

Doing Buses Differently: Greater Manchester Bus Consultation Impact of Covid-19

Response from Transport Focus

Introduction

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

This submission builds on and is supplementary to our response to the initial consultation in January 2020. It responds to the impact of Covid-19 on plans for bus franchising in Greater Manchester and is informed both by our extensive evidence base and insight gathered through the engagement of our work with transport users.

Summary

Our initial response concluded that the proposed scheme could deliver benefits for passengers in specifying the network, providing a simplified fares and ticketing structure and more unified real-time information system, addressing key barriers and aspirations; although the test would be in assessing the delivery of resulting services.

Now this has had the Covid test applied, although taxpayers may take a different view, from a passenger perspective the proposed scheme still could give the best outcome by offering more stability and a bigger 'safety net'. However there are concerns about the transition period and prospect for network deterioration that raise questions about how opportunities to support recovery partnerships can be put to best effect.

We highlight the point from our initial response that plans lack clarity on addressing passengers' priorities for improved reliability and punctuality. Robust measures are needed across modes, to deliver an attractive network that fosters growth and trust.

We also reiterate the need for transport users to have a voice that is heard through independent, multi-modal representation, that holds providers to account in a more focused and sustained way to ensure user priorities remain at the heart.

Responding from a user perspective

As highlighted in our original response, from Transport Focus's perspective the key challenge is whether the proposals reflect the needs and priorities of both existing and potential passengers, with the added dimension of the current context. The closer that the specifications and targets support these and reflect people's changing needs, the better the chance that they will deliver the type of services that people want and value and will attract users to re-grow the market and build confidence towards travelling in future.

Transport Focus’s research has been updated to provide good understanding of the people’s changing expectations and aspirations towards transport against which the proposal can be reviewed.

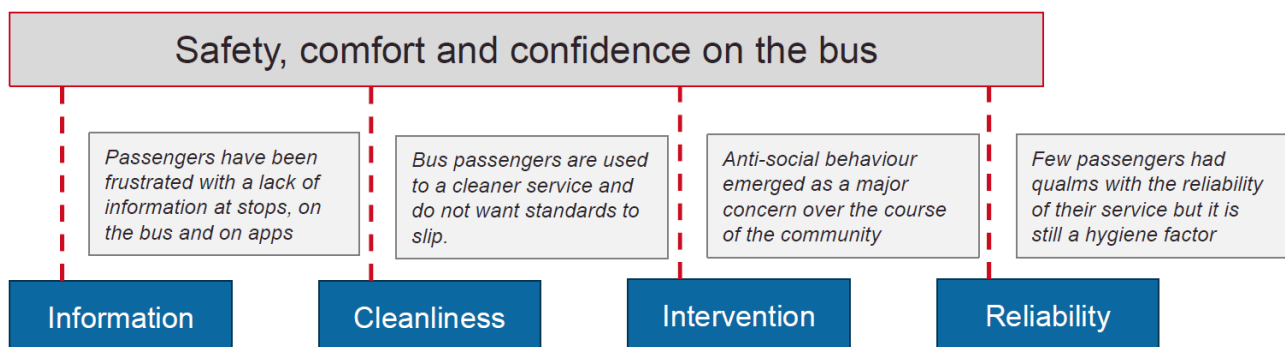
Bus passenger priorities – an updated view

We asked our Transport User Community¹ whether their priorities for improvement have changed in light of Covid-19 and whether this has created any new priorities.

Safety has emerged as a new and vital priority. The community see this being supported by regular cleaning, enforcement of face-coverings and greater prevalence of the government guidelines on buses and at the bus stop.

Passenger information emerged as a major priority and the quality of bus apps to support forward-planning. The community has concerns about the quality and clarity of scheduling information and feels that they have experienced errors and hiccups in apps for a long time. Passengers would like to see timetabling information, ‘crowdedness’, journey planning and ticketing information integrated more seamlessly into bus providers’ apps.

Bus passengers are seeing a watershed moment, causing them to re-evaluate what they value on public transport. As such, lots of smaller frustrations came to the forefront, beyond the core of punctuality, reliability and value for money. Behavioural interventions go beyond simply face-mask enforcement – passengers have always been frustrated with the degree of antisocial behaviour on their routes and more authority conferred on bus drivers would be valuable. These new priorities are likely to persist after the pandemic, re-framed into priorities around comfort and confidence in the service as a whole.



Bus passengers want to experience improvements to their journeys when it comes to cleanliness and safety, rather than see them measured on paper:

- Developments and enhancements to bus providers’ apps:
 - Live timetables
 - ‘Best ticket’ suggestions
 - Congestion and ‘how busy is my bus’ information
 - Journey planners

¹ [Transport User Community – rail and bus priorities](#), Transport Focus. 2020

- Cleanliness and safety are ‘experienced’ rather than measured. Social media activity can demonstrate that regular cleaning is taking place.
- Punctuality and performance were universally recognised as important.

Post-Covid recovery

Evidence from our Transport User Community² shows that cars are well-established as the ‘safer’ mode of transport in terms of Covid-19. Many do not feel that switching is feasible, least of all during the current crisis. As a result, many argue that even post-Covid, public transport will need to entice would-be users. This almost always is reflected in terms of cost – there are no significant expectations for public transport to offer something substantially different in terms of the service offered, provided it comes in as cheaper than taking the car for as many people as possible. Measures to incentivise more public transport use include:

- More flexible and cheaper ticketing options
- Enhancements around bus lanes
- Electric and hybrid buses
- Explicit *disincentives* around private vehicle use (with care taken around vulnerable people who may rely on the car).

Our Travel during Covid-19 survey found many now thought it was unlikely they would return to a typical Monday-Friday commute in the future, indicating we can expect a significant shift towards more flexible working practices and greater working from home. The consistent feedback from our Transport User Community has been that for many former commuters Covid-19 has demonstrated home working is possible and effective and that home working allows for a greater work-life balance and better wellbeing overall. It remains unclear when and exactly how often people will commute, but there’s no doubt the pandemic will lead to some fundamental changes to the way people think about travel and their need to do so.

Our insight³ confirms we should not expect a quick return to the ‘old normal’ and points to five key areas where transport operators should focus their efforts:

Ensuring passengers can make essential journeys with confidence now:

- Provide capacity and improve information to support social distancing onboard
- Maintain improved cleanliness and communicate this effectively
- Drive up compliance with the rules, especially face coverings (if not exempt).

Attracting passengers back when the time is right:

- More flexible fares for less frequent commuters
- Offers and promotions to encourage lapsed users to return.

² [Transport User Community – the environment and travel](#), Transport Focus. 2021

³ [Travel during Covid-19 – key lessons for 2021 and beyond](#), Transport Focus. 2021

In terms of future travel choices, we asked our community what life will look like once the vaccine is rolled out and how they feel about the prospect of using public transport once a vaccine is in place? We found:

- There is significant work to do to ensure that public transport does not feel in some way 'different' to other activities once the 'new normal' sets in and a hope that social distancing and strong sanitation habits will remain the norm.
- There is some fear that hygiene standards will fall back to pre-Covid levels and social norms such as shaking hands and standing close to strangers on public transport will likely be a source of anxiety for the foreseeable future.
- A continuing perception for some that public transport felt 'less safe' compared to other activities such as going to the pub or shops, meaning an expectation that everything else needs to feel normal before they will return.

Scheme proposals and working towards implementation

Since the original consultation Covid-19 has had a significant impact on public transport. Figures produced by the Department for Transport⁴ show that bus use in January 2021 was only 25 per cent of levels pre-Covid and that even in September and October last year when restrictions had been eased, they had only recovered to 50-60 per cent of normal.

There is a risk that demand may not recover to pre-Covid levels, even after the vaccination programme. This could be due to a mixture of increased working from home, modal shift to car or because of residual concerns about personal safety on public transport. If this was to happen then the bus industry faces a potential drop in revenue that could threaten the viability of services.

So we believe one of the new 'tests' for the future model is how well it copes with a drop in revenue and its ability to maintain investment and subsidies. To this end it could be argued that the franchising model, with its wider resources and sources of funding, does offer a larger 'safety net' at such time and as a result offers more stability for passengers. In saying this we are talking from a purely passenger perspective – we acknowledge that the risks from a taxpayer perspective are different.

Trust will need to be rebuilt as part of the measures to attract people back to public transport. A key factor will be in having a network that provides services and connections for the journeys people want to make. However the most recent Bus Passenger Survey⁵ shows satisfaction with public transport connections in Greater Manchester at 74 per cent and already declining prior to Covid-19. People will need to be assured of the security of funding to support connectivity and give confidence in the ability to make journeys and return again later in the day, particularly at evenings and weekends and in support of a return to the retail and night-time economies.

⁴ [Transport use during the Covid-19 pandemic](#), Department for Transport official statistics. 2021

⁵ [Bus Passenger Survey – autumn 2019](#), Transport Focus. 2020
[Transport Focus Data Hub](#)

In weighing up difficult choices about the bus network, it will be vital for any reduction in services to have accountability and understanding of people's changing and future needs at its heart. It will be important that any reduction is co-ordinated and that those services remaining cater for as many people and areas as possible. This means not viewing buses in isolation, but harnessing the strength of a combined bus, tram, train and active travel network. The scheme sets out ambitions for integrated network planning, with simplified and integrated fares and improved customer service through a single point of contact and unified information; which would focus on passengers' main priorities for improvement. The franchise model would seem to offer a greater ability to co-ordinate services in this way.

However, passengers will be rightly concerned about the prospect of a lengthy transition and lag in implementation, which may see a potential for the network to deteriorate and investment to be undermined. How will TfGM be making the most for passengers from CBSSG transition through recovery partnerships, overcome stagnation in planning and relationships and give Greater Manchester the best opportunities during the transition to franchising? Alongside this, how can the good investment model from commercial operators be replicated within future plans, to enhance the benefits for transport users?

Representing transport users

Transport users must have a voice that is heard and holds providers to account in a more focused, sustained way and the proposed scheme draws attention to monitoring and measuring performance being vital. Transport Focus has built an enviable reputation for independent, multi-modal representation, built on top quality insight and policy work which is useful to transport decision makers, together with experience of building alliances in various partnership models with authorities, operators and governments. We can support development of user-focused measures and provide an evidence-based approach to ensuring user priorities remain at the heart. We would be keen to discuss investment in a 'critical friend' role, to strongly articulate the passenger voice.

Transport Focus will be pleased to discuss the points raised in our submission in greater detail and stands ready to work in partnership to support and underpin the interests of transport users across Greater Manchester.

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Transport Focus, 7th Floor Piccadilly Gate, Store Street, Manchester, M1 2WD
www.transportfocus.org.uk