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Understanding passenger needs research

The past couple of months has seen the research team carry out numerous bus and coach passenger research projects, as the organisation gears up to formally take over bus and coach passenger representation in April 2010 (subject to final Parliamentary approval).

The findings of the Concessionary Fares research have now been released. They are available either in hard copy or on the Passenger Focus website. We intend to distribute this nationally to operators and stakeholders, and locally it will be used by our bus pilot teams to focus on concerns expressed by passengers in relation to key areas such as confidence travelling on longer journeys and access to better journey information.



The Bus Mystery Traveller Survey is being undertaken in Bristol, Leicester, Manchester, Merseyside, Nottingham, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, the West Midlands and West Yorkshire. Passenger Focus took over this survey from the Department for Transport (DfT) in April 2009 and two waves of research have already been completed with the third starting shortly. We aim to publish the results this autumn.

We have also developed our own Bus Passenger Satisfaction Survey and have completed fieldwork in the first six areas. We wanted to test out our ability to scope, undertake and deliver this type of work ourselves. We have tested our plans in Bristol, Dorset, Lincolnshire, Southampton, Tyne and Wear and the West Midlands, and we will be rolling out further studies in 14 other areas in the autumn with a view to completing 20 by the end of the year. These areas are Brighton, Cambridgeshire, Cornwall, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Medway, Merseyside, Plymouth, Shropshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Swindon, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire. We will be sharing the results of the research with operators and local authorities in the relevant areas and we will publish the full set of results in April 2010.



Minister of State for Transport, Sadiq Khan MP, our Chairman, Colin Foxall, and other stakeholders at our Concessionary Fares research launch in Birmingham.

A Bus and Coach Research Stakeholder Board has been created and met for the first time in July 2009. It is made up of bus and coach industry stakeholders including operators, other passenger groups, transport authorities, DfT and regulators, and we will look to share our research plans with them to get a 'sense check' and explore areas of possible joint research. This Board will meet twice a year.

In addition, we have started a piece of research looking at bus and coach passenger priorities in order to understand how passengers' experiences of travelling by bus and coach compare to their expectations, and what improvements they would most like to see. We have done similar benchmarking for rail passengers and it gives tangible areas for improvements to be made. During the fieldwork we will speak to a representative sample of passengers in the eight Government Office regions in England outside of London.



Making a difference Passenger link pilots

We are continuing with our passenger link pilots in the three pilot areas; South East England, South West England and the West Midlands.

South East England

Jocelyn Pearson and Paul Bentley are working on the pilot project in South East England covering Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hampshire, Kent, Oxfordshire, Surrey, and East and West Sussex. They have been very busy getting out and meeting people to raise awareness of the work they are doing on buses, whilst also still continuing to work with South West Trains.

Jocelyn has been leading a project to map out transport structures in the Government Office South East area. This is to ensure that we understand how various stakeholders work with each other and what role we can play.

Jocelyn is also leading a piece of work in Milton Keynes where we are working jointly with Milton Keynes Council and MK Metro, the major operator, to carry out a satisfaction survey to establish areas for improvement for bus passengers, as well as another piece of joint research with the Council speaking to non-users to find out their perceived barriers to bus use.



Accessibility is also a key issue for bus passengers and Jocelyn will be leading work in this area. We recently held a well attended workshop for disability representative groups to look at the issues for different groups who wish to use buses. This work will form the basis of a standard research questionnaire on bus accessibility. The groups have also started to share their research and campaigns with us and many have said their members would be willing to take part in our research.

South West England

Mike Greedy and Joe Lynch are working on the South West bus pilot covering the Government Office for the South West region (GOSW). This comprises the following councils with primary transport responsibilities: Bath and North East Somerset, Bournemouth, Bristol, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Isles of Scilly, North Somerset, Plymouth, Poole, Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Swindon, Torbay and Wiltshire.

The initial phase of the bus pilot has been about identifying and briefing the key stakeholders in the region as to what Passenger Focus is and what we hope to achieve in this phase. So far Mike and Joe have met with all the larger bus companies, officers from the 15 South West England local transport authorities and other stakeholders including the Traffic Commissioner, Sarah Bell, the Regional Development Agency and GOSW.

The next phase of the work is about using the results of the Bus Passenger Satisfaction Surveys that have already taken place in Bristol and Dorset and are to be carried out in Cornwall, Plymouth and Swindon, to identify issues on which bus passengers think improvements are required, and to work with the identified stakeholders to achieve this.

Along the way, other issues have arisen, for example, a passenger complaint about out of date bus information in the national rail timetable between Exeter and Bude (and his inability to get either the bus or rail industry to take ownership of this), and an understanding of the rationale and process behind a reduction in the subsidised network route at Plymouth. In Bristol it is likely that we will be involved with the First Bristol Customer Panel (similar to that operated by First Great Western).

There is a lot more to do, but we are confident that we are moving in the right direction to understand the bus passenger experience in South West England and to help influence improvements.



The West Midlands

Since April 2009, Passenger Focus has been testing how it may take forward representing the needs of bus passengers across the West Midlands region, which covers the counties of Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire, as well as the metropolitan area centred on Birmingham. The West Midlands region has a well used bus network with over 400 million bus journeys made annually, and it has marked contrasts between frequently-used city centre services which operate in highly competitive markets, as well as less frequently-used services in rural areas which are subsidised as a result of being classed as socially necessary.



Despite these differences, the individual passengers, passenger groups and stakeholders that we have talked to so far have all raised some similar concerns, including the punctuality of bus services, the consistency of journey times, the frequency of services, and the provision of information.

We have taken these messages to the bus operators and service providers that we have engaged with across the region, and have been pleased with the positive reception that we have had so far. There is an ambition to transform bus travel, not just within the West Midlands, and Passenger Focus is playing an active role in ensuring passenger priorities are placed at the heart of the decision making across the region.

In June, Passenger Focus sponsored a bus passenger event in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent. This was a jointly managed event between ourselves, Bus Users UK, TravelWatch West Midlands, Help the Aged and local bus operators. It coincided with "National Falls Awareness Day" which was promoted by Help the Aged and Age Concern.

The event was an opportunity for passengers to tell operators and other groups about issues they face when using local bus services. The operators also took the opportunity to explain some of the issues they face as an operator and the things they are able to do to incorporate feedback from passengers.

Bus and coach policy - Update

The DfT consultation document and Statutory Instrument on the extension of the remit of Passenger Focus to bus and coach issues and the requirement to display information, has been released. The consultation - which also concerns the representation of tram passengers - closes in October 2009. It can be viewed at <http://www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/open/passenger-focus-remit/>.



We have been providing input into various strategies and plans for developing and improving bus services for Centro (Passenger Transport Executive) in Birmingham and for Go North East in the Tyne and Wear area.

We also carried out a review of the conditions of carriage of the major bus operators to better understand the range of information provided to passengers.

Stakeholder engagement

It has been a busy few months and we have continued to meet various stakeholders within the bus industry who have given us useful feedback on our plans.

We have had regular meetings with the Senior Traffic Commissioner, Philip Brown, the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) and Bus Users UK. We also had a session where we met all the Chairmen of the various branches of TravelWatches from around England and we have continued to meet with bus and coach operators.

David Sidebottom has spoken at various conferences including the annual conference for The Association of Local Bus Managers, the Bus Users UK annual general meeting, a TravelWatch North West conference and the Yorkshire and Humber Bus Forum. He has also chaired a web forum organised by the Local Transport Planning Network aimed at local authority transport officers who had the opportunity to ask questions to Richard Bruce, the Head of the Concessionary Fares division at the DfT, and Caroline Green from the Local Government Association.

Anthony Smith chaired 'The National Concessionary Fares Scheme: Charting the Future' event which involved a keynote speech from Richard Bruce who outlined details of the consultation on the possible changes to the administration of concessionary fares.



Building capacity - recruitment

The bus team has grown since the last issue of Busfocus and has now expanded to five people.

Jennifer Foxley has joined the team as project administrator on a one year fixed term contract. Jennifer will be based in Manchester and will provide project administration support.

With regards to the passenger link pilots, two passenger link executives are working alongside passenger link managers in two of the pilot areas; Joe Lynch is working in the South West with Mike Greedy and Paul Bentley is working with Jocelyn Pearson in the South East.

The bus and coach team



David Sidebottom
Bus passenger
project manager



Michelle Brooke
Development
co-ordinator



Mike Bartram
Policy consultant



Paul Fullwood
Passenger link manager



Jennifer Foxley
Project administrator

Passenger link pilots - working on bus and rail issues



Mike Greedy
Passenger link manager



Joe Lynch
Passenger link executive



Jocelyn Pearson
Passenger link manager



Paul Bentley
Passenger link executive