

Bus user needs are probed by watchdog

A new report by Passenger Focus has discovered that bus users know very little about the way bus services are run and financed



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► It's three years now since Passenger Focus gained statutory responsibility for the representation of bus users in England outside London and the organisation is increasingly providing insightful research.

Last week the watchdog revealed its most recent findings at a seminar held in Manchester. The accompanying report, *Giving Passengers A Voice In Bus Services* reveals, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the bus passengers in Cambridge and Leeds that took part in the research know very little about the way bus services are operated. Indeed many expressed surprise to discover the deregulated and commercially-led framework that is currently in place outside the capital. Meanwhile, passengers also expressed frustration that they frequently have no formal involvement in operator's planned service changes.

Industry regulation

The industry's regulatory framework has never been so in the spotlight with both Tyne & Wear and West Yorkshire advancing plans that could ultimately lead to the introduction of the first Quality Contracts. However, many of the passengers that took part in the Passenger Focus research thought that franchising already existed and expressed genuine surprise when it was revealed to them how the industry is presently structured.

"There is fairly low awareness of who is running the bus service and who's in charge of deciding what happens out there," said Keith Bailey, the watchdog's senior research adviser, at the Manchester event. "There is little knowledge of how services and operators are decided. A lot of people had never thought about it, it's an issue that's never occurred to them and their assumptions vary."

He described how the research had been

undertaken whilst the fallout from the aborted West Coast rail franchise competition was very publicly in the public eye and there was a general assumption amongst bus users that some form of franchising process must take place in the bus industry. Bailey said that many taking part in the research felt that it was right that local authorities should have a degree of control, but there were also concerns that a regulator should be in place to ensure that the local authority would not simply be looking out for its own interests.

"We went through the concepts [of quality partnerships and Quality Contracts], but we didn't ask them to make a choice one way or other," he explained. "We asked them what they liked and it was a combination of contract and partnership." Bailey said that the partnership aspect was a "very British way of working" but those involved wondered how anyone would be held to account.

He continued: "Having a contract and the reassurance that that offers means that the decisions are official and rubber stamped. It gives the operator an incentive to perform at their best and you can review against the contract terms to see how the operator is performing. So, in an ideal world, that's what passengers would like to see."

However, this form of regulation wasn't accepted by all of those attending the Manchester seminar. "You have invented some strange hybrid that sometimes you call partnership and sometimes you call a contract, which isn't legally achievable, and then said to passengers, 'do you like that?'," commented Jonathan Bray, director of the Passenger

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Keith Bailey, Passenger Focus



Passenger Focus questioned bus users in Leeds and Cambridge

Transport Executive Group Support Unit. "What you haven't done is accurately and coherently explain what actual options are on the table."

Meanwhile, Anthony Ferguson, the head of the buses and taxis division at the Department for Transport said that the research was actually in complete contrast to current government policy. "I work for a government that's actually trying to deregulate and be less regulatory and interventionist, but the users actually seem to quite like the idea of somebody controlling things behind the scenes," he said, adding that there was already an independent regulator in the industry - the traffic commissioner.

Perhaps bridging the two key themes of the seminar was Les Warneford, until recently the managing director of Stagecoach's UK bus division. He said that he didn't hear great cries

from passengers for regulatory change. "I do think there is genuine concern that when their service has been changed for the worse they are not being consulted," Warneford added.

Consultation

Customer consultation and the bus industry have not had an easy relationship in the past. This was borne out in the research where those taking part reported that they have had no previous involvement in determining how services are changed. Many could recall significant changes to their bus services, but virtually none had come across a consultation process where they could provide feedback. A minority believed that there must have been some formal process of consultation, but that they had just missed it.

Things seem to be changing though. Speaking at last week's seminar, Giles Fearnley,

the managing director of FirstGroup's UK bus division, described how the Aberdeen-based group is taking its first steps in providing a more formal approach to consulting with passengers over service changes.

So far this year, Fearnley and his team have been involved with five consultations - Aberdeen, Bristol, Glasgow and York - plus in partnership with South Yorkshire PTE and Stagecoach in Sheffield. He believes that they have pushed the boundaries in terms of the dialogue that the group is now having with passengers in such instances.

"The feedback that we've had is very illuminating," said Fearnley. "It is really being used to design the changes that we've been making. We plan to do much more of it." However, he admitted that an adequate consultation process takes time. Operators tend to work around the 56-day deadline

of registering any service change with the traffic commissioner, so naturally consulting with passengers increases the amount of time before any changes can be made. Fearnley continued: "You've got to resource it and you've also got to be prepared to be flexible with your ideas, in some cases pretty significantly. In the case of Glasgow we put back the implementation date for a month because we were getting so much feedback from the consultation."

He claimed that the consultations that First had undertaken over the last year had also been extremely valuable. "It is a huge commitment to do this and to do it properly," Fearnley said. "Does it pay for itself? How can you measure that? In terms of complaints and noise around changes, our experience so far York, Glasgow and Aberdeen has been absolutely yes. In terms of measuring success from customer feedback, and customers are our business, then yes there's absolutely a business case."

The bus industry is frequently compared to the retail sector, specifically supermarkets, but Merseytravel chief executive David Brown, who also said that it was clear from the research that passengers want a greater form of involvement in the industry, warned that there are not always clear cut similarities. "I think that it [consultation] is something that transport does, but Tesco don't go out and consult when they do things because Tesco have a much better on-going relationship with their customers," he said. "They understand what the customer wants all the time. They are constantly feeding their business decisions on what people's views are about their products and their shops."

Brown suggested that the problem in the transport sector was that when the industry began a consultation process, customers expected upheaval and would naturally feel concerned. He continued: "People don't like change, they like stability and security, so in the bus market people get nervous, particularly when we are doing a 'special consultation'."

He added that if the industry was much better informed on a daily basis about customer requirements and had a better dialogue with them, consultation would not be a problem. "It's about engaging much more on an on-going basis rather than when you want to talk about change," Brown concluded. ■