

Memorandum to the Transport Committee

Bus Services Bill

1. Introduction

1.1 Transport Focus is the independent consumer watchdog representing the interests of bus, coach and tram users across England, outside London; rail users throughout Great Britain; and users of the Strategic Road Network in England.

2. The need for the Bill and whether it addresses the correct issues

2.1 Just under two-thirds of all journeys made using public transport in Great Britain are by bus – making bus by far the most frequently used mode of public transport. Buses support the economy and ensure that people can get to work and access education and healthcare. Despite this the bus sector faces a number of significant challenges:

- Growth. DfT's annual bus statistics for 2015 show that the number of local bus passenger journeys in England fell by 27 million or 0.6 per cent to 4.65 billion in the year to end March 2015¹. This was largely due to a 10 per cent reduction in mileage on local authority supported services in England outside London; commercial mileage increased by 1.4 per cent.
- Funding. The annual statistics paint a similar picture: over the last decade in England outside London, local authority supported mileage has decreased by 55 million miles while commercial mileage had increased by 13 million miles. One of the chief reasons for this is the availability of public funding.

2.2 We therefore support the aim in the Bill to increase passenger numbers. Providing a better 'toolbox' that enables local transport authorities and bus companies to work together should help to improve services and to make them more attractive to existing and potential users. This in turn should help cities and regions unlock opportunity and grow their economies.

2.3 It is crucial that any change to the bus sector puts passengers at the heart of developments. To this end we are pleased that the guidance surrounding the Bill makes 'improving bus services for passengers' one of its core aims.

¹ Annual bus statistics: England 2014/15. DfT

3. *How Advanced Quality Partnerships and Enhanced Partnerships are likely to contribute to the Government's aims of improving services for passengers and enabling a successful commercial sector.*

- 3.1 Transport Focus's research gives us a good understanding of passengers' expectations and aspirations. In 2016 we published research into passengers' priorities for improvement. Over 4600 passengers across a section of rural, urban and metropolitan areas in England were asked to rank 31 different criteria². [We have also produced a 'simulator' that allows the research to be broken down by different characteristics - e.g. by bus operator, by region, by journey purpose and by passenger characteristics - age, disability etc.]³
- 3.2 The top five priorities for improvement from our research were:
- Better value for money from bus journeys
 - More buses arriving on time at your bus stop
 - More journeys on buses running to time
 - Buses running more often than they do now
 - More effort made to tackle any anti-social behaviour
- 3.3 We believe that a partnership approach between authorities and operators can help to address all these issues.
- 3.4 On fares, for instance, there is scope for closer working on multi-operator / multi-modal tickets as well as joint marketing initiatives. Our research on bus ticketing showed that there was a need for better access to information on fares and ticketing⁴. Passengers often relied on word of mouth and the bus driver for information on times, routes and fares. There is potential for business to be 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.
- 3.5 Partnerships can also help address punctuality. Our research shows that some of the main causes of delay are outside the direct control of the bus company, for example: delays to the bus because of parked vehicles or vehicles being loaded or because of highway design (narrow roads, poorly designed junctions)⁵. A partnership approach to unblocking these should be more effective for passengers.
- 3.6 Partnerships could also improve the frequency of services, especially of socially necessary services. By working together it may be possible to extend existing

² [Bus passengers have their say- Trust, what to improve and using buses more](#) Transport Focus. 2016

³ [Bus passengers have their say - simulator](#) Transport Focus 2016

⁴ [Bus Passenger views on value for money](#). Passenger Focus. October 2013

⁵ [What's the holdup? Exploring bus service punctuality](#). Transport Focus. December 2014

levels of coverage or, at the very least, avoid the need for further reductions in subsidised services.

- 3.7 Closer working ought to also help with personal security. One of the main causes of concern for passengers is the anti-social behaviour of other people. Partnerships can help create the environment where operators and authorities, along with other agencies such as the police, can identify and address problem areas both on the bus and getting to and from the bus stop. The safer travel partnership established by Centro is a good example of what can be done. This involves the West Midlands Police, British Transport Police, rail and bus operators and Centro and it has helped cut crime on the network by more than 67 per cent over the last six years⁶.
- 3.8 Getting the best passenger ‘dividend’ from partnerships will also require a focus on ‘how’ things are done as well as ‘what’ is done. In 2015 we asked passengers about their relationship with their bus company and how much they trusted them⁷. In doing so it became apparent that many passengers have a limited understanding of how bus services are structured, particularly when it comes to what a bus operator is responsible for and what the local authority provides.
- 3.9 We found that building a relationship with passengers has both a rational and an emotional element. At the rational level it means running the buses on time, being reliable, coping with disruption, resolving problems and offering value for money. However, it is the more emotionally engaging factors that build real affinity. This includes things like staff going the extra mile, and feeling like the company really does care what happens to you. A key part of the latter is consulting and engaging with passengers and the community.
- 3.10 Our research⁸ shows that passengers want to be consulted when changes are planned to their service. This is especially so when it comes to changes to routes or the frequency of services. We found that passengers wanted at least four weeks’ notice when changing a route or timetable and that it was important to communicate/publicise this at the bus stop.⁹
- 3.11 There has been some debate during the Bill’s passage in the Lords about improving passenger representation and involvement, which we welcome. There are a number of issues which passengers (and their

⁶ <https://www.centro.org.uk/about-us/news/2013/anti-social-behaviour-targeted-by-transport-policing-plan.aspx>

⁷ [Bus passengers have their say- Trust, what to improve and using buses more](#) Transport Focus. 2016

⁸ [Giving passengers a voice in bus services](#). Transport Focus. October 2013

⁹ [Bus service changes: what passengers want](#) . Transport Focus. 2010.

representatives) could be involved in including the design of new plans and agreements and changes to them, or action to address poor performance. The Bus Services Bill provides an important opportunity to cement consultation and representation into the process.

- 3.12 We know from our research that passengers want a sense that their views on performance and services matter¹⁰ – this means creating mechanisms to capture views (either directly or via representative bodies) and then to act on them. One of the best ways of ensuring this happens is to build incentives or targets into any agreement. Our strong preference is for these targets to be based on what passengers think – the best judge of quality being those who have used the services in question. This could encompass a range of criteria covering the bus stop, the bus and the driver. This is a technique that is already being successfully used within rail franchises.
- 3.13 As the Committee will be aware Transport Focus conducts the Bus Passenger Survey¹¹ (BPS). In the autumn 2015 wave we spoke to more than 40,000 passengers to produce a picture of satisfaction with bus travel. BPS measures passengers’ satisfaction with their local bus service for a wide range of aspects including the bus stop, waiting for the bus, on the bus, and the bus driver as well as their overall satisfaction with that bus journey and their rating of value for money.
- 3.14 We believe that BPS provides a ready-made, proven, independent assessment of passenger satisfaction that can be used to monitor service provision within a partnership (or franchise) area. As well as providing a means of monitoring passenger satisfaction within that area results can also be compared with other services/areas across the country. This ability to benchmark against other regions and operators provides an additional layer of data that can be used to help improve services.
- 3.15 For the avoidance of any doubt these comments also apply to franchises as well as partnerships.

4. The appropriateness of limiting the automatic right to introduce franchising to combined authorities with elected mayors

- 4.1 The automatic right to enter into a franchise depends on a combination of there being a combined authority and an elected mayor - any other combination will require approval from the Secretary of State. Much will depend, therefore, on the criteria for granting or rejecting approval. It will be essential that the

¹⁰ See footnote 7

¹¹ [Bus Passenger Survey](#). Transport Focus.

guidance to the Bill (or to any secondary legislation surrounding the Bill) provides clarity here. What does the approval refer to – the minutiae of the plan, the financial arrangements or just broad approval to proceed with a business case? In addition, will any approval be time-limited or open-ended? There is a need for greater clarity here.

5. *The likely effect of franchising on small and medium operators*

- 5.1 There is a tendency to view franchising as something that will apply on a grand scale analogous to what takes place with Transport for London (TfL). Looking at franchising purely through this lens would suggest that it is something that fits larger operators rather than smaller outfits.
- 5.2 However, we are given to understand that franchising does not have to be a one-size-fits-all approach - it could be on a city-wide basis or just apply to a sub-set of services or geography within the authority's area. If so, a franchise could be on a TfL scale or it could potentially be as small as a single route within an area. The latter would presumably be more attractive to small or medium operators. If this is indeed the case then it would be helpful for the guidance (or any secondary legislation) to clarify and make things clearer.

6. *The effectiveness of the measures relating to open data and how these could improve the accessibility of bus transport*

- 6.1 We support the aim of the Bill to mandate the release of open fares, punctuality data and real time information. The data would be open to anyone who needs it, including app developers, to create products which will allow passengers to plan their journeys more effectively.

Real time information

- 6.2 One of the most valuable facilities at bus stops is the provision of information, especially real-time information displays. Our report¹² 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.
- 6.3 This research gives a strong sense that bus passengers feel powerless when faced with delays. There is, many feel, no means of finding out what is going on – as one passenger put it: “It’s mental torture sometimes at bus stops working out whether to stay or whether to go.” Providing information that empowers

¹² [Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption](#). Passenger Focus. April 2013

passengers to make an informed decision in these circumstances will make a significant difference.

- 6.4 Passengers strongly favour real-time departure displays at bus stops. These were felt to be inclusive and reassuring and allowed people to make an informed choice. Some favoured an app as long as it could be tailored to provide updates on ‘my journey’.
- 6.5 Some passengers also expressed an interest in providing electronic displays on the bus itself. This would help keep passengers informed during diversions or traffic jams. It could also be used to inform passengers about planned disruption. Moreover, such screens could help to reduce the workload of drivers – many of whom are, by default, the chief source of information for passengers.

Fares

- 6.6 We have already mentioned above the need for better access to information on fares and ticketing¹³. Many passengers did not 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. Open data requirements will help with this.

Punctuality

- 6.7 Our research on punctuality¹⁴ showed a desire from passengers that punctuality and reliability figures are made public. It found that passengers should have access to information about the performance of their bus services and to key actions being taken by operators and 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.
- 6.8 It is important, however, that any performance figures are made as relevant to an individual as possible. The use of area-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.

¹³ [Bus Passenger views on value for money](#). Passenger Focus. October 2013

¹⁴ [Bus punctuality and timetables](#). Transport Focus. 2014

7. *The basis for a prohibition on new municipal bus companies delivering bus services, particularly in non-franchised areas*

- 7.1 We presume the prohibition on creating new municipal bus companies follows a desire to avoid any temptation for an Authority to create a new municipal company and then give it the franchise, thus shutting out commercial operators.
- 7.2 We would offer two main arguments in support of municipal operations. Firstly, they tend to score well in terms of passenger satisfaction – Reading Bus being a prime example and second, competition law would still govern the franchising letting process. We would ask why the powers currently available to the Competition Market Authority (CMA) would be deemed insufficient protection for existing operators.

8. *Measures in the Bill relating to ticketing schemes and new technologies*

- 8.1 The briefing note accompanying the Bill says that one of the objectives is to ‘future proof’ the Local Transport Authority’s power to make multi-operator ticketing schemes in both paper form and via new technology (e.g. contactless payment).
- 8.2 We support this aim. There have been considerable developments in the use of smart ticketing on transport. Our research^{15 16} demonstrates passenger support for new forms of ticketing – in particular in having to avoid carrying the ‘exact change’ and in reducing the time it takes to pay.
- 8.3 It also shows a desire/expectation that smart ticketing facilitates the introduction of new types of tickets – indeed this was felt to be essential to encourage uptake. Will passengers switch from a paper ticket to a plastic version, if the ticket type and cost is the same? We know that one of the key reasons that passengers get a smartcard is that they are able to choose from more flexible types of tickets, which will be better suited to their own travel patterns, so saving money and time. It also stands to reason that facilities and procedures for switching to smart must be easy to use and well explained.
- 8.4 We would also urge caution when it comes to removing a cash option altogether. There are those who will only travel occasionally and who will not ‘join’ a smartcard scheme - it will be important that this doesn’t create a new barrier to travel.

¹⁵ [Smart Ticketing: Oxford SmartZone](#). Passenger Focus. September 2013;

¹⁶ [Smart ticketing in Norfolk: what do passengers think?](#) Passenger Focus. March 2015

**Transport Focus, 3rd Floor,
Fleetbank House,
2-6 Salisbury Square,
London EC4Y 8JX
www.transportfocus.org.uk**

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Bus Services Bill: what will it do to deliver bus passengers' priorities for improvement*?

Priority	Attribute	Comment
1	Better value for money from bus journeys	Yes. Bill provides the potential for multi-operator tickets; help with roll out of smart schemes; marketing of services, and also better information about fares (other research has shown passengers rely on the driver).
2	More buses arriving on time at your bus stop	Punctuality: Specifications could include targets being set and encourage more monitoring of performance. They might include penalties to incentivise performance. Our work shows that poor punctuality is often caused by factors outside the control of the bus company. The Bill won't on its own prevent this but it might foster a spirit of working together through which the partners can jointly tackle the causes.
3	More journeys on buses running to time	
4	Buses running more often than they do now	Frequency: A bus specification could require this, including at weekends and evening.
5	More effort made to tackle any anti-social behaviour	Not specifically designed to do so but potential in working together to dovetail enforcement officers with transport hubs
6	Buses going to more places you want to go	More destinations: specification could again require this
7	More bus stops with next bus displays	More and better info: This is a key aim of the Bill both via specifications and through use of open data
8	Being given more/better information when delays occur on journeys	
9	Cleaner and better maintained buses	This could be influenced via the service specification
10	Tickets which better allow travel on all bus companies	Multi-operator tickets: The Bill helps with this.

*Transport Focus, (March 2016) *Bus passengers have their say: Trust what to improve and using buses more*