

Response from Passenger Focus: Proposal for a Quality Contracts Scheme in Tyne and Wear

As the statutory body representing the interests of bus passengers in England (outside of London) we believe that any proposal must be centred on passengers. We are, of course, aware that the consultation has led to heated discussions, many of which concern issues of principle as well as costs.

Our approach in this submission has been to focus on outputs for passengers. This stance is based on qualitative research¹ with passengers which explored their understanding of the bus 'world' and what role they wanted within it. What came through strongly was that passengers cared much more about the service provided than the structure or inputs required to deliver this.

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

Therefore in the remainder of this submission we look at what passengers have told us they want and how well the Quality Contract proposal aligns with, and delivers, these aspirations. We have not seen the detail of the alternative Quality Partnership proposals put forward by the North East Bus Operators' Association (NEBOA) so we are simply not in a position to compare/contrast the benefits arising from the two models.

Hence our comments below look solely at the Quality Contract scheme in isolation and should not be used to make or infer any criticism or support of alternative models.

¹ [Giving passengers a voice in bus services](#). Passenger Focus. October 2013

1. The Quality Contract proposal

The consultation sets out four broad areas to be covered within the Quality Contract.

a) *Service Offer*

- A fully integrated, multi-modal Tyne and Wear public transport network.
- High frequency, core strategic network of services. This will be based on the existing bus network but will involve approximately 18 additional vehicles.
- Contractual performance standards for reliability and punctuality. There will be incentive mechanisms, formal processes to record performance (via compulsory Automatic Vehicle Location equipment) and an audit mechanism.
- Minimum accessibility standards: low-floor buses, space for safely carrying wheelchairs, targets to ensure that ramps for wheelchairs are working before the bus leaves the depot. All buses will be required to stop at every registered stop if someone is standing there – again enforced through contractual targets - and facility to order an accessible taxi if a passenger in a wheelchair cannot board the bus.
- Driver standards. Bus drivers to achieve the Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) and receive training in disability/diversity awareness. Operators incentivised to improve through customer satisfaction research.
- Fares and Ticketing
Simplified fares structure, smart ticketing (including fare capping/ 'best price guarantee'), discounted tickets to children under 16, and discounted tickets for young people aged 16-18 and students regardless of where they live. Local enhancement to the national concessionary fare scheme (ENCTS) permitting all day travel on bus, Metro, Ferry and Sunderland to Newcastle local rail for an annual fee.
- Extended real-time information. Real-time information displays at key bus stops on high frequency routes and from all bus stops via SMS text or QR codes.
- Up to date information at bus stops: timetable, changes to services, ticketing table and zone map.
- Qualitative standards. These will include cleaning and presentation standards with targets and incentive mechanism.

- b) *Customer Charter*
 - Customer charter setting out the standards of service passengers can expect, requirements to publish performance updates and information on how to contact Nexus / make a complaint.
- c) *Branding*
 - Common, easily recognised branding
- d) *Customer involvement*
 - Customer representatives who can comment on services and participate in Local Bus Boards.

2. Passenger expectations and aspirations

Performance

Passenger Focus is pleased to see the emphasis within the Quality Contract on performance. In 2010 we conducted research into bus passengers' priorities for improvement². Some 3800 passengers across a section of rural, urban and metropolitan areas in England were asked to rank 30 different criteria. The top three priorities in the North East were punctuality, getting a seat and frequency.

A table showing passengers' priorities for improvement for the North East, and for England as a whole (excluding London) is included as Appendix A. For comparison purposes we have also included the rankings for passengers in Metropolitan areas. It is noticeable that punctuality scores heavily in all categories.

For the past two years we have been working with operators and Authorities to understand more about when, where and why buses are delayed and what can be done to help them run on time. Our interim report³ looked at the way data on performance was gathered and used.

It found that Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) systems were potentially a very rich source of information so we welcome its inclusion in the proposal. However, while it may tell you when and where buses are late (or, indeed, early) it will not tell you why. To get full value from the data it may still be necessary to supplement this with manual checks. In Tyne & Wear, for example, Go North East followed up analysis of punctuality data for route 56 with a meeting of three regular drivers and two supervisors. This produced an extensive list of pinch points and helped create an action plan for improving punctuality on the route.

² [Bus Passenger Priorities for improvement](#). Passenger Focus. March 2010

³ [Bus punctuality - a briefing note](#). Passenger Focus. September 2013

Even where sufficient data exists, we found that some operators and authorities struggle to take advantage of its potential. Often there is no dedicated resource for analysing data and the particular statistical and problem-solving skills required are not always available among the staff to whom the task falls, a problem compounded by staff sickness and turnover. We believe that the Quality Contract proposal must ensure that there is sufficient 'back-office' support and expertise to achieve this.

Passenger Satisfaction

We are also pleased to see the proposal contain targets for customer quality/satisfaction. '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 will be aware Passenger Focus conducts the *Bus Passenger Survey*⁴. This provides an independent measure of satisfaction. The March 2013 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.

Tyne and Wear PTE (Nexus) Satisfaction (% passenger satisfied) March 2013	Total Nexus	Go North East	Stage coach
Overall journey	87	86	87
Punctuality	76	77	75
Helpfulness / attitude of driver	72	77	67
Availability of seating or space to stand	85	84	87
Value for money	59	56	60
Personal security whilst on bus	85	85	85
Personal security at bus stop	80	82	77
Overall satisfaction with the bus stop	84	84	82

As part of the survey we also gather comments from passengers about what they feel could be improved. The results tend to emphasise (again) the importance of punctuality, especially the consequences of delay, as well as the attitude of some drivers.

⁴ [Bus Passenger Survey](#). Passenger Focus.

Overall satisfaction with existing services within the Nexus area is relatively good. The average across the 20 areas surveyed was 84% with three areas recording above 90% and five others also recording 87% overall satisfaction.

Tyne and Wear also scored well in comparison with the other Passenger Transport Executive (PTE) areas.

Criteria % satisfied across PTE areas March 2013	Tyne and Wear (Nexus)	Merseyside PTE (Merseytravel)	South Yorkshire (SYPTe)	Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM)	West Midlands (Centro)	West Yorkshire (Metro)
Overall journey	87	87	83	84	79	85
Punctuality	76	73	65	70	64	70
Helpfulness / attitude of driver	72	66	66	62	55	64
Availability of seating or space to stand	85	84	84	83	78	86
Value for money	59	55	59	53	50	55
Personal security whilst on bus	85	84	84	81	70	82
Personal security at bus stop	80	75	77	71	68	74
Overall satisfaction with the bus stop	84	79	79	79	73	77

We would be pleased to discuss how BPS might play a role in setting targets and monitoring performance going forward.

Fares and ticketing

The Bus Passenger Survey results show that one of the lower areas of satisfaction surrounds value for money – at least amongst those paying for tickets – while our priorities research found that it was the seventh highest priority for improvement.

Our report, *Bus passenger views on value for money*⁵, looked in more depth at what had the biggest influence on value for money perception and, importantly, what might help to improve things.

The key findings again emphasise the ‘core’ product. When passengers buy a ticket they expect a punctual, reliable service and a seat in return. Focusing on performance should also improve perceptions of value for money.

⁵ [Bus Passenger views on value for money](#). Passenger Focus. October 2013

Better access to information on fares and ticketing is also essential. Passengers often relied on word of mouth and the bus driver for information on times, routes and fares. All of which begs the question of how much business is lost because potential passengers simply don't know how to use the bus or because people can't find the ideal ticket for their needs.

It also found that many passengers didn't realise what ticket types existed, how they could buy them or where they could find out the information they needed. The research found a very strong desire for more centralised sources of information. For example websites, apps and notices on the bus. We are, therefore, pleased to see the Quality Contract proposal looking to simplify the choice of tickets and to make more information available at the bus stop and at central points.

As part of this value for money research we also looked specifically at the needs of younger passengers and we found that they had very distinctive needs. They rely on buses more, need more flexibility (to balance work, education and seeing friends) and often take journeys spontaneously. They also resent paying adult fares when they are still at school/college or on low (or no) incomes. They wanted this reflected in the fares that they pay, with adult fares only kicking in from 18 onwards. We are pleased to see the Quality Contract setting out proposals to help address this.

We also note that the proposal will help deliver the sixth highest priority for improvement in our research – a multi-operator ticket allowing travel on the next bus irrespective of who runs it.

The price of fares will always be an important consideration for passengers. The consultation acknowledges that there will be winners and losers from the new zonal structure. It states that the overall average fare paid across Tyne and Wear would fall by 2.5% (£0.03p). In total 69% of adult fares in Tyne and Wear will cost less than now, 12% will cost the same, 17% will cost up to £0.50 more and 2% will cost over £0.50 more.

Passengers' views on this will naturally be driven by the category into which they fall – those paying less will be happy, those paying more not. It will be important to explain to those passengers paying more why this is the case and, crucially, what improvements they are getting in return. This sense of value for money is one of the key measures for passengers and is something Passenger Focus includes within its own bus and rail passenger satisfaction surveys. We believe that the Quality Contract ought to monitor value for money perceptions as it gives a more rounded assessment than just the cost of fares.

Finally, we are pleased to see the consultation acknowledge the need to avoid creating a zonal boundary 'cliff-face' with services outside the Quality Contract area. Passengers want, and need, to be able to cross the boundary without difficulty or

excessive cost. This will obviously be something to be addressed in the collaboration agreement mentioned in the consultation.

Real-time information

Our report *Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption*⁶ found that delayed or cancelled buses have a real impact on passengers in terms of being late for work, late picking up children, or late for medical and other appointments. As well as practical issues, passengers talked about the anxiety and stress that this brings.

Our research found a clear desire for better information. Passengers feel powerless when faced with delays. There is, many feel, no means of finding out what is going on. Providing real-time information that empowers passengers to make an informed decision in these circumstances will make a significant difference at bus stops.

The use of AVL ought to provide the infrastructure on which to provide real-time bus information. We welcome the commitment to provide real-time displays at all stops on frequent routes. We would, however, also like to see a commitment in the longer-term to extend the coverage of such displays to some stops on other routes.

We also welcome the commitment to provide real-time information from all other stops via SMS text or QR codes. We are pleased that this will also include SMS as not everyone has a smartphone. Our research found that the 'top of mind' use would be to find out information once passengers had reached the bus stop. However, there is clearly also scope for pre-emptive alerts about disruption. Passengers saw the value in these provided that the information received could be filtered and made 'personal'.

In the main, Apps were seen as a supplement to real-time information at bus stops rather than a substitute for it, but could have an important role where a physical display cannot be justified at a stop.

We would also ask whether any thought has been given to how best to communicate with passengers already on board the bus. To tell them, for example, about current delays, temporary route changes/expected delays because of roadworks and notification about permanent changes to the timetable.

⁶ [Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption](#). *Passenger Focus* April 2013

Driver training/attitude

We are especially pleased to see the proposal focus on driver training/qualifications and for this to be monitored through customer satisfaction surveys. Attitude/helpfulness of the driver is already one of the criteria covered in our Bus Passenger Survey.

One of the features of our work on value for money and on delays/disruption is the crucial role played by drivers. The bus driver is the face of the company and is responsible for far more than driving the bus. They are the main source of information on fares, the provider of information on delays and disruption, and a reassuring presence when it comes to personal security.

Accessibility

The Quality Contract sets out a number of valuable initiatives, especially regarding the carriage of wheelchairs on buses. The recent court cases in Darlington and Leeds regarding wheelchair spaces on buses make it essential that passengers are clear on the priorities of use of such spaces.

We particularly welcome the requirement for buses to stop when passengers are waiting at bus stops. As the RNIB report 'Stop for me, speak to me' makes clear, it is difficult to hail a bus when you can't see what number/route it is.

There is one other initiative which we find useful and which we would encourage Nexus to consider as part of the Quality Contract scheme. We like the 'travel support' cards used by some bus and train operators which, for instance, passengers with learning or communication difficulties can use to indicate their needs to drivers. These are particularly helpful in the case of 'hidden' disabilities.

Transparency and accountability

We agree with the desire in the strategy to publicise standards of customer service through the publication of a 'customer charter'. Such documents are common place on the railway 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. We believe that making performance information more readily available could empower passengers to ask questions of operators and local authorities.

Emerging findings from some (as yet unpublished) research looking at passenger attitudes towards punctuality⁷ found that passengers should have access to information about the performance of their bus services and to key actions being

⁷ Commissioned to inform our response to the Senior Traffic Commissioner consultation on Statutory Document No. 14 on Local Bus Services: Guidance and Directions on punctuality.

taken by operators, local authorities to improve this. The research indicates that publishing this information is regarded as right in principle and is good for trust because “it helps keeps the industry honest”. This was the case even if individuals had little personal appetite in seeking it out – the fact that others are looking at it can often be enough.

Our research in the rail sector shows that rail passengers value the publication of such performance data⁸, 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.

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.

Engagement with users

Our research⁹ shows that passengers believe they have no involvement in determining how bus services are provided and few could recall any examples where they had been given the opportunity to be consulted. They were, however, keen that their opinions should be sought, particularly about significant changes to service patterns.

The latter point mirrors conclusions in our 2010 report¹⁰ on passengers’ attitudes to service changes. More than six out of ten (62 per cent) wanted to be given at least four weeks’ notice of major changes. The same research looked at how passengers wished to be informed of changes. Three quarters (76 per cent) felt that posting a notice at the bus stop would be the most helpful way to let them know about a major change, with 61 per cent supporting the idea of a notice inside the bus and 46 per cent local newspaper articles.

Hence we welcome that the Quality Contract would require a Customer Charter setting out the level of performance that passengers should expect and committing to publish regular reports on this. We also agree with the aim of making it easy for passengers to contact operators/Nexus and with the promise of consulting passengers over service changes.

We note that the proposal talks of appointing customer representatives who can comment on services and participate in Local Bus Boards. We see the value in

⁸ [Putting Rail Information in the Public Domain](#). Passenger Focus and the Office of Rail Regulation. May 2011

⁹ [Giving passengers a voice in bus services](#). Passenger Focus. October 2013

¹⁰ [Bus Service Changes](#). Passenger Focus. October 2012

creating such advisory boards but we think it prudent to also continue other forms of direct engagement with passengers - especially when considering significant service changes. Our report¹¹ on bus service reviews set out a number of case studies/ approaches to such engagement/consultation.

Non/potential users

All of our research outlined above looks at people already using buses. We recognise that a good deal of the strategy set out by Nexus is about encouraging more use of bus, including those who do not currently do so.

Experience suggests that non users of a 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 2010¹². 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.

In short, many of the issues for non-users were similar to those of users. There was a desire for a frequent, reliable service backed up by better information provision at all stages of the journey.

In conclusion we believe that there is much in the Quality Contract proposal that aligns well with passenger aspirations. It focuses on the outputs that matter most to

¹¹ [Bus service reviews: consulting on changes to local services - a best practice toolkit](#). Passenger Focus. October 2012

¹² [Barriers to Bus Use in Milton Keynes](#). Passenger Focus. December 2010

passengers, especially in the key areas of punctuality, real-time information and ticketing. It also offers increased transparency and it looks to involve passengers.

However, given the sensitivities surrounding this issue we would re-iterate the comment we made in the opening paragraphs that this should not be used to make or infer any comments on the pros or cons of alternative models – the details of which we have not seen.

As a passenger body we make no excuse for having looked solely at the outputs for passengers contained within the proposal rather than whether all aspects of the Public Interest Criteria surrounding Quality Contracts have been met. For example, that concerning ‘adverse affects on operators’ is clearly one better addressed by others. Likewise we have not looked at such things as the TUPE arrangements for staff nor at the ‘revenue risk’ for taxpayers. All represent potential risks to the smooth delivery of services to passengers and will have to be carefully managed as such but the main focus on these will inevitably come from elsewhere. Our focus has been on the quality and level of service to passengers set out within the proposal.

Passenger Focus
November 2013

APPENDIX A Bus Passenger Priorities for Improvement

Criteria (in order of priority)	North East	All	All Metropolitan
More buses are on time or within five minutes of schedule time	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/ destination is clearly displayed on the outside of 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 neither too hot nor too cold	25	24	22
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