

Implementing Part 3 of the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019: Bus Services

Introduction

Transport Focus is the independent consumer watchdog promoting the interests of rail passengers throughout Great Britain; bus, coach and tram passengers across England, outside London; and users of the Strategic Road Network in England. We have a Board Member for Scotland appointed by the Scottish Government.

Transport Focus welcomes this consultation. Our response is informed both by our evidence base and insight gathered through the engagement of our work in Scotland.

General Comments

The consultation primarily seeks views on what could be provided by way of regulations and guidance in order to support Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) in exercising the new power in the Act, for running their own bus services, establishing Bus Service Improvement Partnerships (BSIPs) or to create and operate local bus services under a franchising model.

Ensuring the regulatory framework supports LTAs in delivering high quality bus services is important. Equally important is ensuring the setting of passenger focussed targets is part of that framework to support the delivery of high quality bus services under the range of options available under the Act.

We have therefore limited our response to addressing the questions relating to passenger centric measures that should be considered in guidance as part of the overall framework to support LTAs.

Question 1: Is there anything which should be set out in guidance that LTAs must have regard to in exercising their new functions for running their own bus services?

Question 19: What information beyond the processes and considerations outlined in this chapter, should any guidance on BSIPs contain?

Question 20: What should the guidance to LTAs on preparing a franchise assessment contain?

Scotland's National Transport Strategy (NTS2) acknowledges the decline in journeys on local bus services and that changing travel behaviour and encouraging people to make trips by public transport rather than by private car is a significant challenge in order to meet climate change goals.

The consultation recognises that transport challenges differ across the LTAs. The transport barriers facing those living in towns and cities in the Central Belt, for example, will not necessarily be the same as those living in towns and cities in other parts of Scotland or, indeed, many remote, rural and island communities. In addition, different areas of the country may have their own transport requirements to meet their inclusive growth objectives. These challenges will need a range of solutions and models of governance to deliver them as the consultation proposes.

However, although transport challenges differ between LTAs the guidance for all potential models should consider setting targets for passenger growth to meet NTS2 priorities and targets to meet the priorities of existing passengers.

Transport Focus has carried out a Bus Passenger Survey¹ in Scotland since 2014. We have gathered the views of over 20,000 passengers based on a sample of LTA areas, in each of which we gather the views of a cross-section of users - some paying for their journeys, others travelling on concessionary passes.

We asked about satisfaction with a wide range of on-bus and off-bus factors. These include punctuality, journey time, value for money, personal security, cleanliness, and information.

From this evidence base setting targets should be considered in guidance on these factors to improve the bus journey experience:

- passenger growth - breakdown of patronage according to factors like demographics, journey purpose and ticket purchased can help to understand the impact of interventions. It could inform the approach going forward, enabling a focus on specific market segments.
- journey times – including different times of the day, different days of the week as well as overall targets
- reliability improvements – to improve the least reliable and slowest service as well as overall targets
- customer satisfaction – measure satisfaction on a range of factors that are important to passengers and potential passengers as well as overall satisfaction
- accessibility - the need to offer end-to-end accessibility and provide ample areas for pushchairs and luggage in addition to the wheelchair space, so that everybody can travel with confidence

¹ Bus Passenger Survey

Targets would enable LTAs to measure progress in improving bus services. Monitoring and reporting performance against them also makes the model of governance more accountable and can help to build trust with passengers and potential passengers.

Targets should focus on longer-term improvements, rather than immediate recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. LTAs and operators should recognise that the value that passengers place on clean and hygienic buses is likely to continue.

Improvements are unlikely to happen of their own accord, so target setting needs to be accompanied by a plan of actions designed to drive up overall performance.

The guidance should also consider that LTAs should work with passenger groups and others to understand what factors are currently holding back bus patronage and growth.

This should include developing an evidence base on the barriers to bus use and the development of action plans to overcome the identified barriers.