

# Passengers happy, but bus use is still declining

The loss of subsidised services is affecting rural areas but even in metropolitan areas passenger numbers are still decreasing. How worried should we be by the latest statistics?

**N**ews about buses in the local media is, understandably, dominated at the moment by stories about cuts to services. In some places these could add up to an election issue. As funding pressures on local authorities increase, they are focusing on areas they have to act on, rather than discretionary activities like supporting non-commercial bus services.

This trend is likely to continue, given the noises being made about spending by all the major political parties. So are we witnessing the slow death of bus services outside London (where, as ever, things seem a bit different)?

True, there have been significant reductions in bus services in some places, as the Department for Transport's *Annual Bus Statistics: England 2013/14* confirm. Beyond London, local bus service mileage continued its slow decline. It is now at the lowest level since industry deregulation in 1986.

The decline in supported services has been partly offset by an increase in commercial services, but not enough to stem the trend.

On the surface, this is bad news. As we know from Passenger Focus's earlier research *Bus service reductions – the impact on passengers*, the effects of the loss of bus services are subtle but significant in more rural areas. The gradual loss of choice and mobility will, undoubtedly, have longer-term effects for health and other government budgets. Having a concessionary pass is not much use if there are no buses to use them on.

However, there is a lack of data which makes it very hard to gauge just how passengers are affected. A route may have gone, but how many passengers were using it? It is also difficult to find out what the whole range of transport choices is in certain areas. Should we mourn the loss of a scheduled bus when there

might be a plethora of community transport, patient transport and other services that are available if you know about them?

A true transport map for a particular area would be useful.

In our own research, Passenger Focus asked passengers for their views on Herefordshire Council's tendered market day bus services and Shropshire Council's sponsored Shropshire Link. We found that passengers like these services.

The rise of apps is leading to new services such as the Nene and Welland Call Connect service. This dial-a-ride service, funded by Peterborough, Lincolnshire and Rutland councils, serves Peterborough, Stamford, Oakham, and lots of smaller towns and villages in between. New routes have just been added and a mobile app offered.

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Against a background of cuts to bus services, we are currently researching the demand-responsive alternatives that local authorities are investing in, whether they are taxis, car clubs or car-sharing schemes. We hope to assess whether passengers' demand has been met, whether money has been saved, and whether there is good practice to share and promote with local authorities.

Perhaps the more worrying story relating to passenger numbers is the continued decline in the larger metropolitan areas. Bus passengers in those six areas make up about half the numbers outside London, so this change is significant.

The reasons for this are well rehearsed but the continued rise and use of the car in those areas must be one of the main factors. Will devolution make a difference to this? Will increased local authority control, through quality contracts or the like, make a difference?

There is only way to find out: try a pilot and see what happens. This should provide some comparative data to work on.

The department's statistics make for easy and interesting reading. The current vogue for infographics has spread to the DfT and they have made a good job of it. Interesting statistics leap out. 84% of buses in England are deemed accessible: not perfect, but not a bad proportion as we head towards mandatory requirements in 2017. 82% of buses have CCTV. 92% have wi-fi. 86% are ITSO smart ticket equipped. Improvements in the buses themselves are being seen everywhere.

As our Bus Passenger Survey shows, passengers are broadly happy with their service. As a consumer organisation, we are measuring consumption and don't do much work on non-users, but the basic product seems to be relatively satisfactory. It seems there is just not enough of it to satisfy everyone.

What do bus passengers make of all this? Local authorities and bus companies remain essentially tribal. However, they are doomed to co-operate. Whatever happens with devolution and the battles for control of services, the future will hopefully be dominated by more "jaw jaw" than "war war". We bus passengers expect nothing less.



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