

Will devolution make a difference to passengers?

The public has little interest in who runs buses provided the service is reliable and good value. Does that mean proposals to devolve responsibility to combined authorities is irrelevant?



Passengers expect operators and local authorities to work together, as exemplified in Brighton and Hove

Do passengers really care who runs or makes decisions about their bus services?

We know that bus passengers, like most other public transport-users, care a lot about how their service is operated, but not who runs or owns it. What they want is a punctual, reliable service that offers value for money.

The Transport Focus Bus Passenger Survey, published in March this year, found that overall around nine in ten were satisfied with the service (88% in the English areas covered and 92% in the Scottish ones). We spoke to more than 47,000 pas-

sengers in 38 areas in England and four areas in Scotland.

The Buses Bill, as revealed in the Queen's Speech two weeks ago, paves the way for significant changes. It will provide an option for combined authorities with directly-elected mayors to be responsible for the running of local bus services, including the possibility of franchising.

In recent years the debate about how local transport authorities can arrest the decline in bus patronage has intensified. In some areas of the country bus operators and transport authorities already work well together in partnership. However, there can

port executives exercise some form of control. They generally trust those bodies to look after their interests as a passenger.

Passengers are less trusting of local bus operators, believing that the local authority should have a greater say in services. However, local bus user groups and representatives sometimes felt that operators should retain commercial freedom to generate better services for passengers.

There is also a clear desire for passengers' views to be given more weight in any decisions about local service provision, a view echoed by local bus passenger representatives.

Passengers expected operators and local authorities to work together. They were less interested in the precise model of doing so, although they were very clear that any agreements needed to be backed up by penalties should performance not meet passengers' expectations.

There are some good examples of bus operators and local authorities really engaging with their passengers. Continuous dialogue, which information captured through smart ticketing makes easier, should help more difficult conversations when changes are in the offing and consultation needs to take place. Such good examples need to become more widespread if trust is to be built up with all bus passengers.

Transport Focus is about to start work on some research into bus passenger priorities for improvement, and passengers' relationship with the industry – trust, in other words.

We need to properly understand what the current experience on buses is, how people feel about the companies they use and how they would like to improve the experience of using buses.

Bus users often assume that local transport authorities and passenger transport executives exercise some form of control

be tension between the aims of local politicians and commercial bus operators, who sometimes have very different ideas about local bus service provision.

A franchising option, through a quality contract arrangement, would enable the authority to set fare levels and ticketing deals and to decide where and when buses run locally.

We carried out some research with passengers to find out what they knew about the structure of their local bus service and network and what they thought would serve them best – effective local partnerships or franchise-style provision.

Our report, *Giving Passengers A Voice In Bus Services*, available on the Transport Focus website, found that passengers know very little about the way bus services are determined for them. They often assume that local transport authorities and passenger trans-

