Passengerfocus
putting passengers first

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Dear Tobyn

Draft ITA Bus Strategy

I am responding on behalf of Passenger Focus to your consultation on the draft bus strategy for Tyne and Wear.

Passenger Focus is the statutory body representing the interests of bus passengers in England (outside of London). We believe the starting point is to focus on the outputs to passengers set out within the strategy - the acid test for any proposal will be in terms of the benefits it brings to passengers and how it will improve the delivery of services.

To this end we begin our submission with a summary of our research setting out passengers' priorities and expectations from bus services. We then discuss the draft strategy from the perspective of how well it aligns with, and delivers, passengers' aspirations.

1. Passenger priorities and expectations

Passenger Focus's research gives us a good understanding of passenger expectations and aspirations. In 2010 we conducted research into bus passengers' priorities for improvement[1].

Some 3800 passengers across a section of rural, urban and metropolitan areas in England were asked to rank 30 different criteria.

The table below shows passengers' priorities for improvement for the North East, for England as a whole (excluding London). For comparison purposes we have also included the rankings for passengers in Metropolitan areas.

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[1] *Bus Passenger Priorities for improvement. Passenger Focus. March 2010*

Criteria (in order of priority)	North East	All	All Metropolitan
More buses are on time or within five minutes of when they are scheduled to arrive	1	1	1
All passengers are able to get a seat on the bus for the duration of their journey	2	3	2
Buses run more frequently at times when you want to use the bus	3	2	3
All bus drivers are helpful and have a positive attitude	4	7	4
Buses go to a wider range of destinations in your local area	5	5	5
Tickets that entitle you to travel on all bus services in your local area, not just those operated by a specific bus company	6	4	6
Bus fares, tickets and passes offer better value for money	7	6	7
Accurate timetable and route information is available at all bus stops	8	8	11
All bus stops have a well-maintained shelter	9	10	10
The correct route number and destination is clearly displayed on the outside of all buses	10	14	12
Tickets and passes are available that entitle you to travel on all types of public transport in your local area, not just buses	11	9	14
All buses have low floors and are easy to get on and off	12	17	17
Personal security while waiting for the bus is improved through the use of CCTV cameras at all bus stops	13	11	9
Personal security onboard the bus is improved through the use of CCTV cameras on all buses	14	13	8
All buses drive at an appropriate speed and are free from jolting	15	15	15
All buses have sufficient room for wheelchair users/ people with a buggy or pushchair to travel in comfort without obstructing other passengers	16	16	19
Electronic displays showing the correct length of time until the next bus is due to arrive are available at all stops	17	12	13
Bus stops are located closer and with easier access to where you live	18	22	21
The inside of the bus is clean and litter-free at all times of the day	19	21	16
All bus stops are clean and free from graffiti	20	20	18
Bus stops are located closer and with easier access to other forms of public transport e.g. rail stations in your local area	21	18	20
Printed timetables, route information and other useful information is provided inside all buses	22	25	25
Bus tickets, travelcards and passes can be purchased more easily and from a wider range of sources	23	19	24
The length of time your bus journey takes is reduced by five minutes	24	23	23
The temperature inside the bus is regulated at all times of the year to ensure it is	25	24	22

neither too hot nor too cold			
Information on fares is available at all bus stops	26	26	27
The seats onboard the bus are very comfortable	27	27	26
The name of the next bus stop is announced or displayed electronically on the bus during the journey	28	28	28
All bus drivers are smartly dressed and have a professional appearance	29	29	29
The outside of the bus is clean and in better condition	30	30	30

It is noticeable that the concept of the 'core product' scores heavily in all categories – passengers want a reliable, frequent service. Value for money also scores highly with, in particular, a desire for a multi-operator ticket allowing travel on the next bus irrespective of who runs it.

Passenger Focus also carries out the Bus Passenger Survey (BPS)[2]. The March 2012 wave included results for the Tyne and Wear area, both as a whole and for GO North East and Stagecoach North East services.

The Table below shows some of the headline results.

Satisfaction (% passenger satisfied)	Total Nexus	Go North East	Stage coach
Overall journey	91	92	89
Punctuality	79	84	73
Helpfulness / attitude of driver	70	71	70
Availability of seating or space to stand	88	90	87
Value for money	63	n/a	n/a
Personal security whilst on bus	88	90	85
Personal security at bus stop	76	n/a	n/a
Overall satisfaction with the bus stop	77	n/a	n/a

As part of the survey we also gather comments from passengers about what they feel could be improved. The results tend to emphasise punctuality (especially the consequences of delay), a desire for more frequent services and a better attitude from some drivers.

As its name implies the Bus Passenger Survey targets actual passengers onboard buses. It was not designed to cover non users of services. Experience suggests that non users of a

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[2] *Bus Passenger Survey. Passenger Focus. March 2012*

service typically have a lower opinion /perception of services than do actual passengers. This could be caused by a number of issues – e.g. the lack of a service in the first place, a previous poor experience when travelling (even if years ago) or negative publicity - people being far more likely to remember and talk about a poor journey than a good one.

To better understand this issue we carried out research into barriers to bus use in Milton Keynes in 2010[3].   This found that:
- Participants would be more likely to use buses if they could be relied on to turn up on time, particularly when making time-critical journeys.
- Services on some routes were thought to be too infrequent to use to get to work, or to return from a night out. In particular, some said they would consider using buses instead of taking taxis if there were more buses after 8pm or if night buses were available.
- In the longer term, more could be done to raise awareness of bus services and promote their use. Many non users had negative perceptions of bus travel. Some also found it hard to know where to start – i.e. to find out about bus times and services in the first place.
- Participants welcomed the introduction of newer, modern buses, but felt that this would not be enough on its own to overcome the negative perceptions created by other barriers.

2. The draft ITA bus Strategy

The strategy sets out three key objectives:
i)   *Arrest the decline in bus patronage*
    This is to be achieved via:
- Introducing a fully integrated, multi-modal Tyne and Wear public transport network, built around a high frequency core strategic network.
- Providing a unified and consistent customer offer and guarantee standards of customer service through the publication of a "Customer Charter".
- Ensuring that bus users are fully consulted prior to network changes.
- Ensuring that all infrastructure is accessible and of a high standard and includes measures to improve safety.

ii) *Maintain (and preferably grow) accessibility*
    This is to be achieved via:
- Adopting accessibility standards and targets across the Tyne and Wear Network
- Introduce a common brand and accessible high quality buses.
- Work with bus operators to create a more integrated network through timetabling and ticketing initiatives.

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[3] *Barriers to Bus Use in Milton Keynes. Passenger Focus. December 2010*

ii)   Improving value for public money
  This is to be achieved via:
  - Ensuring affordability for both the customer and the taxpayer.
  - Simplifying fares and ticketing and improve integrated ticket products.
  - Setting improved environmental standards for the bus fleet.

We note that the strategy envisages a fully integrated, multi-modal Tyne and Wear public transport network but only sets out the bus strategy element of this. Bus policy / initiatives will clearly have an impact on (and be influenced by) developments on the Metro. It is, therefore difficult to comment fully on bus without seeing this wider context. Our comments below need to seen in this context.

The consultation discusses in depth the decline in bus use and advances a number of explanations and arguments why this is so.

 As part of this analysis we believe it would also be useful to factor in efforts made by the ITA over the years to increase usage. For instance, there has been a large investment in bus-based infrastructure (new stations and interchanges), bus priority schemes and low-floor buses over the last decade. In particular there was the Superoute initiative in 2003 that focused investment on certain services. What has been the impact of these initiatives in terms of passenger numbers? Have some been more successful that others in growing the market or arresting the decline in patronage? Lessons from previous experience can be invaluable in shaping future initiatives.

Equally it would be useful to know how the network has contracted over the last 15 years and whether the ratio of commercial mileage to publicly funded mileage has changed. To what extent is the decline in numbers attributable to a decline in the size/extent on the network?

These points notwithstanding we agree with the broad conclusion reached in paragraph 3.0.8 that efforts to arrest the decline in bus passenger patronage should be targeted at increasing the number of high frequency services, improving punctuality and reliability and increasing perception of value for money. In a time of increasing budgetary constraints it is right to focus management attention and investment on the things that passengers most care about.

Our research (outlined above) reinforces the importance of the core product, with punctuality, seats/capacity and frequency of service being the top three priorities for improvement. The better these are the more chance of growing passenger numbers.

We also agree with the broad assessment of the barriers to potential users of bus services (paragraph 3.0.9): the need to interchange; a feeling that the bus took too long to reach the desired destination; and a view that buses were too expensive. We also believe that the area in

which passengers wait between buses is an important consideration and one that we suggest is also included. Perceptions of personal security do have an impact on passengers' actual travel patterns.

Simplicity and ease of use are also important – for users and potential users alike. A prime example exists right outside Newcastle Central railway station where are two bus routes operated by different companies but possessing the same route number (no.10). This is confusing enough for existing passengers but must be baffling for new or occasional travellers.

Our research in Milton Keynes emphasises the importance of perceptions for non-users. When we challenged people to make journeys by bus as part of our research many were pleasantly surprised that the bus journey was better than they had expected – perceptions deterred use.

Addressing barriers to use will clearly be important to the strategy of improving access and, as mentioned, we would urge that this extends to the perceptions of barriers as well as their physical reality. It may not be enough simply to make things better, some will still need persuading to 'give it a go'.

Better value for money is the seventh highest priority in our survey for the ITA areas as a whole. However, it must be noted that this survey also includes passengers in receipt of concessionary travel arrangements which is bound to have an impact on value for money assessments. In fact, when we remove concession pass holders from the results we see value for money coming in as the second highest priority across England (excluding London). Cost and value are clearly a core issue for fare-paying passengers.

We agree therefore with the desire expressed in paragraph 3.1.9 that fare increases be more closely aligned with the rate of inflation/cost of living rather than being above this rate. We also support the use of multi-operator tickets – sixth highest priority in our survey. The benefits of having a walk-up-and-go service frequency are lost to some extent if your ticket only allows you to travel on some of those services. We note that there is already a multi-operator ticket of sorts in the form of a 'Transfare'. This allows a ticket purchased from one bus driver to be used on another route operated by a different operator or the Metro within 90 minutes of buying the ticket. However, this does not seem to have been widely promoted.

We are also aware that the 'Network One' fare offers a multi-modal travel option in the Tyne and Wear area but that sales are relatively low – presumably because the price set by the participating operators makes it more expensive than single-operator day ticket prices.

Hence, to be successful, it is clear that any new multi-modal or multi-operator ticket must be competitively priced. Without this important element there is a danger that history will simply repeat itself.

We also agree with the desire in the strategy to guarantee standards of customer service through the publication of a 'customer charter' – though we recollect a bus passenger charter being introduced previously in the 1990s. Such documents are common place on the railway (in the form of Passengers Charters) and are useful in setting out, in one place, the standards of service that a passenger can expect and their entitlements should this not be received.

We believe that a key part of any charter is the provision of punctuality and reliability figures. Notwithstanding government's annual publication of overall punctuality figures, there is little or no performance information in the public domain. Passenger Focus is currently running a pilot programme with operators and local authorities aimed at capturing bus punctuality data and using this to gain a better understanding of what causes delays to buses and the most effective ways of tackling these delays. We believe that making performance information more readily available could also empower passengers to ask questions of operators and local authorities.

Our research in the rail sector shows that rail passengers value the publication of performance data[4], believing that greater transparency generates greater accountability on the part of the service provider. Providing this for bus services could also help address the perception that services are less punctual than they actually are. We see from the consultation that such perceptions are an issue in the Nexus area.

It is important, however, that any performance figures are made as relevant to an individual as possible. The use of region-wide averages that mask poorer performing routes does not give a true perspective. It will be important to disaggregate the figures by service group or route to ensure that they remain relevant to passengers.

It is not clear from the strategy whether the 'unified and consistent customer offer' extends to Metro services as well as bus services. Metro already has a Passengers Charter which compensates passengers for delays in excess of 15 minutes. Naturally we would not wish to see standards/commitments for Metro passengers to worsen so we would be interested to learn whether there are proposals to introduce such a mechanism for bus passengers. We would be more than happy to discuss the development of the customer charter with the ITA in more detail.

We also endorse the commitment to consult bus users prior to network changes (paragraph 4.1.3). Improvements to frequency and service patterns are clearly important to passengers. However, in any substantial change there will inevitably be winners and losers. This makes it all the more important that there is extensive local consultation – the people best able to judge and

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[4] *Putting Rail Information in the Public Domain. Passenger Focus and the Office of Rail Regulation. May 2011*

comment on services being those who use them. Following the consultation it will be important to identify any areas that will receive a worse service and to see what can be provided in mitigation – for example in terms of demand responsive transport.

Passengers value stability of service. As part of our Bus Passenger Survey we ask passengers for the main reason they chose the bus – some 30% of respondents in the Nexus area said that it was because they had no other option. Passengers rely on bus services for work and to access local services – for many people it is an essential part of their lives – and so stability of service is important. This message is further reinforced in our research into the impact of bus service reductions on passengers[5]. This found that even though small changes may not have a major impact on an individual passenger, when viewed cumulatively they can have an adverse impact on overall quality of life.

Hence we support the aim in the strategy to add more stability to service planning. We wonder, however, whether only allowing changes once a year is too infrequent. Will it, for instance, prevent operators adjusting according to seasonal factors or reacting to changes from other modes – e.g. a change in rail services which breaks an established connection.   Allowing for two timetables a year (as per rail) may enable a little more flexibility.

We note the range of targets and measures set out on page 43. While there is a difference between the 2022 targets and the benchmarks for measures of punctuality, customer satisfaction and CO_2 emissions it is noticeable that those covering access do not differ. We would be interested in knowing more about these targets, including the equivalent scores today. It might be asked, for instance, why, despite the range of initiatives outlined within the draft strategy, only just over half (56.8%) of households within the Tyne and Wear area are expected to be within 400m of a frequent day time service by 2022. Having access to existing performance would help to put these targets into context.

We welcome, however, the inclusion of passenger satisfaction targets within the strategy. 'Hard' measures of punctuality and service frequency are very important but there is also a need to keep one eye on service quality. Our strong preference is for targets based on what passengers think – the best judge of quality being those who have used the services in question. This could encompass driver attitude (the fourth highest priority of improvement in our research) and also such things as personal security, the condition and upkeep of the bus stop and the provision of information. As you are aware Passenger Focus conducts the Bus Passenger Survey and we would be pleased to discuss how this might play a role in monitoring performance going forward.

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[5] *Bus Service Reductions – the impact on passengers. Passenger Focus. July 2012*

3. Structure

The debate over delivery options is clearly a sensitive one: there has been much written about the pros and cons of a voluntary partnership versus a quality contractual approach. We are keen that the issue over structure does not dominate the debate – the key focus must be on what is to be delivered. Form must follow function and not vice versa.

We agree, therefore, with the concluding remark in the draft strategy, "the preferred option for implementation should be the one which is expected to make the greatest contribution to achieving the vision, objectives and deliverables set out within the strategy." For us the best option will be the one that delivers the best service to passengers.

We look forward to working with Nexus and bus companies in the ongoing deliberations on this issue.

Yours sincerely

David Sidebottom
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