



## Rural bus services

September 2011

## Foreword

One in five people in England live in rural areas<sup>1</sup>. Recent surveys suggest that those living in the countryside regard better public transport as a top priority for improving their quality of life<sup>2</sup>. For many of those who do not own a car, and who are unable to rely on lifts from friends or relatives, the local bus service can represent a lifeline.

And yet, bus services in rural areas are increasingly being seen as an unaffordable luxury by local authorities under financial pressure following last year's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). Some regard demand-responsive transport as the most efficient way of matching up drivers and buses with the journeys passengers wish to make; others are scaling back fixed timetables to levels that they feel able to sustain. But what do the users think? We decided to ask passengers using two services:

*Herefordshire Council's 'market day buses': conventional tendered, fixed route, fixed timetable services carrying passengers from their rural locations into local towns on market days and back a few hours later.*

*Shropshire Council's ShropshireLink: a demand-responsive service to take residents anywhere within their local 'area'. For each area, it is usually available two days a week (more frequently in some areas), but journeys must be booked at least 24 hours in advance. Passengers can be picked up from home.*

Our research shows how passengers rely on these services to get about, a good proportion saying they accounted for all or most of their travel outside their neighbourhood. Indeed, if these services had been unavailable, around half said they would have been unable to make the journey they did; a third of passengers said the option to drive or get a lift was either impossible or very inconvenient. The need to travel was highlighted by less satisfaction with services that ran once a week. Only a minority of passengers believed their council would take much notice of them if they wanted changes to these services. The findings build on our national research: *Bus Passenger Priorities for Improvement* and the *Bus Passenger Survey*.

Passenger Focus has been actively involved in the debate about local service cuts. While the findings have most relevance to local authorities, bus operators and passengers of Herefordshire and Shropshire, we believe there are lessons here which apply to all rural areas. This research lends further weight to our argument that there is a need for full transparency and consultation over the options and impact when changes are proposed to rural bus services. If this is done, there is no reason why even people living in the most remote hamlets cannot continue to rely on buses to make the journeys they need to lead independent lives.

## Management summary

Passenger Focus asked passengers for their views on Herefordshire Council's 'market day bus' tendered services and Shropshire Council's ShropshireLink.

Market day buses are conventional tendered bus services which carry passengers from very rural locations into their local towns, nearly all once a week, bringing them back a few hours later. ShropshireLink is demand-responsive transport, generally available twice a week (sometimes more frequently), with registered users having to book ahead; a significant number of passengers are picked up from their home.

The key findings were:

- for just over half of the passengers, these services account for 'all' or 'most' of the trips they make outside their neighbourhood;
- for around a third of passengers, making trips by private means would be very inconvenient. Specifically for the trip they had just made, around half said that if the market day bus or ShropshireLink had not been available they "would have been unable to make that trip";
- the majority of passengers are aged over 60, with a good proportion aged over 70. This was a slightly higher proportion than for conventional buses in a comparable rural area (based on Bus Passenger Survey results). Around a third said they had a disability, which is not dissimilar to the proportion in the Bus Passenger Survey;
- the vast majority of passengers were very satisfied with all aspects of the journey they had just made (at the bus stop, punctuality, on bus comfort, the bus driver);
- passengers rated very highly the way the service is provided overall (bus route, journey times and specifically for the ShropshireLink the registration process and time slots offered for pickup). However, satisfaction on 'market day buses' with the number of days a week the service was available was, relatively, more lukewarm; and
- only a minority of passengers believed their councils would listen 'a lot' to their views if the residents wished to have changes made to these services.

The research was conducted via self-completion questionnaires issued to passengers of these services. Passengers rated: the journey just made; the overall service proposition ('market day buses or ShropshireLink as relevant); and the extent to which their total travel needs are met from using these services.

## Introduction

This research asked passengers for their views on Herefordshire Council's tendered 'market day' bus services and Shropshire Council's sponsored ShropshireLink. This section describes the services in more detail and the survey methodology.

### The services

#### **Herefordshire Council's: tendered market day buses (MDB)**

The 'market day' services are bus routes set up to bring passengers from very rural locations into main county towns on their market days. These services are 'focused' tendered services to supplement other tendered and commercial bus services across the county. There are twenty one market day bus services which feed into five market towns [Ledbury, Leominster, Hereford, Ross-on-Wye, and Kington].

Market day services are generally provided by smaller bus operators using traditional single-decker buses. These range from twenty to thirty seat vehicles depending on passenger demand. Passengers can get on at bus stops or hail the bus from the side of the road. We selected services scheduled to run once a week and to a fixed timetable. Almost all of them leave in the morning allow passengers around two to three hours in the market town and then, from central town pick-up points, follow the same route back from the town to drop passengers off.

It is a fare paying service, but free bus pass holders do not have to pay. In the last financial year the market day buses have transported around 20,000 passengers with a cost subsidy per journey of £3.30.

#### **Shropshire Council's ShropshireLink (SL)**

ShropshireLink is demand-responsive transport, provided by Shropshire Council's 'Operations Group' (after competitive tender in 2008) on behalf of Shropshire Council. This service is overlaid to be additional to conventional bus services within the county.

The Council has divided Shropshire into nine zones; each zone is then subdivided into a number of areas. Passengers can choose to travel to any other registered bus stop in their area or the main town(s) within their zone, although in practice most passengers make radial journeys (i.e. into the central town and back out again from all points in the area).

ShropshireLink is delivered using a modern fleet of 16 seat mini buses with low-floor access. The service will pick up passengers from any local place or bus stop, but will pick up disabled passengers from their home. ShropshireLink is available usually two days a week, although in a few areas (and for residents living on a boundary line) it is available more days of the week. Residents wishing to use the service need to register with Shropshire Council. They then need to book the service at least 24 hours in advance.

ShropshireLink is a fare-paying service, but free pass holders do not have to pay. Shropshire Council developed ShropshireLink in tandem with the requirement to provide flexible school's transport. This meant a singular fleet of vehicles, greater vehicle / maintenance utilisation and

spreading the fixed costs of operation across two community needs. To date, ShropshireLink has approximately 2,000 registered users. Overall, including educational trips it provides around 40,000 journeys per annum and the cost subsidy per journey of £7.70.

## **The survey method**

The research was carried out for Passenger Focus by BDRC Continental Ltd (the agency). A quantitative approach was taken to generate representative findings. A questionnaire was designed for self completion by passengers. Passengers were asked to rate various elements of the journey they had just made: catching the bus, the punctuality of the bus, the on-bus experience and the driver. Passengers were also asked to rate the service overall and the extent to which these services fulfilled their total travel needs. The same questions were asked about each service where applicable and different where relevant, e.g. the ShropshireLink booking service. The research methodology took account of the fact that these services ran in different ways and the field work for each service was as follows:

### **Market day buses**

The agency stationed interviewers in the market towns on market days. They approached passengers either as the market day bus arrived in the town or whilst they wait for the return journey. Passengers were asked to take part in the survey; those interested were given a questionnaire, asked to complete it after their journey, and provided a reply paid envelope to send it back to the agency. The fieldwork was carried out between Friday 18 March and Wednesday 30 March.

### **ShropshireLink**

Initially, the agency had interviewers ride the ShropshireLink bus for whole days across a range of zones and invite all passengers who boarded to take part in the survey. However, numbers travelling were lower than expected and this method was curtailed to save cost. A second fieldwork period was set up using ShropshireLink drivers to ask passengers if they wished to take part. For both invitation methods, those doing so were given a questionnaire, asked to complete it after their journey and provided a reply paid envelope to send it to the agency. Initial fieldwork was carried out between Friday 18 March and Tuesday 23 March. The second fieldwork period was Wednesday 6 April to Thursday 20 April.

The agency received a total of 252 responses: 149 from 'market day bus' passengers and 93 from ShropshireLink passengers. With such response numbers, caution should be applied before reading into any differences between the services.

## Research Findings

### 1. The users of these services

The results below show that the majority of users of these services are elderly and female; a significant minority have a disability.

| Users of the services      | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|----------------------------|------------|----------------|
| <b>By age</b>              |            |                |
| Under 60                   | 16         | 19             |
| 60 – 69                    | 25         | 27             |
| 70 and over                | 59         | 54             |
| <i>Base size</i>           | 139        | 89             |
| <b>Gender</b>              |            |                |
| Male                       | 25         | 24             |
| Female                     | 75         | 76             |
| <i>Base size</i>           | 139        | 87             |
| <b>Having a disability</b> |            |                |
| Yes                        | 35         | 47             |
| <i>Base size</i>           | 136        | 89             |

The Bus Passenger Survey (BPS) in July 2010 reported results of a survey on conventional bus services across 14 local transport planning authorities. One of the authorities surveyed was Shropshire, and is therefore a good basis to compare the results from the surveys on these two specific services with those from conventional bus services within a similar territory.

In the BPS, the proportion of those aged over 60 in Shropshire was 63%, so the age profile on these services is a little higher than that generally for this type of region. The proportion of females on these services was not dissimilar to BPS (71%). On the BPS, of those travelling with a free pass (which is the majority of those on the 'market day' and ShropshireLink services) 57% stated they did not have a disability, which again is not dissimilar to the proportion on these services.

The main reason for using both services was for shopping:

**Market day buses: 89% said main purpose was shopping (base size = 127)**

**ShropshireLink: 77% said main purpose was shopping (base size = 78)**

The proportion of shoppers on these services is higher than is typically on other bus services. By comparison, the BPS (free pass holders) found that 68% of bus passengers' journey purpose was to make a shopping trip.

## 2. The role of these services in the community

Passengers were asked whether they had a car they could drive, or whether they could get a lift from someone else. The results, in the table below, show that for most passengers the option of a car is not generally feasible.

| Availability of a car             | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|-----------------------------------|------------|----------------|
| Has car and does not mind driving | 15%        | 14%            |
| Has car but prefer not to drive   | 32%        | 17%            |
| Does not have a car available     | 55%        | 69%            |
| <i>Base size</i>                  | 139        | 87             |

| Asking someone else to drive      | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|-----------------------------------|------------|----------------|
| Ask someone whenever needed       | 10%        | 11%            |
| Ask someone else most of the time | 7%         | 5%             |
| Ask someone else some of the time | 37%        | 39%            |
| Do not have anybody to ask        | 45%        | 45%            |
| <i>Base size</i>                  | 139        | 88             |

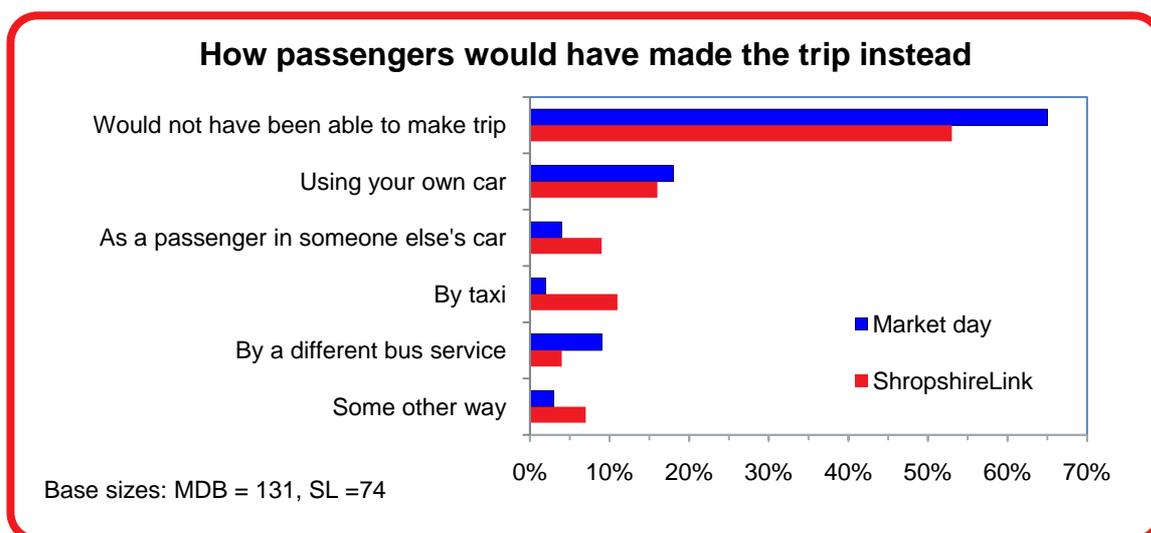
The answers to these two questions were combined into a 'convenience of private travel' measure. The results below show that around a third of passengers struggle to travel conveniently when not using public services.

| Convenience of private travel | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|-------------------------------|------------|----------------|
| High                          | 28         | 25             |
| Medium                        | 40         | 37             |
| Low                           | 32         | 38             |
| <i>Base size</i>              | 145        | 89             |

\* High = car to drive OR access to lift for all or most journeys, Medium = car but prefer not to drive OR access to lift for some journeys, Low = no car OR cannot ask someone else to drive

Passengers were asked if the service ('market day' or ShropshireLink) had not been available, how they would have made that journey they wanted to make that day. The chart below shows that at least half say they would not have made their journey that day. Four fifths of those who

said they “would not have been able to make the trip” had either a low or medium “convenience to travel privately” (as defined above).



Half the passengers on these services said that their usage of these services accounted for ‘all’ or ‘most’ of their travel beyond their neighbourhood:

| Amount of use for travel beyond neighbourhood (%) | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|---|------------|----------------|
| All   | 33         | 32             |
| Most  | 22         | 28             |
| About half  | 7          | 12             |
| Some  | 13         | 13             |
| Only a small proportion                           | 25         | 15             |
| <i>Base size</i>                                  | 123        | 78             |

They were also asked how inconvenient it would be to arrange an alternative to these services for their shopping trips; around half said they would find it very inconvenient. This supports the finding earlier about the limited usage / availability of a car as a means of transport.

| Inconvenience to arrange alternative transport for shopping (%) | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|---|------------|----------------|
| A great deal of difficulty                                      | 50         | 42             |
| Reasonable inconvenience  | 10         | 10             |
| Some inconvenience  | 19         | 18             |
| Easily  | 17         | 19             |
| Does not apply  | 4          | 10             |
| <i>Base size</i>  | 129        | 78             |

The majority of passengers used these services as standalone modes of travel. Although a minority on the ShropshireLink did connect to other services. ShropshireLink services were designed to connect into mainline bus services at some points. In order to reduce duplication the bus ticket is transferable and the ShropshireLink vehicle becomes the “bus stop” whilst waiting for the connection.

**Market day:** Only 4% said they used it to connect to another mode (base size = 142)

**ShropshireLink:** Only 17% said they used it to connect to another mode (base size = 79)

Passengers were mostly weekly users of the service, rather than more infrequent users. The questionnaire did not ask whether they used the service more frequently than once a week, (which can apply to the ShropshireLink service).

| How often do you use MDB/SL service (%) | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|---|------------|----------------|
| Once a week                             | 79         | 89             |
| Once a fortnight                        | 9          | 9              |
| Once a month                            | 7          | 2              |
| Less frequently                         | 5          | 0              |
| Base size                               | 130        | 82             |

### 3. Passenger ratings of their journey

#### Prior to the journey

Passengers were asked to rate the journey they had just made. In the case of the ShropshireLink, passengers needed to book the journey in advance. Their satisfaction with the outcome and service they received in booking their journey was near universal, as the numbers below show.

**83% booked their own journey** (base size = 86)

**95% got the timeslot of their choice** (base size = 76)

<sup>1</sup> **Satisfaction with “ease of getting through” – 95%** (base size = 68)

<sup>1</sup> **Satisfaction with “helpfulness” – 100%** (base size = 54)

<sup>1</sup> **Satisfaction with “pick up time offered” – 100%** (base size = 52)

1. Note: Proportion not providing an answer was over 20% (in part because not all booked their own journey).

## **Boarding the bus**

The majority of 'market day' passengers got on at a bus stop, waited a limited amount of time for the bus and only a small minority of passengers were dissatisfied with punctuality, as the figures below for the **market day** buses show:

**66% boarded from bus stop** (*base size = 141*)

**70% waited under 5 minutes** (*base size = 149*)

**95% satisfied with punctuality [82 of the 95 being very satisfied]** (*base size = 149*)

**<sup>1</sup>Bus stops: two thirds were within a quarter of a mile of passengers' homes; a third had shelters and seating; and negligible dissatisfaction with security, level of litter, or graffiti'. (*base size for these questions circa 85*)**

1. Note: Proportion not providing an answer was over 20% (mainly because some boarded at roadside)

The majority of passengers boarded ShropshireLink services from home. They also waited a limited time for the bus and were very satisfied with punctuality, as the figures for **ShropshireLink** below show:

**71% boarded from home** (*base size = 77*)

**84% waited less than 5 minutes for the bus** (*base size = 93*)

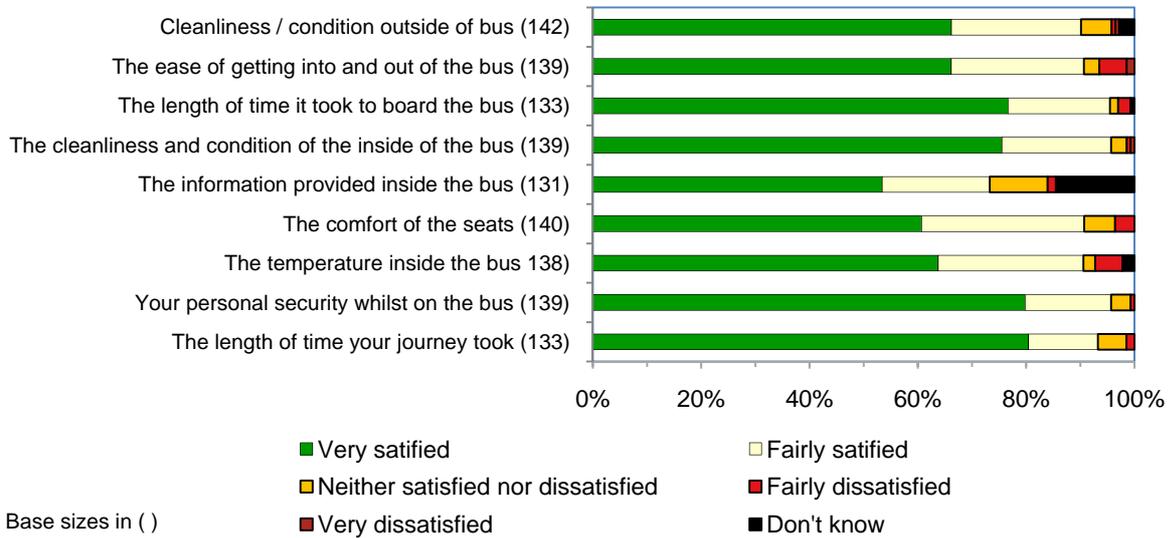
**89% satisfied with punctuality (80 of the 89 being very satisfied)** (*base size = 93*)

Passengers of these services were more satisfied with their punctuality than were passengers of other bus services. By comparison, the BPS (free pass holders) found that around 80% were satisfied with punctuality.

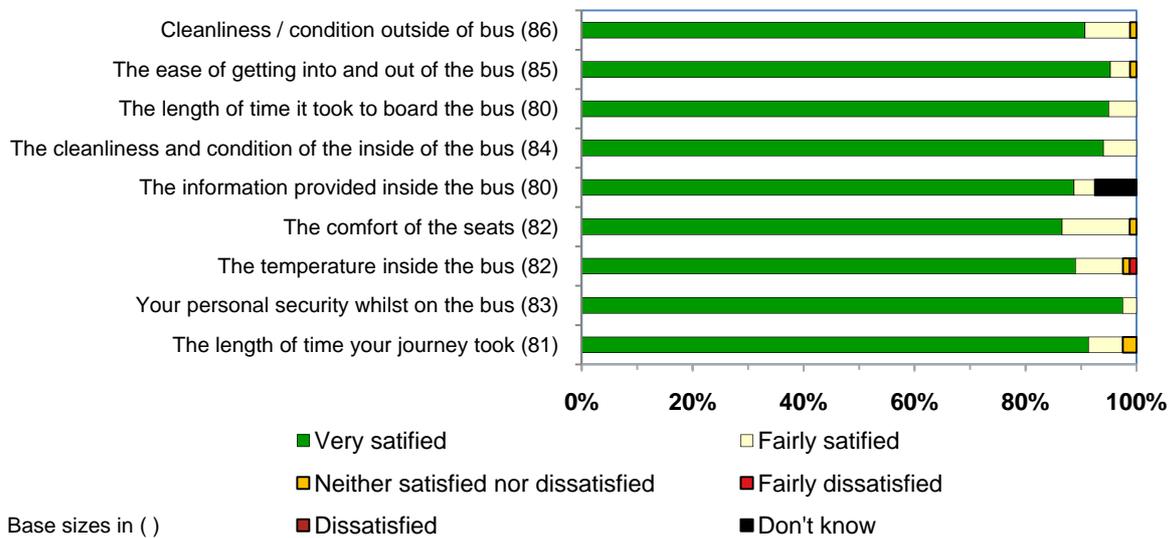
## On the bus

On both services, passengers rated all the on-bus attributes very highly in terms of satisfaction with a majority of those satisfied being very satisfied.

### Market day buses - rating of on bus attributes



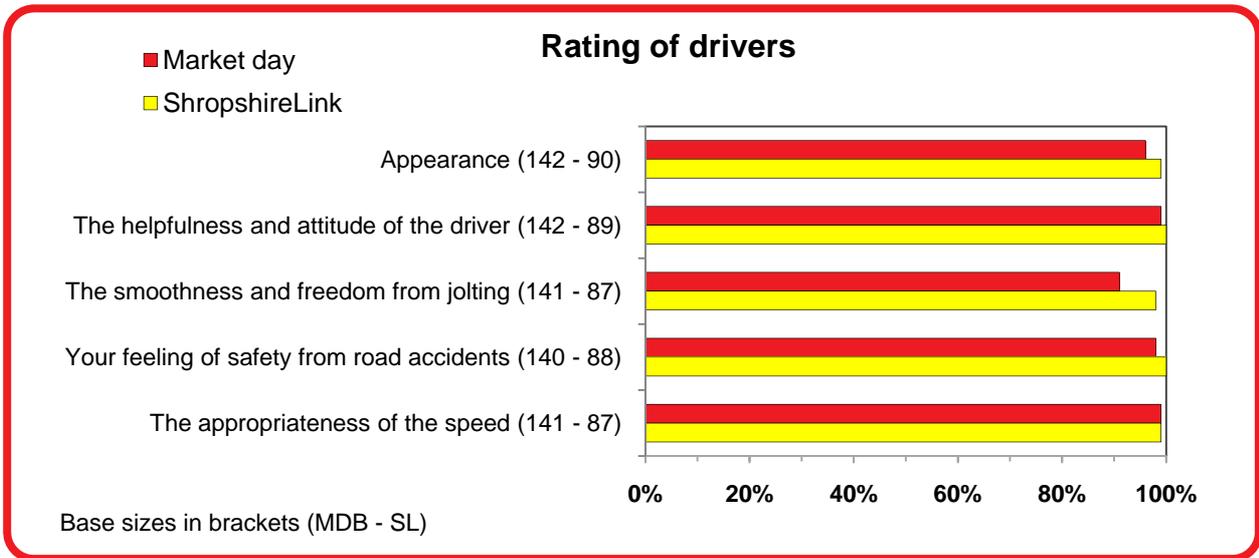
### ShropshireLink - rating of on bus attributes



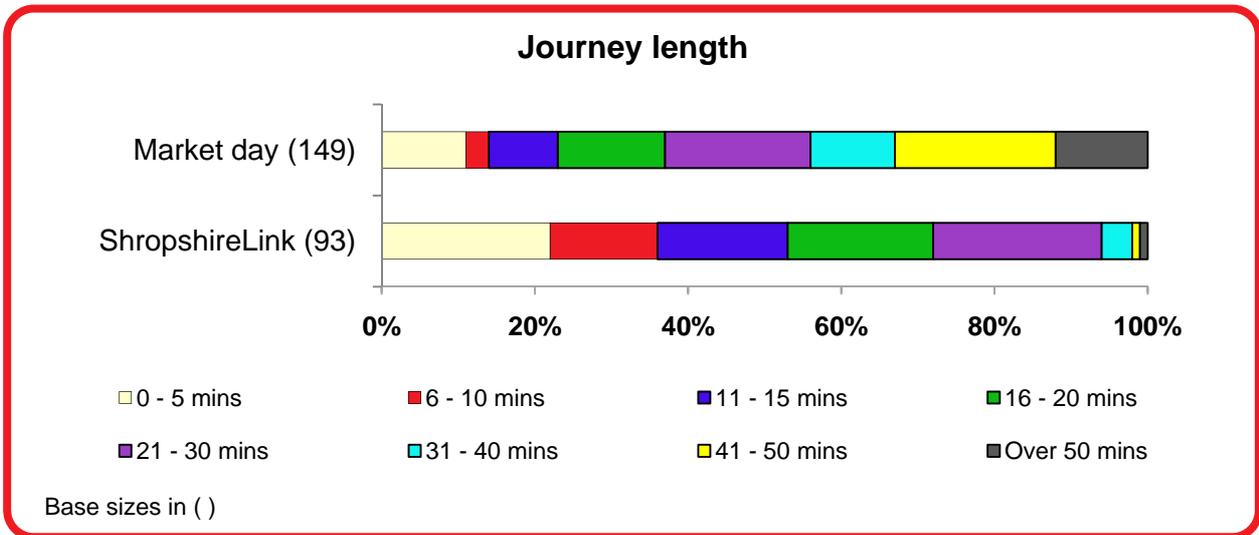
The comparable figures from the BPS (for free pass holders) were satisfaction scores of 90-95% for these measures with the very satisfied comprising about two thirds of the total satisfied. The figures for ShropshireLink are a little higher, especially the proportion of very satisfied passengers; this may reflect that the service benefits from a dedicated fleet of newer buses.

## Bus drivers

Passengers of both services rated their bus drivers very highly across all attributes. Passengers from the BPS (free pass holders) had satisfaction scores around 90%.



Journey lengths on 'market day' buses were longer than those on the ShropshireLink (assessed by passengers). Typically a journey on the market day bus was in the 21-30 minute range, whereas on ShropshireLink the typical journey is 11-15 minute range.



## Overall satisfaction ratings of the journey made

Both services were highly rated in terms of overall satisfaction with their journey.

**Market day:** 97% overall satisfied [87 of the 97 were very satisfied] (base size = 149)

**ShropshireLink:** 96% overall satisfied [90 of the 95 were very satisfied] (base size = 93)

BPS passengers (free pass holders) gave similar satisfaction ratings to their bus services. However, a much higher proportion of 'market day' and ShropshireLink passengers were very satisfied (compared with the two thirds of those BPS passengers who were very satisfied).

## Opinions of these services generally

Passengers were asked to rate matters that related to the provision of the service in general. Overall passengers rated the services very highly, with the majority of those satisfied being very satisfied. However, the exception to this was the number of days a week the services are available, especially for 'market day' bus users. They generally run once a week, whereas ShropshireLink runs two days a week from most areas.

| Rating of the services generally [% all satisfied, (% very satisfied)]                  | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|---|------------|----------------|
| Ease of registering for the ShropshireLink  | *          | 96 (84)        |
| Number of days the service runs (base size = MDB 121 SL 84)                             | 53 (26)    | 80 (55)        |
| Time of day the bus goes into town (base size = 126)                                    | 90 (56)    | *              |
| Time in town before the bus returns (base size = 124)                                   | 81 (52)    | *              |
| The choice of pick up times offered (base size = 80)                                    | *          | 90 (64)        |
| Likelihood of getting your preferred journey time (base size = 78)                      | *          | 96 (63)        |
| Reliability of arrival within specified time window (base size = 80)                    | *          | 93 (80)        |
| Width of the time slot ShropshireLink provides (base size = 80)                         | *          | 93 (64)        |
| Where you wait for the bus (base size = 80)   | *          | 96 (85)        |
| The route the bus follows (base size = MDB 121 SL 80)                                   | 90 (62)    | 94 (80)        |
| The length of time your journey takes (base size = MDB 119 SL 79)                       | 90 (61)    | 95 (82)        |
| Location of destination / pick up bus stops within the town (base size = MDB 118 SL 80) | 96 (80)    | 94 (83)        |

\* This feature was not applicable to that service

Passengers in Shropshire were more likely to find out about ShropshireLink through Council literature and those in Herefordshire were more likely to find out about 'market day' buses through personal recommendations, or seeing it in action. The table below shows the top three ways residents learned of these services.

| Market day                          | ShropshireLink                      |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Friends/family told me (36%)        | Received leaflet from Council (57%) |
| Saw the service operating (31%)     | Friends/family told me (25%)        |
| Received leaflet from Council (11%) | Saw the service operating (14%)     |
| <i>Base size = 149</i>              | <i>Base size = 93</i>               |

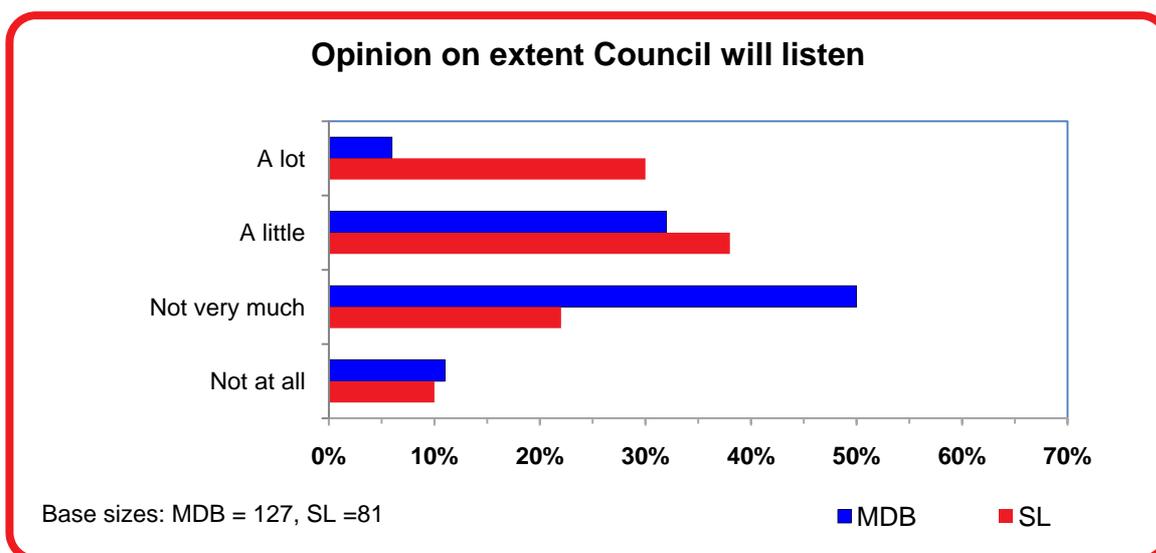
Passengers were asked how likely they would be to recommend the ShropshireLink or 'market day' services on a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 was the best score. Passengers of both services are highly disposed to recommend them to others, although a higher proportion of 'market day' bus passengers gave a score below 7.

| Likelihood to recommend (%) | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|-----------------------------|------------|----------------|
| Scores of 9 or 10           | 65         | 74             |
| 7 or 8                      | 9          | 12             |
| 0 - 6                       | 26         | 14             |
| Base size                   | 88         | 64             |

1. Note: proportion of those not providing an answer was over 20%

#### 4. The community's say on the services

Market day bus and ShropshireLink are services delivered under contract to Herefordshire and Shropshire Councils respectively. In response to whether the Councils would listen to passengers' views on changes to the service, only a small proportion of 'market day' bus passengers thought 'a lot' of listening would take place.



The majority of passengers had not taken part in any consultation about their service (ShropshireLink or 'market day'). Herefordshire Council last consulted on the 'market day' services around four years ago; Shropshire Council consulted on ShropshireLink around the time the service was created and recently on changes to tendered services within the conventional bus network.

| Whether taken part in consultation (%) | Market day | ShropshireLink |
|--|------------|----------------|
| Yes                                    | 8          | 20             |
| No                                     | 92         | 80             |
| Base size                              | 129        | 86             |

## Appendix

### 1. Herefordshire 'market day' bus routes

| Route | Start Locality        | Market Town | Day(s) of Operation |
|-------|-----------------------|-------------|---------------------|
| 31    | Llangrove             | Ross-on-Wye | Thursday            |
| 37    | Little Dewchurch      | Ross-on-Wye | Thursday            |
| 54    | Bridstow              | Monmouth    | Friday              |
| 55    | Howle Hill            | Ross-on-Wye | Thursday            |
| 388   | Hereford / Cheltenham | Ledbury     | Saturday            |
| 405   | Bromyard              | Hereford    | Wednesday           |
| 411   | Goodrich              | Hereford    | Wednesday           |
| 426*  | Hereford              | Leominster  | Friday              |
| 436   | Kinnersley (Hereford) | Hereford    | Wednesday           |
| 441   | Clodock               | Hereford    | Wednesday           |
| 442   | Clehonger             | Abergavenny | Tuesday             |
| 444   | Kilpeck               | Hereford    | Wednesday           |
| 457   | Newent                | Hereford    | Wednesday           |
| 459   | Much Marcle           | Ross-on-Wye | Thursday            |
| 472   | Fromes Hill           | Hereford    | Wednesday           |
| 478   | Much Marcle           | Hereford    | Wednesday           |
| 482   | Bromyard              | Leominster  | Friday              |
| 497   | Leominster            | Kington     | Tuesday             |
| 500   | Burford (Shrops)      | Leominster  | Friday              |

\* This is the variation to the standard route for Leominster's market day (Friday)

Routes 479 and 448 were not sampled as they ran more frequently than market days

## 2. ShropshireLink zones within Shropshire and days of availability

| Zone | Coverage   | Day of Operation  |
|------|--|---|
| 1    | Pontesbury, Minsterley and Bishop's Castle.          | Area 1 – Monday Wednesday and Friday<br>Area 2 – Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday   |
| 2    | Bishop's Castle, Bucknell, Clun and Craven Arms      | Area 1 – Tuesday and Friday<br>Area 2 – Monday through to Friday<br>Area 3 – Wednesday and Saturday<br>Area 4 – Monday and Thursday   |
| 3    | Ludlow, Cleobury Mortimer and Burford                | Area 1 – Monday through to Saturday<br>Area 2 – Thursday and Saturday<br>Area 3 – Tuesday and Friday<br>Area 4 – Monday and Wednesday |
| 4    | Bridgnorth, Shifnal, Pattingham and Kinver           | Area 1 – Thursday and Saturday<br>Area 2 – Monday through to Saturday<br>Area 3 – Monday and Wednesday<br>Area 4 – Tuesday and Friday |
| 5    | Ludlow, Church Stretton, Bridgnorth and Much Wenlock | Area 1 – Tuesday and Thursday<br>Area 2 – Wednesday and Saturday<br>Area 3 – Monday and Friday  |
| 6    | Shrewsbury Rural                                     | Area 1 – Wednesday and Friday<br>Area 2 – Tuesday and Saturday<br>Area 3 – Monday and Thursday  |
| 7    | Whitchurch, Ellesmere, Wem and Market Drayton        | Area 1 – Wednesday and Saturday<br>Area 2 – Tuesday and Thursday<br>Area 3 – Monday and Friday  |
| 8    | Market Drayton, Woore, Wem and Whitchurch            | Area 1 – Wednesday and Saturday<br>Area 2 – Monday and Thursday<br>Area 3 – Tuesday and Friday  |
| 9    | Oswestry, Nesscliffe and Ellesmere                   | Area 1 – Tuesday and Friday<br>Area 2 – Thursday and Saturday<br>Area 3 – Monday and Wednesday  |

### Contact:

Any enquiries regarding this report should be addressed to:

Murray Leader  
 Research and Project Adviser  
 Passenger Focus  
 murray.leader@passengerfocus.org.uk  
 www.passengerfocus.org.uk  
 2nd Floor, 1 Drummond Gate, Pimlico, London, SW1V 2QY  
 t 0300 123 0843



© 2011 Passenger Focus

Passenger Focus  
Freepost (RRRE-ETTC-LEET)  
PO Box 4257  
Manchester  
M60 3AR

0300 123 2350  
[www.passengerfocus.org.uk](http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk)  
[info@passengerfocus.org.uk](mailto:info@passengerfocus.org.uk)

Passenger Focus is the operating  
name of the Passengers' Council