nature of the route used)
- upkeep of buses and on-board environment, including cleanliness and comfort of the seats
- attitude of drivers, which is often perceived as poor (this is amplified amongst certain groups, such as young people, who sometimes feel discriminated against in drivers’ treatment of them)
- capacity and crowding
- punctuality of services
- routes and service coverage
- difficulty of making complaints (some found it difficult to establish how to complain and, for those that have lodged a complaint, operators were often perceived as unresponsive).

Representatives of bus user groups concurred with passengers about the areas of key importance. They were also particularly keen to see improvements in the way that bus operators communicate with their passengers on commercial routes:

“I would certainly like to see the commercial operators going out to the local public well before they introduce a network change, and find out what people are thinking.”

(Bus user group representative)

3.2 Passenger engagement with bus operators

Most passengers displayed some awareness of their local bus operating companies, but this was mostly passive, rather than the result of an active engagement with the industry. The majority were at least aware of the operator running the service(s) which they use most often, and many also had knowledge of other bus operators present in their area. Those that commuted, or were otherwise highly exposed and relatively dependent on bus services, tended to be the most aware.

However, a minority did not have this base level of awareness and simply did not take notice of the operator as they do not see this as important to them. There was also some confusion between different commercial operators and even with the PTE in

Leeds (as illustrated by the comment below). Lower awareness tended to be observed amongst those who travelled less regularly, and was also more noticeable where similar or identical routes are run by more than one operator.

“I think [Metro] is just a travel company, 'cause they do trains as well as buses, I think.”

(Leeds – student)

“I actually never notice what company it is.”

(Leeds – leisure)

Whilst most are at least aware of the operator of their primary route, this is through continuous exposure to the livery and branding of the bus itself rather than an active interest in the industry or service provider.

Passengers have encountered a few practical implications of having several different bus operators. Firstly, many passengers were aware of different fares specific to each operator through experience of using each, and have sometimes made a conscious decision to use the least expensive option.

Similarly, some passengers had purchased a ticket on one operator's service, which could then not be used with another operator (for example, for a return journey, or a day/weekly travel pass). This was generally regarded as inconvenient, and in some instances misleading, while multi-operator tickets were seen as unnecessarily more expensive.

In some areas one operator was associated with a particular 'type' of route. For example, in Leeds, Arriva was associated with more rural routes serving further outlying areas, whereas First was identified as being more urban in providing shorter, more direct routes. This was viewed as an almost logical 'grouping' of routes by some passengers, which heightened awareness of the differences between operators.

In Cambridge, passengers were well aware of Stagecoach as the area's principal operator, to the extent that it was regarded by many with suspicion due to a perception that it held a monopoly. Some passengers felt that here the operator demonstrated a willingness to use its strong commercial position to its advantage, potentially to the detriment of passengers and other operators.

“They flooded the market, took over every route. They are the only bus you see, and are so big that nobody could compete with them.”

(Cambridge – leisure)

“I'm not loyal to Stagecoach - I just see them as having a monopoly.”

(Cambridge – commuter)

Most passengers have some awareness, and clearly in some cases have strong opinions, about their operator. However, from a passenger perspective, the concern is

more to do with service delivery than the provider of the service. Ultimately, bus service delivery is the priority, and the operator is relatively immaterial.

“As long as you’re on time and you’ve got a decent priced fare...”
(Leeds – student)

“We’re very fickle as long as we get there.”
(Leeds – leisure)

“I don’t really mind whose bus...I don’t really look at that.”
(Leeds – student)

4. Passenger views on models for bus service provision, and their role in this

4.1 Passenger understanding of the current provision of bus services and determination of bus operators

It is necessary to understand passengers' familiarity with the ways in which bus services and operators are determined, their views on this process, and how they feel it affects them, before looking at the potential benefits of involving them in any processes leading to these decisions.

Passengers' understanding of the provision of bus services

Passengers generally have little knowledge of the ways in which bus services are currently determined. This is partly due to passengers' low levels of engagement with bus operators, and the fact that they are more concerned with the service they receive on their journeys than the processes which result in an operator coming to provide that service in the first place.

A substantial proportion of passengers had never even considered the ways in which routes and operators are determined before taking part in the research. This applied even to those who were very frequent users or highly dependent on bus services. Bus passengers were even less aware of these processes than rail passengers were about the franchise process in that sector; press coverage of the recent InterCity West Coast franchise competition has at least given the general public a basic understanding of the rail franchise process.

"I can honestly say I've never even thought about how buses end up operating certain routes."

(Cambridge – commuter)

"Not even thought about it."

(Leeds – commuter)

Due to the overall lack of consideration or knowledge on the part of passengers, any ideas about how bus services are determined were assumptions. Perceptions were often influenced by passengers' understanding of other industries, their interpretations of what they observed happening to bus services in their own areas, and simply speculation about what they felt should happen. The proliferation of sources and personal perceptions meant that these assumptions were diverse.

Firstly, passengers had different ideas about how the system as a whole functions. Some assumed that bus services were determined by a fairly structured and formal process (very similar to the rail franchising model), whilst others thought that it was a completely deregulated market.

Whilst the range of passenger opinion did cover this full spectrum, most assumed that there is some involvement of a third party that is responsible for determining services in conjunction with the bus operators. However, their ideas about who or what this body was, and which aspects of service provision it would be involved in, were less clear.

“I assume they just like put a bid in, and whoever can do it cheaper gets that area. That’s how everything works, isn’t it?”
(Leeds – commuter)

“There’s definitely some kind of permission [being given] because they [bus operators] have to put in like bus lanes and bus stops, so they’ll have to have, like, planning permission or something like that.”
(Leeds – student)

“They [bus operators] all want to go and use the routes that are [commercially] viable.”
(Leeds – leisure)

Passengers had varied views about who the decision makers were in the determination of bus services, ranging from central to local government, to the bus companies themselves. Most assumed there was some involvement of ‘government’ in the process, although there was no mention of the Traffic Commissioners. Most frequently a local authority or PTE was suggested rather than a central government department. The majority also felt some governmental input was logical given that they view buses as a ‘public’ service, and so it would seem naturally to fall within the remit of a public authority.

“Someone will come up with an idea, and they’ll ask the council, or the government, or whatever.”
(Leeds – student)

“Is it the government Transport Secretary? I don’t know who they are, but they might get a say in it.”
(Cambridge – commuter)

There were also varying expectations regarding the specification of bus services. As a minimum, the majority of passengers assumed some requirements were imposed based on the areas to be served and the number of services needed for each. Outside of this there were other aspects which passengers thought are, or should be, required of bus operators. These were generally linked to factors which passengers felt were most important to their experience of the service, such as reliability, quality of vehicles and fare types.

“I don’t really know how it works but I would hope the council look for efficiency, customer service and reliability.”
(Cambridge – leisure)

“They would need to check on how many buses they have as they would need a lot for Cambridge because we have a lot of tourists in Cambridge and it’s a really big place.”
(Cambridge – student)

*“They promise to look after the bus stock, have the correct infrastructure and maybe environmental promises such as bio-fuel.”
(Cambridge – commuter)*

Some also assumed wider political or social goals would be encompassed - for example, environmental concerns and appropriateness in relation to the local economy of the area.

Press coverage surrounding the InterCity West Coast rail franchise competition had had some influence on passenger expectations about the processes for determining bus services. The West Coast debate was mentioned in most of the bus group discussions and some participants used it as a ‘template’ for what they expected to occur within the bus industry. For some, this was their first exposure to the processes for determining transport service provision and triggered consideration of this for perhaps the first time.

*“With Richard Branson...I think that was a bit of an eye-opener...I didn’t realise that they actually put tenders in for train services...so that must be what they do with the buses.”
(Leeds – leisure)*

*“Like they did with the trains last year... The lowest bid...it’s all about the money.”
(Leeds – commuter)*

The role of local transport authorities

In both areas researched, local authorities figured highly in passengers’ assumptions about how bus services are determined. In the vast majority of instances where passengers referred to the involvement of a public or government authority in providing bus services, they referred to the local ‘council’ or to a ‘local authority’, rather than to a Passenger Transport Executive (PTE) specifically. In general, there was very little awareness of PTEs or understanding of their function.

In Leeds, some passengers did recall Metro and were aware of their presence in providing bus and other transport services in the area. However, there was little genuine understanding of the kind of organisation Metro is, how it works in relation to other organisations in the sector or its specific remit. As a result of this, passengers tended to reference ‘local councils’ and ‘local authorities’ as they were much more familiar with this concept than they were with PTEs. However, ultimately the two were interchangeable from the passenger perspective.

The local authority was very often cited as a decision maker involved in the service provision process, and in most of these instances, local transport authority involvement was regarded as positive.

*“I think the council have to ensure a certain level of service of transport.”
(Cambridge – commuter)*

“You know how they have a plan for everything... They’ve worked it out, they’ve probably looked at the routes and looked at the people... There’s quite a lot of calculations to do, and they’ve figured out that First is the best.”
(Leeds – student)

Although passengers did not reject the involvement of bus operators as a principle, they did recognise the operators’ commercial interests as being very distinct from the social focus of local transport authorities.

Some passengers felt they had observed instances of commercial bus operators in their area acting in their own purely commercial interests – in some cases, even when this was to the detriment of passengers, which cemented a sense of suspicion around operators alone being responsible for the provision of bus services. This contrast with commercial operators may have strengthened the positive way in which local transport authority involvement was interpreted.

“[The bus companies] think more about the profit than the people, whereas the government think more about the people than the profit.”
(Leeds – student)

“I reckon as a whole the council takes more notice of us than a company does.”
(Leeds – student)

Further to this, blame for specific issues which had occurred relating to local bus services was typically and more easily laid at the door of the operators themselves. This was particularly true in Cambridge, where recent cuts to local bus services and issues with investment in the guided bus service were seen as the fault of the relevant operators rather than the local authority. There is clearly an opportunity for some commercial bus operators to work to gain trust and respect thus improving their perception amongst passengers.

Passengers did distinguish between local and central government, with local authorities almost invariably seen as more suitable to determine bus services than central government. There was a general feeling that local authorities are better placed to make decisions about service provision due to local knowledge and understanding, although there was some acknowledgement that financial impetus may come from central government.

“Regional government gets the money from the Ministry of Transport, but they’ll see to their own little area.”
(Leeds – leisure)

“[The] local council should know what local people need, rather than people sat in Whitehall.”
(Leeds – leisure)

*“I’d like to assume that the local guys at some point in their lives have been in the position that we’re in and have had to travel around the area and have had to use public transport.”
(Leeds – commuter)*

The involvement of local transport authorities in the provision of bus services is therefore not only an assumption made by passengers, but something which they feel quite strongly should be the case. Passengers perceived local authorities as being instrumental in the protection of services on behalf of passengers. Specific areas in which local transport authority influence were seen to be particularly valuable included:

- maintaining routes which may not be commercially viable
- defining and enforcing security standards
- upholding quality standards.

In each of the above cases, passengers felt that there would be little incentive for an operator working on a purely commercial basis to ensure these are upheld, so local authorities were viewed as a valuable counterbalance to the operator influence.

Despite the generally positive interpretation of the assumed role of local government, some passengers also saw limitations in local transport authority involvement.

- If the authority becomes implicated in decisions this means that they are no longer independent, thereby detracting from their ability to act in a regulatory role. Passengers felt that if a local transport authority is implicated in decisions, they would share the same desire as any commercial organisation involved to ‘save face’ when things go wrong. This may result in a lack of transparency which would compromise passenger confidence.
- Passengers recognise that local councils also have agendas which they seek to promote - for example, they may have targets related to environmental indicators and budget constraints. Whilst these agendas are expected to be different from those of commercial organisations, passengers assume they are also capable of influencing decisions in a way which detract from a purely passenger-centric approach.
- Local councils may lack the experience and understanding of the operational aspects of bus services to make informed decisions. Some feel local councils may also lack the infrastructure and funding required to effectively engage in this, as suggested by recently publicised budget cuts and passenger experience in dealing with local authorities in relation to other services.
- Similarly, while passengers usually trust local transport authorities to act in the public interest with regard to bus services, passengers have less faith in local authorities’ capabilities to actually execute these decisions effectively, and some expressed concerns as to how a local transport authority could cope with these responsibilities.

Aside from local transport authorities, some passengers suggested that the oversight role could be fulfilled by an official independent regulator, tasked specifically with the protection of passenger interests. Although not raised as frequently as local government, this would be a similarly welcome development from the passenger perspective, and in some cases overcomes the potential shortcomings of local authority involvement listed above.

However, the vast majority were not aware of any group which represents the needs of bus passengers currently (this offers some explanation as to why this may have been referred to far less frequently than local government, which is ever-present in passengers' lives).

*“They’ve got Ofcom, Ofgen, they should have Ofbus, a spectre hanging over [the bus companies].”
(Leeds – commuter)*

From the passenger viewpoint, the key concern is that there is a body involved in the determination of bus services that will honestly and objectively represent their interests. As long as the appointment of an organisation to assume this role is sound, it is less important who or what this organisation is.

4.2 Passenger views on models for bus service provision

After being asked for their own understanding of the way in which bus services are determined, passengers were asked for their views on existing and potential future models of bus service provision. A description of each of the models is given within the discussion guides used in the research, in Appendix B.

The Commercial Model

Once the Commercial Model was explained to them, passengers expressed some surprise and concern that the bus service in a given area can be determined almost entirely by commercial bus operators themselves, with no requirements or specification as to what this service should entail and no (or very little) intervention from a third party.

*“Wow, I didn’t think it would be like this. I thought it would be much more official. This seems a little risky.”
(Cambridge – student)*

*“If they’re doing that, we people just have to like it or lump it.”
(Leeds – commuter)*

Many passengers felt that commercial operators do not seem appropriate as the key decision makers within an industry which they view as performing a public and social function. From these passengers' perspectives decisions cannot be judged purely on the basis of commercial viability, but should also take into account the wider social context of the community in which it operates. Therefore from a passenger perspective, any organisation which is primarily concerned with generating profit does not feel like an appropriate administrator of a fundamental public service.

“It should be about the service as well as the necessary cost making. It’s about serving communities.”
(Cambridge – commuter)

“This feels wrong now I’m thinking about it. Buses are meant to be more accessible as they can drive to places that trains can’t get to so they should cover areas that trains don’t and not just decide themselves.”
(Cambridge – student)

Passengers felt it would be too easy for a commercial operator to take decisions which may adversely affect passengers given that their main motivation is to make commercial gains out of the running of the service, e.g:

“It shows you that with this system, the bus companies can do what they like. The late night bus was always packed yet it was just scrapped... It was a really useful service. Surely it was a good route so why has it been cut?”
(Cambridge – leisure)

“I don’t think they [bus operators] would let us get [reduced fare student] passes – they’d want more money, they’d keep making you pay individually.”
(Leeds – student)

Adding to this, passengers are concerned that the seemingly unilateral nature of decisions made under this model provides no opportunity for passengers (or others) to influence decisions. This is a further indication of the weak level of engagement passengers experience with the bus industry currently.

“They have too much power this way as they are deciding everything, even bus journeys they don’t want, in case they lose money.”
(Cambridge – student)

There is also unease that this arrangement favours the largest operators with the greatest financial power. Whilst passengers had no objection to the principle of large commercial operators, the idea that they could operate unchallenged was a concern to some who would feel even less able to influence decisions which may directly and adversely affect them.

“The most powerful companies...would obviously get it because they’ve got more money to [just buy their way in].”
(Leeds – student)

“This feels like a shoddy approach... It favours big bus companies and makes sense as a business model but not for a focus on customers.”
(Cambridge – commuter)

The existence of government subsidies within a commercial system was also difficult for many passengers to assimilate. Unaware that cross-subsidisation of services is

forbidden, some felt that if a commercial operator has the ability to adjust their offer in certain areas to maximise profitability, then they should use income generated on those parts of the network to invest in the maintenance of less profitable routes without relying on government subsidy.

*“I don’t think it’s fair that a company gets paid to take on unprofitable routes. Why should they get paid? Shouldn’t they take the cost as part of the service?”
(Cambridge – student)*

Interestingly, the bus user groups represented in this research consistently gave a different view. Although only a small number of user groups were interviewed, they consistently advocated the importance of allowing bus companies to operate in a way that permits commercial success. They argued that this in itself is vital in order to protect the provision of services in the first place. While user groups did not suggest that local transport authorities should have no involvement, they felt that local transport authorities should not ‘interfere’.

Quality Contracts

In general, across both areas researched, passengers are favourable towards the concept of some contractual agreement between bus operators and a local authority/PTE; however views are mixed and there are several concerns.

Importantly, the term ‘contract’ held considerable value for passengers. To passengers, this indicated obligation on both sides of an agreement and a guarantee that once terms were set, these would be adhered to and enforced. This provides passengers with a sense of security which was missing from the Commercial Model and which appealed to passengers since it was consistent with their view of bus services as a community service which should be protected.

Passengers welcomed the involvement of a local authority or PTE, which would be brought about by a Quality Contract, and which many passengers actually assumed to be the case already, because this would seek to represent the passenger interest in decisions relating to the provision of bus services. This involvement would act as a counterbalance to the commercially focused view of operators, with the assumption that this would provide a more effective safeguard to services than if bus operators alone take the decisions.

As well as having someone act on their behalf, passengers also saw more opportunity to be directly engaged in decisions when a local transport authority was involved, and this was a welcome development.

*“[Having] quality indicators [as part of a contract] suggests they would ask people what they want, rather than assuming. Hopefully it would be about improving the service.”
(Cambridge – leisure)*

“Hopefully this approach would be more people-focused being associated with the council.”
(Cambridge – commuter)

Some passengers felt that the involvement of a local body would also minimise the instances where one large commercial operator has dominance in the area by allocating some routes to smaller and potentially innovative operators, encouraging competition and new ideas.

“I suppose with it being council-based, they should take some routes off one of the bigger companies and put the small companies in, or see how they do...”
(Leeds – student)

In addition to this passengers also felt that Quality Contracts, and the involvement of a local body that this would bring, would create potential for the standardisation of services across an area. This would establish a consistent service level and potentially rationalise and synchronise routes, timetabling and even ticketing. Having observed and experienced services where this is not the case, passengers feel this would be of benefit to them.

To be of optimum benefit to passengers, contracts should cover and be assessed against those areas which passengers recognised as of most importance to the passenger experience such as cleanliness of the bus, punctuality, the attitude of the driver, fare levels and safety. Both local transport authority involvement, and the contract renewal process, would provide an incentive to address these issues adequately and an opportunity to deal with poor service when it occurs.

“You would have some hope that the company could be kicked out if not successful.”
(Cambridge – leisure)

In order to be constructively and successfully implemented, passengers feel that a Quality Contract must provide the opportunity to actively review the service being provided and for the contract issuer to act upon non-compliance. There must be the opportunity to regularly assess the service provider based on the requirements which are stipulated within the contract.

As well as forming part of the contract renewal process, passengers felt there should also be an ongoing assessment carried out periodically throughout the lifetime of a contract. This was seen as one of the greatest benefits of this approach, as operators can effectively be ‘held to account’ on behalf of the passenger.

To ensure that this is the case, passengers expect Quality Contracts to be enforceable – and this is felt to be the particular advantage of a contract over a partnership. Where standards and service levels are stipulated but not achieved, passengers expect there to be procedures in place to penalise operators. Generally, it is assumed that a warning (or series of warnings – depending on the nature of the incident) would be issued in the

first instance, followed by financial penalties and resulting ultimately in removal of a licence and termination of a contract if issues remained unresolved.

Passengers were understanding that the nature of a bus service means that certain aspects can be quite unpredictable at times, for example punctuality during times of disruption, so were mindful of the need to be sensible in how and when enforcements are issued, but were clear that recurring issues over a sustained period which impacted poorly upon service delivery should be met with punitive measures.

*“They’d be able to enforce fines...otherwise it would be worthless.”
(Cambridge – leisure)*

There were also some shortcomings to the Quality Contract approach which passengers identified.

- Firstly, passengers were aware that this process, if implemented efficiently and effectively, would incur costs in the general administration and monitoring of the operators. Passengers recognise that this is ultimately likely to be funded by fares and taxpayers. This was unpopular as most already feel their contributions to the service are already high.
- Secondly, passengers did again bring into question the suitability of local authorities to meaningfully contribute to the process at all stages, from designing the specification of bus services to enforcing penalty clauses where applicable. This concern was not just about the lack of financial capability and resourcing of a local authority, but also a lack of expertise in the area of bus provision.
- Thirdly, although it is crucial for passengers that a contract is enforceable, if a contract or licence were to be withdrawn following preliminary enforcement procedures, then passengers would need to be assured there was a contingency plan to continue the service with no disruption to passengers. Without this, then either the contract is harmful to the passenger, by causing unnecessary and potentially widespread disruption if revoked, or is meaningless to the operator, if a local authority is not in a position to be able to enforce the terms due to a lack of feasible alternative.

Ultimately, whilst there are several aspects of the Quality Contract model which are appealing to passengers, there are also a number of concerns which passengers feel may prevent the system from working as well as it could. If put in place, passengers will require reassurance and evidence that the system is worthwhile and will be well executed.

Quality Partnerships

Passengers across both areas liked the idea of a partnership between bus operators and local authorities/PTEs, whereby both parties work together to determine and provide bus services. Again, however, views are mixed and some concerns are identified.

The term 'partnership' was meaningful to passengers as it suggested a constructive working arrangement in which both operators and local transport authorities have equal influence. This was different to the term 'contract' which to passengers felt more prescribed by one side rather than mutually agreed with equal input from both parties, and so also benefitting from the differing expertise of each. This semantic interpretation was important to passengers' overall perception of this model.

Passengers feel that a joint venture which seeks the views and expertise of both local transport authorities and bus operators can be of benefit to them. Bus operators are recognised for their operational and commercial expertise in the sector which enables them to make a valuable contribution to the way bus services are provided.

Passengers accept that bus operators bring a valuable understanding of the practical issues affecting bus service delivery, through extensive experience of running bus operations on a day-to-day basis, making them well-equipped to make realistic decisions and provide pragmatic solutions. However, passengers can be suspicious of bus companies' motivations and their likelihood to take decisions which are in their own commercial interests even when these are detrimental to passengers.

Conversely, as we have already seen, local authorities and PTEs are recognised by passengers as able to act in the interest of the general public, with less vested in commercial gain. The social-mindedness of local councils reassures passengers that their needs will be considered when decisions are taken. However, passengers have reservations about the expertise of a local council in the day-to-day running of bus services.

For these reasons the idea of the two working together, bringing their different areas of expertise and counterbalancing each other, is attractive to many passengers.

*"The bus company will have had a lot of experience in this kind of thing, so they're working together, whereas government won't... They might have the best intentions, but not the best ideas."
(Leeds – commuter)*

*"[The partnership approach is] more sensible and considers both views."
(Leeds – student)*

Another perceived benefit is that, if both local government and bus operators are engaged in one process, it is in the interest of both parties to make the partnership work, as both would want to ensure financial arrangements are stable and that their reputations are not damaged. This reassures passengers that, not only are they getting the expertise and differing perspective of both partners, but both are incentivised to work in a constructive way to reach the desired outcomes for a service which passengers want to use.

“They’ve both got something to win, they’ve both got something to lose, so it’s in their interest that they come to [an] agreement that everybody’s happy with and find something that works.”
(Leeds – leisure)

However, there are also some important concerns for passengers. Whilst the difference in perspective (commercial and social) provided by both parties is certainly valued by passengers, there are practical concerns as to the parties’ ability to make a genuine agreement if there is ever a fundamental conflict of interests. If this was the case, rather than providing ‘the best of both worlds’, the agreement could actually end up as a compromise which served neither purpose well, and therefore does not serve the passenger well either.

“You might get a conflict of interest between what the local authority wants and what the bus company shareholders want.”
(Leeds – leisure)

There are also some concerns that large commercial organisations may have too much influence in the process, which would not create a level playing field for all those involved. There is an element of fear that a negotiation process between operators and local transport authorities would actually encourage larger organisations to exercise their financial power in order to influence the outcome of the partnership. Within the research, this was again focused mostly in Cambridge where Stagecoach was regarded with some suspicion.

“This might encourage backhanders between companies so I don’t really like it.”
(Cambridge – commuter)

Passengers also felt that a partnership lacked the authoritative clout of a contract. This semantic difference was meaningful to passengers as ‘partnership’ signals a voluntary agreement whilst ‘contract’ indicated a set of terms which had to be met, and which could be enforced, and in theory therefore provide a more stable service for users. Passengers did therefore worry that a partnership could be rendered meaningless if it was not backed up by the kinds of disciplinary powers they would expect from a contract.

“I would have concerns that if it was voluntary it would not be adhered to as there’s no obligation and as such means less to the passengers.”
(Cambridge – commuter)

“As long as there’s a contract at the end of it saying ‘this must be met’... a bare minimum of what has to be done – frequency, things like that, and fares – anything like that would work.”
(Leeds – student)

Models for bus service provision: the passenger ideal

For passengers, the semantic difference between the terms ‘contract’ and ‘partnership’ was important in how each approach was perceived, and passengers identified

valuable characteristics in each which they would like to see replicated in their ideal model. Passengers feel that a combination of these approaches would best represent their interests and protect their needs.

Passengers do feel that some elements of any agreement should be contractually underpinned as is the case for Quality Contracts. Passengers feel this would:

- provide reassurance that decisions are 'official' and are to be upheld
- provide an incentive for operators to perform at their best, knowing that they could be liable for enforcement action
- ensure the opportunity for agreements to be reviewed, both when a contract ends/is renewed and periodically during the lifetime of a contract, and therefore provide opportunity for passenger input.

Passengers also value the idea of bus operators and local transport authorities working together to reach an agreement as is the case for Quality Partnerships. This reassures passengers that:

- there is the opportunity for constructive criticism within the agreement process
- the agreement benefits both from the expertise and business sense of the bus operators and the local social and economic concern of a local authority.

To ensure that the process is transparent and ultimately accountable to passengers, they feel it is also important that it should be overseen by an independent regulator. Passengers are not specific about who or what form this should take, but it should be an organisation which is not directly involved in the agreement itself in order to maintain independence, transparency and objectivity.

The bus user groups represented in this research usually felt that the model of bus service provision should vary in different areas. However, generally they advocated the benefits of a partnership which involves both commercially and socially-minded goals and felt that some form of obligation, on both sides, is necessary.

4.3 The role of passengers in the determination of bus service provision

The current situation

At present, passengers believe they have no involvement in determining how bus services are provided; few could think of any examples where they had been given the opportunity to be consulted, and therefore even fewer where they had been actively engaged.

Although many passengers could recall significant changes to their bus services, for example the introduction of 'bendy' buses in Leeds and service cuts in Cambridge, virtually none had come across information or consultation about these changes personally.

"I have never known someone to be approached regarding updated information or asking about bus travel and what they think about it and whether they would like a different service in the future."

(Cambridge – leisure)

“Someone at the top makes that decision about cuts; they don’t care about what we think.”
(Cambridge – leisure)

“I’ve never been asked about my views and I use the buses every day.”
(Cambridge – leisure)

There were a few who believe it simply ‘must be’ that passengers are consulted and that they had just ‘missed’ it. Generally these were infrequent users who assume that bus companies and/or local transport authorities carry out some kind of consultation, as would be anticipated in other industries.

“Yes, they definitely speak to bus users all the time otherwise they wouldn’t know what people thought or what they wanted.”
(Leeds – student)

“I think they do little surveys here and there don’t they?”
(Leeds – leisure)

Some of the unadvertised changes which passengers observed on their routes were unpopular and seemed illogical from the passenger viewpoint. This is seen as evidence to passengers that their views are neither solicited, nor seen as important to service providers.

“Why did they decide that bus wasn’t viable, it was always full... We could never understand why that bus was removed from service.”
(Leeds – leisure)

Some passengers had made (or attempted to make) complaints to bus operators. Where this was the case, most felt that it was not clear where and how a complaint could be made, that the process itself was difficult, and that service providers were generally not responsive. This, combined with a general lack of opportunities for customer feedback, suggests to passengers that bus operators actively wish to avoid hearing the passenger viewpoint.

“I would like to think they would talk to customers but I’m not aware of it ever happening, maybe because it would never be positive and they don’t want to have to deal with that.”
(Cambridge – leisure)

The ideal future situation

Despite the current lack of communication between bus operators and passengers regarding service provision, passengers are keen that their opinions should be sought. The opportunity to give feedback is important to passengers as this allows them to put forward their concerns and interests. As many passengers regard buses as a public service rather than a business opportunity, they see it as their right to have some input.

“Straight from the mouth of what’s important to a passenger, it’s not a big wig sat in an office saying, “I think people need this, this and this.” If they come straight to us, it’s there in black and white, instead of people just guessing.”
(Leeds – commuter)

“The council should find out what people would like and how they would ideally use the bus and feed that information back to potential bus people.”
(Cambridge – leisure)

“The company who’s running the service, they get grants off the government... so they should find out [what passengers want]... It would benefit them in the long run, as they would get more people using their service...and produce more custom.”
(Leeds – commuter)

However a willingness to participate in a consultation if given the opportunity is not universal. The majority would contribute as long as this was made easy for them and a significant proportion express a willingness to contribute even if this required more personal effort on their part. Likelihood to participate can also vary according to the level of dependence on the service and the magnitude and effects of the change.

“Depends how much it affects me.”
(Leeds – commuter)

“I am bothered but...it’s a percentage of my day; that little bit at the start and at the end, it’s the middle bit you’re bothered about.”
(Leeds – commuter)

“Yeah definitely, I use the bus every single day so it’s worth it, if it’s going to change something or if it’s going to bring a better service.”
(Leeds – student)

In general, bus passengers can be quite heavily dependent on their services with few alternative options, meaning that changes (or cuts) to services would affect them greatly. In addition to this, a bus service is seen as part of the fabric of local communities and many passengers feel a sense of entitlement to bus services and therefore to involvement in how bus services are run. This creates a sense of local ownership which is far more significant than for rail services, and spurs some passengers’ sense of duty to participate in a consultation, if offered.

“If you don’t do anything you can’t complain... It’s like if you don’t vote.”
(Leeds – commuter)

“I’m sure that people would be happy to share information and tell people what they think to make the service better.”
(Cambridge – leisure)

Several passengers also advocated the involvement of non-users in consultations relating to bus services. This recognises the fact that non-users can also be affected (for example, by traffic flow if a route is changed) and that they could wish to use bus services in future, even if they do not at the moment, if decisions are taken which take their particular needs and preferences into account.

It is also consistent with the sense that residents of an area have an entitlement to a bus service, and therefore have the right to contribute to and influence the service in their area.

*“I think they should consult everyone and not just those who get on buses because some people may use the buses more if things were better.”
(Cambridge – leisure)*

There is, however, cynicism about how effective and influential passenger feedback would be in decisions made about bus service provision. This is mainly due to passenger perceptions that bus operators largely control the industry currently, and a historical sense of a lack of regard for the passenger perspective.

*“It’s not so much about them asking – but would they actually listen?”
(Cambridge – commuter)*

*“But do they listen to you if you fill in these questionnaires?”
(Leeds – leisure)*

*“I don’t think they’d take any notice anyway. It’s difficult to get your voice heard.”
(Leeds – leisure)*

For a few, the suspicion as to operator intentions and potential use of any passenger data collected is more serious but, again, this is primarily an assumption.

*“I’ve only seen Stagecoach people checking on the time of buses at bus stops. These people are actually employed by Stagecoach so who’s to say they won’t change the results to suit them?”
(Cambridge – commuter)*

For some, these assumptions are backed up by previous experience of interaction between passengers and bus operators via complaints procedures, which confirm to passengers that companies take little notice.

*“They have never replied to any complaints put in, ever! So why would they actually do research amongst bus users to see what they think. I don’t think they care.”
(Cambridge – commuter)*

For many passengers, this is at odds to the way in which they experience other industries. In other sectors, customers are accustomed to relationships being actively nurtured and feedback being regularly sought, for example via invitations to provide

feedback in sectors such as retail. This wider experience makes the current lack of opportunity for passenger involvement in the bus industry even less acceptable. Actively seeking, acknowledging and responding to passenger input will enhance engagement and encourage a more positive overall perception of the industry to be fostered.

4.4 How to communicate with passengers when determining bus services **Points at which passenger opinion should be sought**

There are several points in the process of determining bus service provision at which passengers feel they should be consulted. Unlike rail franchise competitions, the process leading to the determination and provision of bus services is generally more fluid and does not readily suggest an obvious point at which passenger opinion would be most useful or even crucial. Therefore passengers envisage that their feedback should be sought on both periodic and ongoing bases.

Primarily passengers see scope for consultation at times when service changes are being considered. This includes a range of factors:

- new routes are to be defined and added
- existing routes are to be changed (for example, to include additional streets)
- potential cuts and service reductions (such as loss of route, reduced frequency, reduced weekend/evening service)
- timetable changes
- changes to fares and ticketing.

In these instances, passengers expect that specific and tangible proposals will have already been developed, incorporating consideration of any existing passenger data. These should then be released and publicised for passengers to comment specifically upon the proposed developments, rather than a more open-ended invitation for requirements and suggestions.

“I think it would be useful to see their specific agenda to say whether you agree or disagree with the service they [plan to] provide.”
(Cambridge – commuter)

Additionally, passengers expect that their feedback should be sought on an ongoing basis in order to review performance against targets, highlight any problems with service provision and enable operators to keep abreast of any changes in passenger needs and satisfaction. This can be a more general consultation to seek passengers' views on a range of measures and service indicators.

Preferred methods for gathering passenger perspectives

Preferred approaches for gathering passenger perspectives vary according to the purpose of the consultation.

For feedback on specific issues, such as changes to existing services or the addition of new services, it is important that passengers are first made aware of the proposals. In the research, most passengers felt that the best way to achieve this would be through the distribution of leaflets outlining the key elements of any proposal. Leaflets could be

distributed either on the bus network itself, for example underneath a notice/map on board (or alternatively as posters on board or at bus stops/stations), in free newspapers circulated in the local area, or by distributing the leaflets to houses in the affected area, which would also ensure non-users have the opportunity to contribute.

Leaflets would also provide additional references where further information could be sourced if desired. Most passengers were happy for this to be via a website, although an alternative such as postal address or telephone number would ideally be provided to avoid excluding those without internet access. Leafleting has a precedent across other areas of local infrastructure management, such as planning permission, so seems feasible and reasonable to passengers.

“When they were changing the road [layout] on my street, they put everything through the letterbox and said if you want more information this is where you go and put a website ... just so you were aware that something was happening, and if you cared enough to look then you can, but you don’t have to.”
(Leeds – commuter)

Public meetings held by the operators and/or local transport authorities are another method through which to consult on specific service changes. Whilst this clearly requires more effort on behalf of passengers, most felt that they would participate and that it would be of benefit to them if the issue had serious repercussions for them personally, such as a route being removed. For less fundamental changes, this may not be as effective as an approach given the effort required from passengers.

For the ongoing monitoring of services, passengers felt there were practices which could be implemented on their behalf which would not require their involvement at all, but would reassure them that their needs were being considered. Mystery shopping and evaluations by independent inspectors (the example of Ofsted in schools was used to articulate this) were both suggested. As long as passengers could be confident of the objectivity, independence and thoroughness of these exercises, and were aware of them, this would be a valuable contribution.

Alternatively, for the more direct involvement of passengers, customer surveys were the most popular way to gather passenger opinion. Passengers were familiar with the concept of this kind of research through fairly extensive exposure across other industries, and it was generally considered to be an effective way to collate passenger opinion and monitor trends.

Passengers could envisage a range of ways in which surveys could be administered, but favoured methods which required little effort on their part, as these were therefore considered easy and convenient to participate in. Suggestions include the survey being carried out online or whilst travelling by bus.

“Have people on the buses asking for your opinion or on bus stops which would give you something to do whilst waiting.”
(Cambridge – commuter)

*“Online surveys, they would need to be advertised though but they are quick and anyone can take part.”
(Cambridge – leisure)*

A final way in which passengers suggested that services can be monitored is through analysis of complaints received. Passengers see this as a resource already at the fingertips of bus operators which therefore should be used proactively. Although not a complete picture of a service, passengers do feel complaints should be treated seriously and can be used as a way of identifying any problem areas or issues as they arise.

Under both circumstances, the feedback process should be made as simple as possible for passengers to encourage response.

*“Not an essay, something quick and easy.”
(Leeds – commuter)*

There is perhaps also a role for user groups here in being able to collate passenger opinion, and use this alongside their more detailed understanding of the operational aspects of bus operations to represent passenger interests. Indeed, some passengers pointed out that a more informed view may also be needed.

*“Wouldn’t they know better than we know ourselves? When we get on the bus we don’t really realise these things, we just get on it to go to our destination...there’s some things you just don’t know about.”
(Leeds – student)*

Naturally, user groups also advocate a bigger role for themselves. They identify specific reasons for this:

- strengthening individual passengers’ cases when issues arise
- developing relationships with operators to increase the likelihood that passenger needs will be heard
- having a more informed view than many individual passengers, to:
 - provide credibility in the way passenger views are expressed
 - ensure that issues are directed to the right body, e.g: a local transport authority rather than an operator, or another consumer group.
- encouraging passengers to actually use local services, in order to maintain their viability.

Issues for consultation and who passengers should interact with

Passengers see a role for a range of parties to be involved in seeking and providing the passenger viewpoint:

- independent regulator/watchdog
- bus operating companies
- local authorities/PTEs
- user groups.

Passengers wish to voice their opinions on a wide range of issues, many of which are extremely important to the overall experience of passengers:

- fare prices
- fare structures and administration
- routes and service coverage
- frequency
- cleanliness
- driver attitude
- capacity
- punctuality
- information and communication channels in general.

Appendices

A. Summary of sample structure

A (i) Focus groups among bus passengers

Leeds

Group 5 (Leeds) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bus passengers• For commuting to work• Aged 25-44	Group 6 (Leeds) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bus passengers• For leisure journeys• Aged 60+ (concessionary pass holders)
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Cambridge

Group 7 (Cambridge) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bus passengers• For commuting to work• Aged 25-44	Group 8 (Cambridge) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bus passengers• For leisure journeys• Aged 19-25 (not students)
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A (ii) Depth interviews with representatives of bus user groups

- Representatives of a number of bus user groups were interviewed by telephone and in person.

B. Discussion guide – passengers, focus groups and triads

(1hr 45 mins)

1. Introduction

- Introduction and thank respondents for taking part
- Brief background to Passenger Focus
 - Monitor awareness of Passenger Focus / other passenger groups
- Explain purpose of research, i.e. to find out about passengers' experiences of and views about the bus industry
- Confidentiality issues/reassurances/Permission to record
- BRIEF: Respondents work in pairs to introduce each other:
 - Personal details
 - Description of recent bus journey – bus companies used, and journey purpose for each, overall views on these journeys (i.e. any negatives or highlights)

2. Current service overview

- Which bus companies do you currently use?
- For each relevant;
 - What are your overall impressions of these companies?
 - How happy are you with the service provided overall?
 - Which elements are particularly good/bad?
Moderator note areas of particular concern and importance for later
 - What could be improved to make the service better?
- Do you have a choice between which bus companies you use?
- If not, do you ever use different bus companies when making different journeys?
 - Should there be more than one company to choose from, or should there just be one company?
 - Why? How does this affect you as a passenger?
- How do the different bus companies compare?
 - Are there any similarities/differences?
 - in general perception?
 - in the service provided?
Refer to notes about important service factors above to prompt if necessary
 - Are there things that one company does better or worse than the other(s)?
 - Do you trust one more than the others?
 - Why? / Why not?
 - Do you feel differently towards some companies over others? (Do you have any feeling of loyalty?)
 - Why? / Why not?
 - Would it matter if the service was run by a different company?
 - Why? / Why not?

3. Introduction to bus services

- Which companies operate the routes that you use?
- Are you aware of any other companies which operate buses in the area, or have done so in the past/could do in the future?

Depending on group's awareness;

- *EITHER:* What is/was different about these?
- *OR:* What would be different about the service if a new company took over in 6 months time?
 - Was/could the service be better/worse, or the same?
 - Were/could the buses be different?
 - Was the branding different?
(i.e. the name of the service, logos, colours, uniforms etc.)
 - How did/could this affect your journeys?
- Is it important to you that the company was/could be different?
 - Does this mean anything to you?
 - Did you 'like' or feel loyal to one more than the other?
 - Why? / Why not?
 - Did/could one provide better/worse service?
 - Why? / Why not?
- *EITHER:* Why do you think there are/were different companies which operate routes in this area?
- *OR:* Why do you think this company operates these routes and another operates those routes? (use a relevant local example)
- Why is that particular company in place?
 - Who determines who will operate which routes?
 - What do you think about that?
 - Does it affect you as a passenger?
 - What criteria are used to decide this?
 - Is it a good/bad thing?
 - Does it create competition? Is this a good/bad thing?

Moderator to observe at this point how interested and engaged the passengers are in this process and their knowledge of it

4. General principle of public service contracts and public consultations

NB this section should be brief. The purpose is to prepare the group for more detailed discussion about bus services

Moderator to explain briefly depending on the knowledge demonstrated at section 3

There are several contracts issued by public organisations which are awarded to private companies to carry out specific tasks in public services.

[If necessary...] This means that when there is a job which the government, a local authority or public organisation needs doing, they will sometimes ask companies in the private sector to do this on their behalf.

- Can you think of any examples of this?
- What do you think about this concept?
 - Are any advantages/drawbacks to those who use the public services involved?
 - Is it a good way to get the right people for the job?
- To what extent do you think members of the public are involved in making decisions about which companies run these services?
 - What do you think about that?
- Is it something that you would want to know about when these contracts are awarded?
- Is it something that you feel that you would like to have a voice in?
 - Do you think members of the public and/or those who use the specific service should be asked for their opinions when deciding how these contracts are awarded and to which companies?
 - Why? / Why not?

5. Passenger perceptions of bus service provision

We are now going to talk more specifically about how the companies which run bus services are decided upon, thinking back to the bus services that you use.

- How do you think the bus companies which operate on certain routes are decided?
- Who do you think it is determined by?
 - Prompt if needed:*
 - central government
 - local authorities
 - commercial organisations themselves
- How do you think this process works?
 - What do you think about this?
 - Is there anything which could be changed or improved?
- Who do you think is involved in the process?
- Who do you think makes the decisions about who can operate and where?
 - What do you think about this?
 - Is this a good or bad thing?
 - Is there someone else who should be involved/decide?
 - Does this benefit you as a passenger?
 - How? / Why?
- Are passengers consulted (asked for their opinions) at any stage in this process?
 - What do you think about this?
 - Is this a good or bad thing?

- When should consultation happen? (before a company starts running a service, or during?)
- Should passengers (or anyone else) be consulted?
- Would a consultation benefit you as a passenger?
 - How? / Why?
- What should consultation cover?
 - punctuality/number of delays
 - number of cancellations
 - handling of delays and cancellations
 - crowding / space to sit or stand comfortably
 - bus stop/station environment and facilities
 - bus environment and facilities
 - quality of buses (e.g. age, size)
 - frequency of service
 - evening and weekend services
 - provision of staff (other than driver)
 - driver attitudes and helpfulness
 - provision for disabled passengers/other passengers with special requirements
 - fares
 - ticket types
 - timetable and other service information
 - personal safety
 - handling of complaints
 - locations of bus stops

If not interested in passenger consultation, probe further:

- Earlier you said that xxx needs to be improved on your bus service. Do you think that potential companies should know that this is an area of particular importance to passengers?
- For each:
 - Why?
 - How would this affect you as a passenger?
 - How should they be obligated on this?
 - How should they be told?
 - How would you (realistically) expect companies/local authorities/government to respond to this?)
- Overall, does this process affect passengers – either in a positive or negative way?

Prompt if necessary:

 - providing competition (or not)?
 - consideration (or not) of passenger needs?
 - encouraging (or not) changeover of operators?

6a. How bus operators come into place – current

We're now going to talk about how bus operators actually do come into place for certain routes

Moderator to show and briefly explain the current, commercial arrangement

Commercial operation

The situation in most localities at present where a local bus company decides what services to offer on a purely commercial basis. The local authority may provide financial support for some services e.g: in the evenings and at week-ends (which are put out to tender).

- How do you think this affects you as a passenger?
 - What are the benefits?
 - What are the disadvantages?
 - Does it encourage competition – and is this a good/bad thing?
 - Does it encourage change of operators – and is this a good/bad thing?
 - Does it encourage investment in the network – or not?

- *Prompt if needed:* How could this be improved upon?
- *Allow spontaneous thoughts and ideas:*
 - What would be the benefits of [idea]?
 - What would be the disadvantages?
 - Why?

Use subject of bus cuts to encourage more discussion (may come up spontaneously)

- Are you aware of any cuts to bus services?
 - What happened?
 - What was the impact on you/on the community?

EITHER: Thinking about this experience (if any in group)

AND/OR: Imagine that a route you use were to be cut as it was no longer commercially viable...

- Should you be told about this?
 - Why? / Why not?

- How?
 - Through which channels?
 - Who by?
 - When? (i.e. in advance – and how far in advance, during, after)
 - How is this as a way to find out about this? (Positive/negative/neutral)

- What would you want to know?

- Would you want the opportunity to express your views about this?
- Why? / Why not?
 - How? (i.e. through which channels)

- Who to?
- When? (i.e. in advance – and how far in advance, during, after)
- Would you do this if there was the opportunity?
- What would you want to tell them?
- Who would you want to tell?
- What would you want/expect them to do about this?
- Who would you expect to take action about this?
- How would this affect you as a passenger?

6b. How bus operators come into place – contracts

Now I want to talk about some potential new ways for deciding which bus companies run the routes

Moderator to show and briefly explain contract options

Quality Partnerships (reached by mutual agreement)

- *The transport authority (PTE or county council) reaches an agreement with one or more bus companies covering what local routes are needed, frequency of services, the range of fares to be charged, etc. This might, for example, involve the council constructing a bus lane if the bus company agrees to provide low floor buses.*
- *Such agreements might be voluntary or they might be signed contracts which are legally enforceable.*
- *Another possibility is that two or more bus companies agree to work together to co-ordinate their services so that, for example, bus times are more evenly spaced or they accept each other's tickets. The local authority must oversee such agreements to ensure they are not anti-competitive.*

Quality Contract (mandated by the local authority)

- *The local authority applies to parliament for legal powers to establish a Quality Contract scheme whereby it then sets the routes, timetables, fares, etc. and invites bus companies to bid to run the service according to the authority's specification (as happens in London). Only the companies winning the tender (bid) process can then operate on the authority's routes.*

For each:

- How do you think this might affect you as a passenger?
 - What are the benefits?
 - What are the disadvantages?
 - Is it any better or worse than the current process?
 - Why? / Why not?
 - *Prompt if needed:*
 - Does it encourage competition – and is this a good/bad thing?
 - Does it encourage change of operators – and is this a good/bad thing?
 - Does it encourage investment in services – or not?

Consultation:

- Would you as a passenger want to know about setting up these kinds of contracts when they happen?
 - Why? / Why not?
 - Who else might represent your interests?

 - Which parts are particularly interesting to you as a passenger?
 - What exactly would you want to know about?
 - How would you want to be told about this (or expect to be able to find out)?
- What exactly would you expect to be told or asked?
- Which issues is it most important to be consulted on?
 - What would you like to say to your bus company, or a potential bus company, about this?
 - Or what would you like to know from your bus company about this?

For the areas in which passengers would like to be involved:

- How would you like to be told about this?
- And how would you like to contribute your views?
 - *Prompt if needed*
 - notices and posters?
 - online - websites, email, social media?
 - meet the manager sessions?
 - local meetings?
 - surveys and questionnaires?
 - polls/votes?
 - letters?
 - news/media?
 - local MPs?
 - petition?
- Would you expect to be told, or is it enough to be able to find out?
- What would be the best ways for you to participate?
 - Who might best represent the passengers' viewpoint?
- Why is this a good/bad way?
- How would you expect the bus company/government/local authority to respond to this?
- How would this affect you as a passenger?

7. Service monitoring

Moving away from the way that bus companies gain the right to run services, and going back to what happens nowadays....

- What do you think happens at the moment to monitor the service on your bus?
- Have you ever seen any information regarding this?

- Should bus services be monitored on an ongoing basis?
 - Why? / Why not?

- Who should monitor the service?
 - Prompt if needed:*
 - Government?
 - Local authority?
 - You (i.e. passengers)?
 - Passenger groups?
- How should this be monitored?
 - Prompt if needed:*
 - Customer comments – e.g. emails, social media, website, letters?
 - customer satisfaction surveys and questionnaires (NPS)?
 - industry information and statistics?
 - meetings (eg: ‘Meet the Manager’ sessions)
 - reports?
 - the media?
 - newsletters?
- What should happen if things go wrong, or the company does not provide the service they promised?
 - Prompt if needed:*
 - financial penalties?
 - withdrawal of the right to run services?
- Would you want to be involved in the monitoring of the service?
 - Why? / Why not?
 - Who else might represent passengers’ interests?
 - How?
 - How would this affect you and the service

8. Closing

- What is the one thing that you would want to see improved or maintained about your current bus/rail service?
- How would you let the potential future company know about this?
- If there is one way you could interact with the bus company:
 - at what stage in the process do you think this should be?
 - what would you like to tell them about (i.e. service aspect)?
 - how would you do this (i.e. channel)?
 - and how would this affect your journeys?
- Realistically, how likely would you be to actually do this?
- If time, any questions from observers if present
- If time, ask how process for bus compares in their eyes rail
- Invite any other comments from the group
- Thank and close

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