

Liverpool City Region Bus Franchising Consultation Response from Transport Focus

Introduction

Transport Focus is the voice of Britain's transport users. We:

- champion the needs of all transport users today
- ensure all transport users are at the centre of policy making and decisions for tomorrow
- facilitate and inspire future transport thinking

Our statutory responsibilities cover 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 specifically responds to the plans for bus franchising in the Liverpool City region and is based around the Assessment, the consultation document and the short questionnaire. This should not be used to infer views on franchising plans or proposals in other areas.

Q1. The Assessment concludes that the current bus system is not performing as well as it should. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Transport Focus has conducted extensive research into passengers' and non-users' needs and priorities for local bus services and their attitudes towards them. While some of this research has been conducted at a national level and some very specific studies were conducted some years ago, we believe they are still valid and we have extensive evidence that relates specifically to Merseyside and the way in which local bus services are performing there. We set out below the main conclusions from our evidence base.

Unfortunately, the first set of interim results from our new *Your Bus Journey* survey will not be available until early September, so we have had to rely on the results of the Bus Passenger Survey (BPS) which gathered bus passenger satisfaction data up to and including 2019. We recommend that Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) review passenger satisfaction with the performance of local bus services against the new data once it is available, particularly since your auditors have recommended that you include more up-to-date passenger satisfaction data in your Assessment.

Bus passenger priorities for improvement

Passengers across the country were asked to rank a series of possible improvements to their bus service in order of priority. As well as getting the rank order of priorities, the research¹ also gives a sense of relativity – in other words how much more, or less, important is one factor compared to another. The table below shows the relative scores for the top 20 aspects of service and their order of importance nationally and on Merseyside. From this we can see that the network, frequency, punctuality and value for money are particularly high priorities.

¹ Bus passenger priorities for improvement. Transport Focus. September 2020

Bus priorities published Sept 2020	Overall index	Overall priority	Merseyside index	Merseyside priority
Buses running more often than they do now	259	1	239	1
Buses going to more places you want them to	245	2	238	2
More buses arriving on time at your bus stop	237	3	217	3
Better value for money from bus journeys	215	4	180	5
More journeys on buses running to time	212	5	197	4
More effort made to tackle any anti-social behaviour	156	6	174	6
Faster journey times	142	7	152	7
More bus stops with next bus displays	112	8	127	8
Better quality information at bus stops	85	9	93	9
More space for wheelchairs and buggies	82	10	84	11
Drivers allowing more time for passengers to get to their seat	82	11	77	15
Cleaner and better maintained buses	80	12	85	10
More bus stops having shelters/seats	77	13	79	14
Being told of delays whilst on board	70	14	67	20
More tickets which allow travel on all local buses	70	15	69	18
More apps showing live arrival/running times	69	16	80	12
Free Wi-Fi more widely available	69	17	70	17
More comfortable seats	69	18	68	19
Improved ventilation and temperature control	68	19	66	21
Drivers showing more consideration for passengers	65	20	63	23

Bus passenger trust

Research² into the levels of trust passengers have with the bus company they mainly use, shows attitudes on Merseyside being broadly similar to the overall picture. Overall scores are not particularly high, especially for aspects such as providing value for money, doing the best when things don't run to plan and appreciating passengers. However, bus drivers score positively for being considerate. On Merseyside, the biggest negative difference is for drivers being considerate, and being honest with passengers when there are problems. Making it easy for you to stay up to date with timetables and fares shows the biggest positive difference. The relative importance that passengers give to each matter are set out in the second table, while the following chart combines the levels of trust with their importance.

² Bus passengers have their say: Trust, what to improve and using buses more. Transport Focus. March 2016

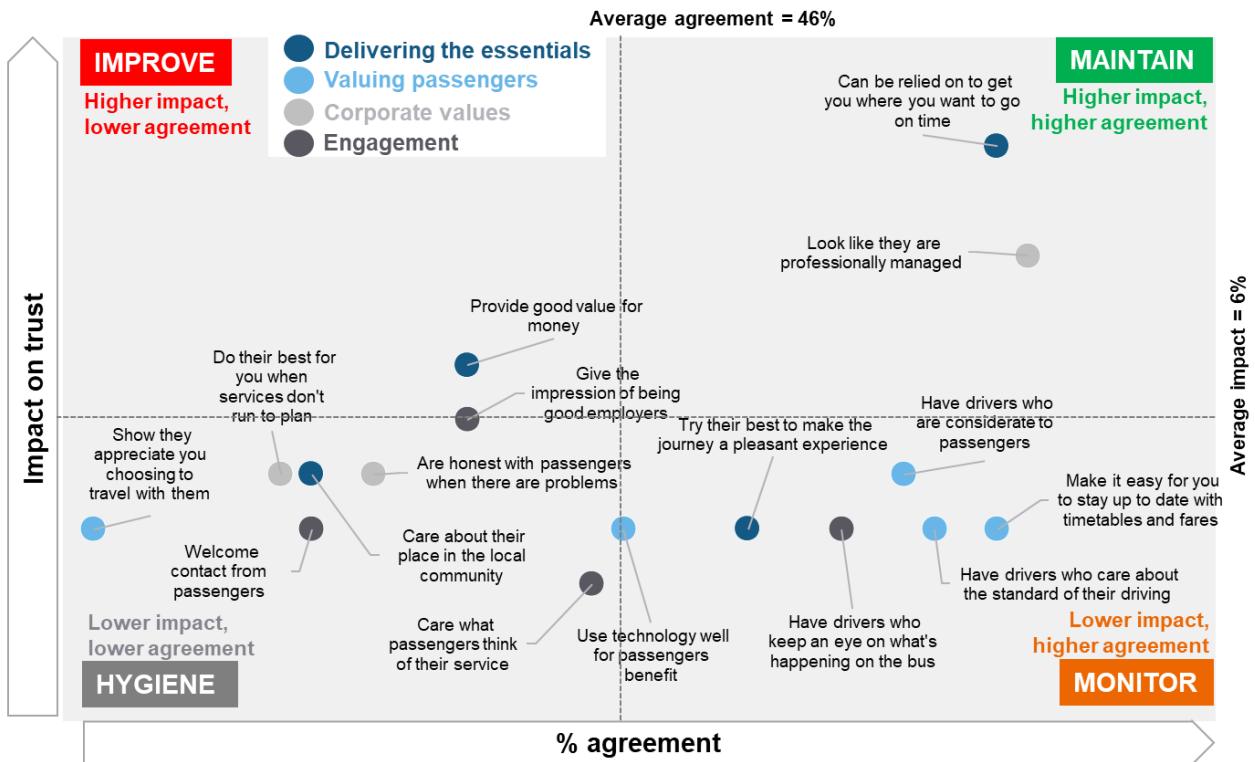
Agreement levels

	Overall	Merseyside
Delivering the essentials		
Can be relied on to get you where you want to go on time	56%	58%
Can be relied on to turn up when they say they will	52%	53%
Try their best to make the journey a pleasant experience	51%	50%
Provide good value for money	44%	41%
Identity/organisation		
Look like they are professionally managed	57%	59%
Give the impression of being good employers	42%	41%
Are honest with passengers when there are problems	44%	38%
Care about their place in the local community	39%	36%
Valuing passengers		
Have drivers who care about the standard of their driving	60%	56%
Have drivers who are considerate to passengers	63%	55%
Have drivers who keep an eye on what's happening on the bus	56%	53%
Do their best for you when services don't run to plan	36%	35%
Show they appreciate you choosing to travel with them	30%	29%
Engagement		
Make it easy for you to stay up to date with timetables and fares	53%	58%
Care what passengers think of their service	44%	45%
Use technology well for passengers benefit	44%	46%
Welcome contact from passengers	38%	36%

Trust impact

	Overall	Merseyside
Delivering the essentials	36%	38%
Can be relied on to get you where you want to go on time	11%	11%
Can be relied on to turn up when they say they will	9%	16%
Try their best to make the journey a pleasant experience	6%	4%
Provide good value for money	10%	7%
Identity/organisation	28%	25%
Look like they are professionally managed	11%	9%
Give the impression of being good employers	6%	6%
Are honest with passengers when there are problems	4%	5%
Care about their place in the local community	7%	5%
Valuing passengers	19%	22%
Have drivers who care about the standard of their driving	3%	4%
Have drivers who are considerate to passengers	4%	5%
Have drivers who keep an eye on what's happening on the bus	3%	4%
Do their best for you when services don't run to plan	4%	5%
Show they appreciate you choosing to travel with them	5%	4%
Engagement	17%	15%
Make it easy for you to stay up to date with timetables and fares	3%	4%
Care what passengers think of their service	7%	3%
Use technology well for passengers benefit	3%	4%
Welcome contact from passengers	4%	4%

Priority matrix for improving bus company trust: Merseyside bus users

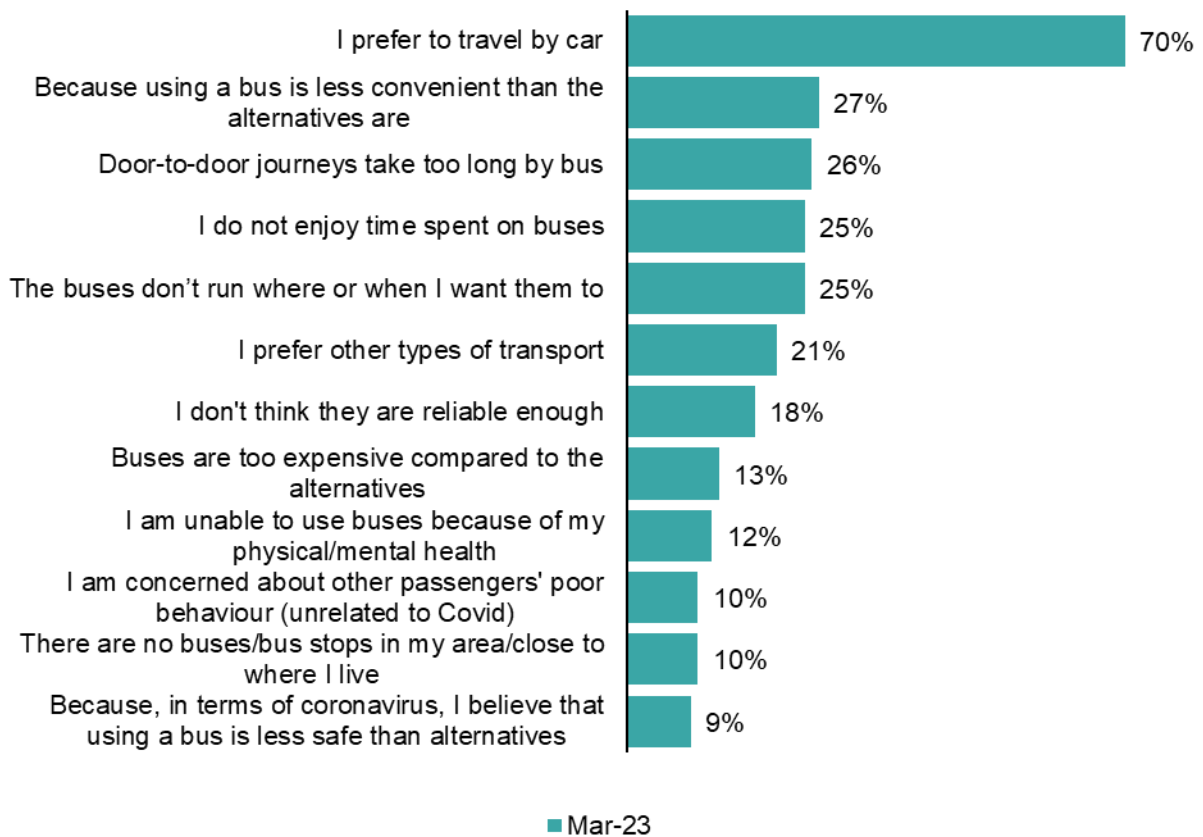


Barriers to using buses more

It is even more important to understand the barriers to making more journeys by bus – what is it that prevents people from doing so? Our research³ shows that for non-users in general the main reasons are very practical: along with a preference for the car and its relative convenience, their perception is that bus journeys take too long (26 per cent), buses don't run where or when they want them to (25 per cent) and they are too unreliable (18 per cent).

³ Motivations and barriers to bus use. Transport Focus. June 2023

Which of the following reasons best describes why you do not use local buses? (Top 12)



Network stability

Having standardised change dates throughout the year has helped to contain the level of alterations. However, scope remains for frequent changes to bus services across Liverpool City Region – changing routes, times or withdrawing services.

We also know from the (BPS⁴ results that around 33 per cent of passengers on Merseyside do not check timetable information, so are potentially caught out when services do change, which together with the major work required to update information at bus stops, are big issues that will require addressing.

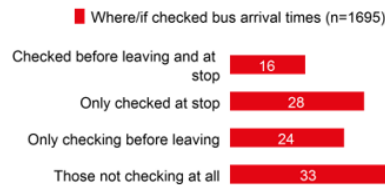
⁴ Bus Passenger Survey. Transport Focus

Heading out: whether passengers checked bus arrival times



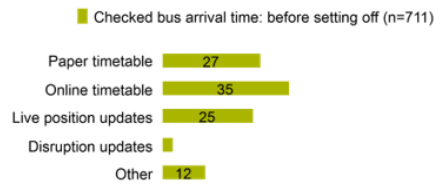
Passengers checking bus arrival times (%)

2019 results



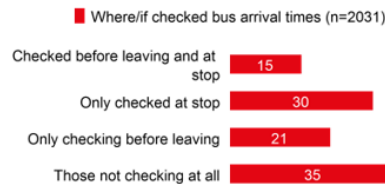
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What checked: % of all those checking beforehand

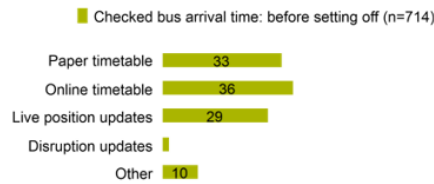


Filter: Hierarchical Filter = Mersey - Year = 2019

2018 results for reference



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Q. Did you check any of the following to find out when the bus was meant to arrive?

It is clear from our research that the ‘core product’ is especially important to passengers – the essence being that they have a stable service on which they can depend. This stability takes two forms: the reliability of the actual services themselves and the frequency with which timetables can be chopped and changed.

Bus priority measures will be instrumental in increasing reliability. It will be important, however, that these measures are enforced/‘policed’, or else the potential benefits to passengers risk being diluted. We would also ask what steps will be taken to co-ordinate feeder routes into the core area to ensure that end-to-end journeys are equally reliable.

In our Bus Service Changes report⁵ we drew attention to passengers’ attitudes to service changes. Two-thirds did not think it acceptable to make changes to bus services more than twice a year and more than six out of ten (62 per cent) wanted to be given at least four weeks’ notice of major changes. Our research also showed that the best place to inform passengers of changes is at the bus stop itself: 75 per cent of passengers wanted information at the bus stop, 61 per cent wanted it on board. This research was conducted in 2010 and we accept that passengers’ expectations and preferences may have developed in the intervening period – however, the importance of bus stops should not underestimated.

Limiting timetable changes to agreed dates and sufficient notice of registration changes are important. So too is restricting the number of times a specific service can be changed in a given period – to avoid the impression of a service constantly being ‘tinkered’ with – alongside a clear process for consulting with and informing passengers of changes.

⁵ Bus Service Changes. Passenger Focus. September 2010

We have also reported on the impact on passengers of cuts to rural services. In ‘Bus service reductions – the impact on passengers’⁶ we identified four main impacts:

- Passengers could not travel like they used to: they made fewer discretionary trips
- Dependency on others increased: awkwardness to ask for lifts and their travel plans now being contingent on others
- Sometimes the passenger paid instead: passengers bore some of the costs by using taxis or other paid means of transport
- Lack of spontaneity: fewer services on fewer days reduced the opportunity to decide on the day to go out.

Our research⁷ shows 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.

Given the importance of punctuality we also conducted further work to build a better understanding about when, where and why buses are delayed and what can be done to help them run on time⁸. Our case studies highlighted the challenge of setting timetables to reflect variable patterns of traffic and patronage and threw up a number of recurrent reasons for delays, including traffic and parking, boarding and alighting, inadequate recovery time between services and perhaps most surprisingly, exiting bus stations. This also highlighted the need for robust and consistent monitoring of services.

Simplified and integrated fares

Better value for money is one of passengers’ highest priorities for improvement. It is also linked to getting a punctual, reliable service and a seat in return for payment. Our research⁹ has found that passengers often have poor information on fares and ticketing and types of tickets, often relying on word or mouth or the bus driver. Younger passengers have distinct needs relying heavily on bus travel. They require service flexibility but also resent paying adult fares. Smart ticketing can help with some of these issues. New arrangements should:

- Provide a central source of pre-journey information on fares, ticket types (including smart ticket availability) and bus routes
- Identify specific policies for 16-18 year olds, such as the range of tickets and price.

Our report on bus passenger views on value for money¹⁰ looked in more depth at what had the biggest influence on value for money perception and, importantly, what might help to improve things. The key findings again emphasise the ‘core’ product. When passengers buy a ticket, they expect a punctual, reliable service and a seat in return. Focusing on performance should further improve perceptions of value for money.

Better access to information on fares and ticketing is also essential. Passengers often relied on word of mouth and the bus driver for information on times, routes and fares. All of which begs the question of how much business is 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. It also found that many passengers didn’t realise what ticket types existed, how they could buy them or where they could

⁶ Bus service reductions – the impact on passengers Passenger Focus. September 2012

⁷ What’s the holdup? Exploring bus service punctuality. Passenger Focus. December 2014

⁸ How late is late – What bus passengers think about punctuality and timetables. Passenger Focus. January 2014

⁹ Bus passenger views on value for money. Passenger Focus. October 2013

¹⁰ Bus passenger views on value for money. Passenger Focus. October 2013

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.

Younger passengers also have very distinct needs. They rely on buses, need more flexibility (to balance work, education and seeing friends) and often take journeys spontaneously. They also resent paying adult fares when they are still at school/college or on low (or no) incomes. They want this reflected in the fares that they pay – with adult fares only kicking in from 18 onwards.

There have been considerable developments in the use of smart ticketing. Our research on smart ticketing^{11 12} demonstrates passenger support for new forms of ticketing – in particular having to avoid carrying the ‘exact change’ and in reducing the time it takes to pay. 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 can choose from more flexible types of tickets, which will be better suited to their own travel patterns, so saving money and time. It also makes sense that facilities and procedures for switching to smart must be easy to use and well explained. Here again, we accept that there have been some significant developments in ticketing since our research was conducted, in particular the introduction of contactless payments.

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 or use contactless - it will be important that this doesn’t create a new barrier to travel.

Customer experience

Young people’s experience

Young people use the bus more than any other single group of passengers. Yet despite the importance of bus to younger people we know from our BPS that they are the least satisfied group of passengers. So, for this important group, there is a clear challenge to Government, bus operators and local authorities to make the bus a better experience.

Our research with young people¹³ shows they are starting to travel to more places independently but have key concerns. Many of these come from lack of confidence or not understanding ‘the system’ and bring anxieties about ‘getting it right’. The report details key points to address:

- Building confidence – making it stress-free and easy to use, teaching the skills they need, empower and support drivers in their role
- Get the basic service right – young people are put off by poor quality. Focus on the core elements of the journey and ensure consistent reliability
- Engage with them through technology – with a centralised source of information and ticketing and details of fares, discounts and passes widely available. Learn from the successes of other industries and sectors
- Simplify fares, make them consistent and reward loyalty – a young people’s concession, fare deals that are easy to find, with loyalty rewards, more tailored offerings and targeted communication.

People who have a disability

Our analysis of the Bus Passenger Survey shows that almost a quarter of bus journeys are made by those who have a disability. Although the prevalence of disability increased with age, mental health had a high proportion in middle age and in our work with young people, a fifth said they had

¹¹ Smart Ticketing: Oxford SmartZone. Passenger Focus. September 2013

¹² Smart ticketing in Norfolk: what do passengers think? Passenger Focus. March 2015

¹³ Using the bus: what young people think. Transport Focus. February 2018

a disability, which may be hidden, needing even more support. Those with a disability were generally less satisfied. Key points from their experience:

- Greater dissatisfaction with smoothness of ride and personal safety and security
- More concern about other passengers' behaviour – particularly the younger age groups and in the peak. Those whose disabilities have a higher impact on travel have much higher levels of concern.
- Passengers' comments also highlight the importance of: allowing time to get to seat; lowering access ramps; seats for disabled people being taken by others; and the wheelchair/buggy contention.

Q2. The Assessment concludes that Franchising is the best option for the Combined Authority to meet its strategic objectives for bus transport in the region. For each of the following objectives, to what extent do you think Franchising will help deliver it? [Not at all/Somewhat/Mostly/Fully/Don't know]

- i) Objective 1 – Maximise the contribution of bus services to achieving the economic success and social capacity of the Liverpool City Region. (Make the most of how bus services contribute to improving the economy and enable people to access opportunities and services).
- ii) Objective 2 – Maximise the contribution of bus services to reducing the impact of travel on the natural environment. (Make the most of how buses can reduce the impact on the environment).
- iii) Objective 3 – Harness competition's role in improving the offer to passengers and delivering best value for the Combined Authority for the services it procures. (Use competition between operators to help improve bus standards and services for passengers and get the most value for the cost to the public sector).
- iv) Objective 4 – Maximise the passenger benefits of service coordination, ticket integration and information provision across the Liverpool City Region public transport network. (Give passengers a better experience with buses by making bus services more connected, improving how tickets are used across bus services and other public transport services, and providing better information about services and timetables).
- v) Objective 5 – Support the implementation of measures that improve bus service delivery by addressing factors which may constrain the extent to which bus operators can commit to meet quality or service level standards. (Support plans to improve bus service standards to make buses run on time more often).

The *Vision for Bus* sets out a number of objectives (section 1.4.5 of the consultation document), which sit underneath the objectives listed in this question, some of which reflect our concerns. This is a great set of objectives. But that is what they are - objectives. It is suggested that franchising will better enable LCRCA to achieve them than other delivery options, such as enhanced partnership. But will you achieve them?

The consultation focuses on a largely theoretical model of franchising compared with a largely theoretical model of an enhanced partnership. Neither has been closely defined in terms of what it is expected to deliver. It is up to the current and future Mayors to determine the degree of priority to give to improving bus services and it is up to the various funding bodies to determine how much support to offer. Funding scenarios have been provided, but they do little to clarify the situation. What the bus operators are prepared to offer under an enhanced partnership is not yet known, so a comparison has been made with a notional Ambitious Partnership.

By way of comparison, we note that under their franchising scheme, which is due to start in September, Greater Manchester is aiming to provide more frequent services – at least every 12 minutes on key orbital and radial routes and a twice hourly service within 400m of 90% of the population. People in the most built-up areas of Greater Manchester would have at least five buses per hour within 400m of their front door. They also aim to provide 90% of the entire Greater Manchester population with a 30-minute frequency bus or Metrolink service on weekdays within 400m of their home. Proposed infrastructure improvements include creating 500 more accessible

stops and installing Real Time Customer Information displays at 300 stops to give people greater confidence when travelling.

Could you please clarify more precisely what standards of service you are expecting to deliver in the LCR under (a) franchising, and (b) the enhanced partnership comparison?

From Transport Focus's perspective the key challenge is whether the LCRCA's proposal reflects the needs and priorities of both existing and potential passengers. The closer that the specifications and targets reflect people's needs, the better the chance that they will deliver the type of services that people want and value and will draw in new users to grow the market. Transport Focus's research gives good understanding of the expectations and aspirations of transport users against which the proposal can be reviewed. We note that the commercial case includes a performance incentive regime (3.4.21) which we are told would cover areas such as service efficiency, bus standards (e.g. cleanliness), passenger satisfaction, driver performance, fares, revenue and monitoring and accident investigations. This is welcome, but to have full confidence that it will enable you to achieve your objectives, we would need more information on the details of the monitoring regime and the process for reviewing performance against targets and modifying services to respond to shortcomings.

3. Based on the information given, do you think Franchising will offer value for money to the public sector? Why do you think this?

It is difficult for Transport Focus to form a judgement. As the question implies, we are reliant on the information provided. Much will depend on what tangible improvements franchising delivers to local services and this is not entirely clear, as explained in our answer to Q2 above.

4. The Financial Case sets out the potential sources of funding available to the Combined Authority to deliver Franchising. Do you have any comments?

Improving local services will cost money, and this could present a challenge when seen against the backdrop of falling patronage which LCRCA's Assessment predicts. The financing of franchising includes use of the existing Transport Levy and fares. Is there a risk that fares will need to rise to pay for improvements or cuts to services will be needed if patronage falls, as expected? How can you be confident that you will be able to deliver the network, fares and ticketing and clean vehicle assumptions on which the proposal is based (consultation document paragraph 3.2.31)?

5. The Assessment shows how Merseytravel would manage Franchising in the Liverpool City Region. To what extent do you agree with these plans?

The management case refers to the need to establish a Customer Experience Team which would be 'responsible for customer engagement and contact, feedback and complaints. The Customer Experience Team would act as an intermediary between customers and franchisees, managing stakeholders, and running consultations and surveys' (3.6.9). 'Merseytravel's role in... customer interfacing would present a step-change from the current bus service arrangements' (3.6.3). Your proposal raises a number of questions:

- what assessment have you done of the performance of the bus operators in complaints handling?
- what do you see as the advantages of taking over complaints handling and what would be the challenges?
- how would appeals be handled?
- how would you analyse and use complaints data to improve services?

6. Overall, to what extent do you agree with or oppose the introduction of Franchising?

7. Do you think Franchising will improve and support the delivery of future improvements for the bus network in the Liverpool City Region? And why?

To assess this point, we have set out passengers' expectations and aspirations from our research. These will then need to be mapped against measures in the proposed scheme. For many years Transport Focus consulted almost 50,000 passengers annually to produce the BPS¹⁴. This measured passengers' satisfaction with their local bus service for a representative sample of journeys. Passengers were asked to rate their satisfaction with the bus journey they were making, across a wide range of aspects.

Results in Merseyside and the Liverpool City region from 2014 to 2019 (including peak and off-peak services, weekdays and weekends) are in the table below:

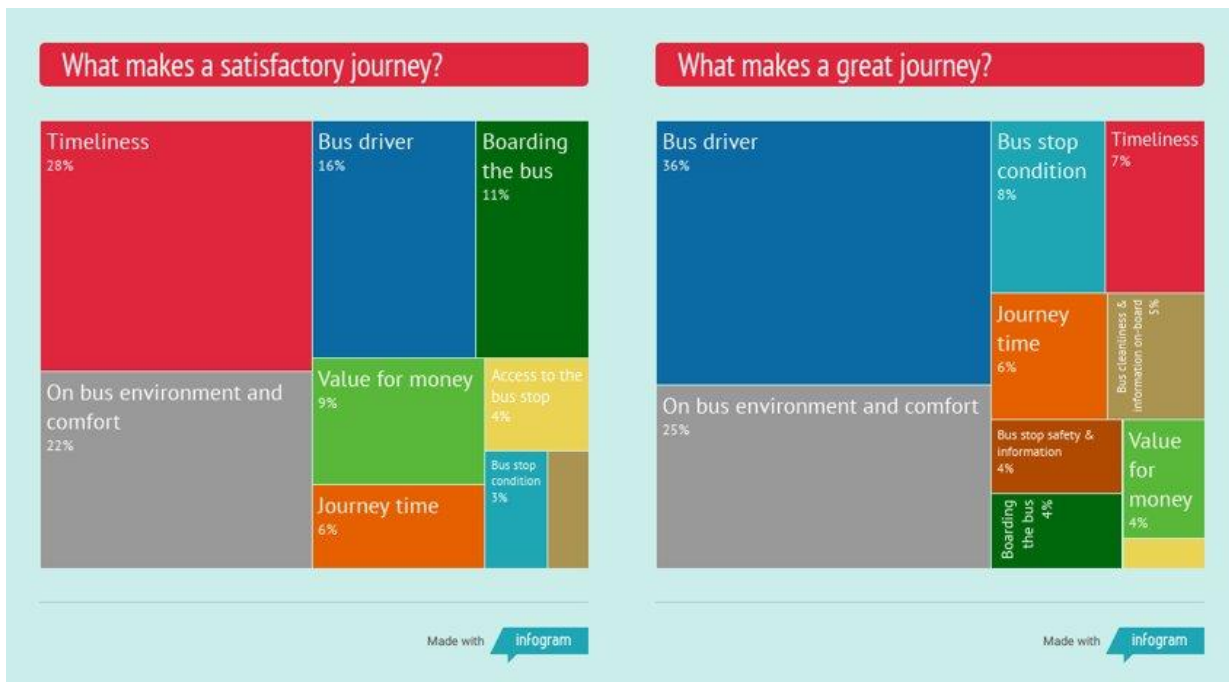
All satisfied %	Year					
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Overall satisfaction with journey	90	89	90	92	91	92
Punctuality of bus	80	78	78	75	76	77
Satisfaction with journey time	88	87	87	89	88	87
Satisfaction with value for money (fare-payers only)	67	71	73	70	75	73
Overall satisfaction with bus stop	82	82	81	81	83	81
Information provided at bus stop	76	76	73	70	74	76
Personal safety whilst at bus stop	80	79	79	78	80	80
Bus driver helpfulness / attitude	74	75	76	76	77	77
Information provided inside bus	71	72	72	72	69	70
Comfort of the seats	80	82	84	84	83	81
Personal security whilst on the bus	86	87	87	87	87	85

These results show a slight increase in passenger satisfaction with value for money and with bus driver helpfulness/attitude, but with most other scores relatively stable across the period. Interim passenger satisfaction scores for 2023 derived from our new *Your Bus Journey* survey will not be available until early September.

Key drivers of satisfaction

Analysis of BPS looks in more depth at the key driving factors behind fare paying passengers' overall journey satisfaction, which have been grouped into 10 themes based upon a statistical analysis of the responses. Analysis for the Merseyside area is below:

¹⁴ Bus Passenger Survey. Transport Focus



On the left are themes which make the difference between ‘not satisfied’ and ‘satisfied’ overall – making a journey ‘satisfactory’. On the right are themes which make the difference between ‘fairly’ and ‘very’ satisfied overall – making a ‘great’ journey.

This analysis demonstrates that the key factor for a satisfactory journey experience is timeliness – satisfaction with punctuality and waiting time. Whilst the key to a great journey is the bus driver – the greeting, helpfulness, time to get to a seat, driving style and safety.

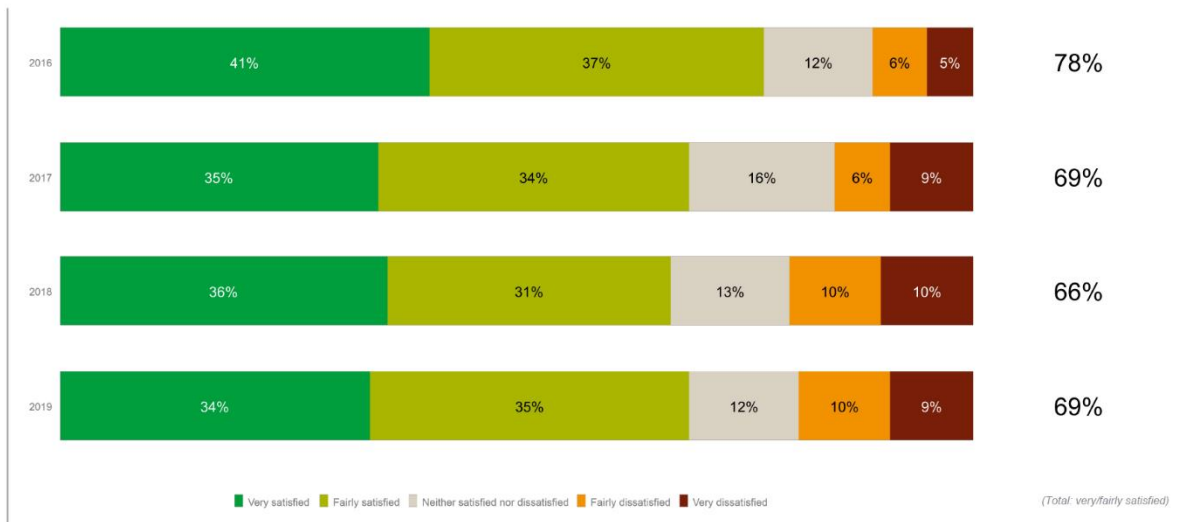
Punctuality and journey time

Buses arriving on time at the stop is the third highest priority for improvement. However, passenger satisfaction with punctuality fell during this period. This fall in the afternoon peak, set out in the chart below, was slightly more pronounced:



Punctuality - comparison of scores

[More information](#)



Filters: Country England (excludes London) Local Transport Authority area Mersey & Halton Year 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019
Time of travel Weekday - pm peak (15:30 - 18:29)

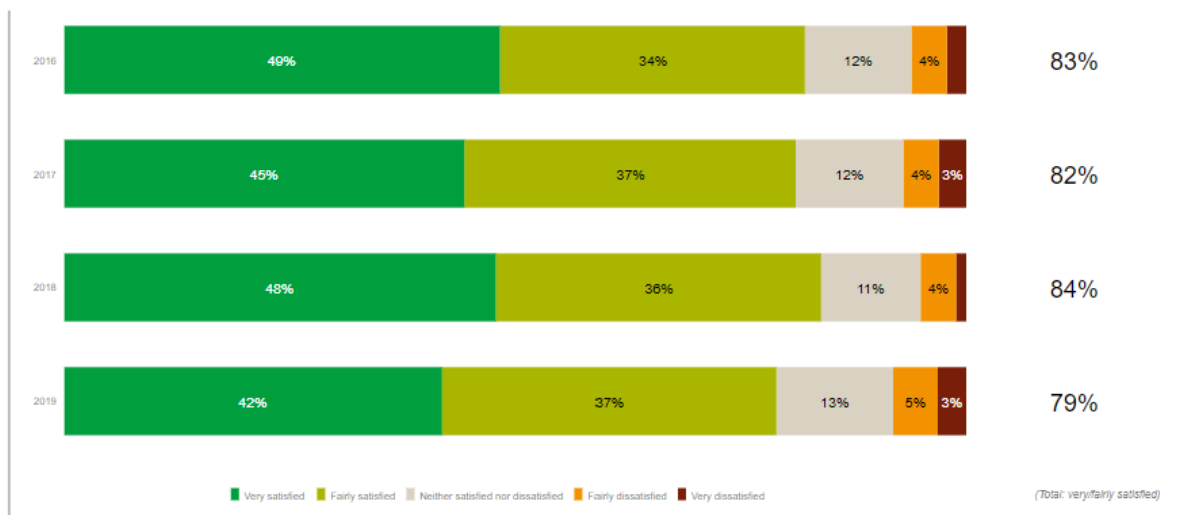
*caution - based on 75-99 responses
** result hidden as less than 75 responses
^The 'Total' is the total according to the filters you have applied

Passenger satisfaction with journey time in the afternoon peak is set out in the chart below. At the same time as passenger satisfaction with journey time had fallen in the afternoon peak to 79 per cent in 2019 it had risen to 88 per cent in the morning peak.



Journey time - comparison of scores

[More information](#)



Filters: Country England (excludes London) Local Transport Authority area Mersey & Halton
Time of travel Weekday - pm peak (15:30 - 18:29)

*caution - based on 75-99 responses
** result hidden as less than 75 responses
^The 'Total' is the total according to the filters you have applied

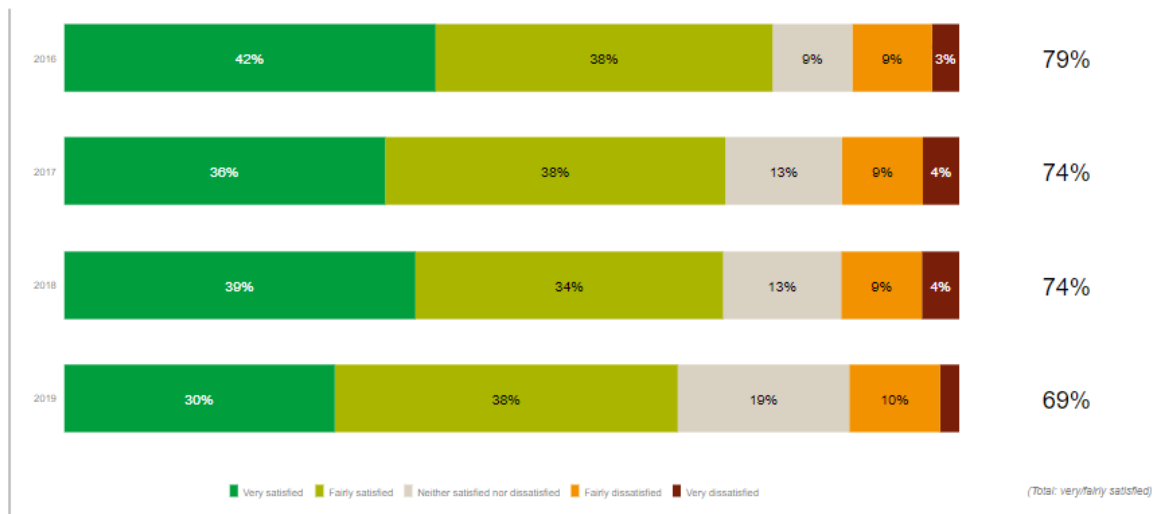
Value for money

Passengers judge value for money against a range of aspects, especially core service elements, that the service delivers in return for the price of their ticket. The same afternoon peak saw the very satisfied proportion at 30 per cent in 2019, compared with 42 per cent in 2016:



Value for money (fare-payers only) - comparison of scores

[More information](#)



Filters: Country England (excludes London) Local Transport Authority area Mersey & Halton
 Time of travel Weekday - pm peak (15:30 - 18:29)

*caution - based on 75-99 responses
 **result hidden as less than 75 responses
 *The 'Total' is the total according to the filters you have applied

Transport Focus agrees that the proposed franchising scheme could deliver benefits for passengers although the test will be in assessing the delivery of resulting services.

It would seem to provide additional flexibility when specifying routes and times and through this help address 'gaps' in the network that impact on existing users and act as a barrier to new users.

Franchising would also seem to provide the most flexibility when it comes to providing a simplified and integrated fares and ticketing structure – another key passenger aspiration.

The franchising proposal could also deliver benefits when it comes to customer experience – though we acknowledge that some of these could also be provided through the partnership options. The chief benefit of franchising in this regard would be the opportunity of setting a consistent set of standards across all routes and services. It could also facilitate a more unified real-time passenger information service.

However, it is less clear how proposals will influence the key drivers of satisfaction in tackling punctuality and reliability. People see transport as a public service and an enabler for supporting personal mobility. The scheme needs to include robust measures for providing the reassurance of consistently reliable and punctual journeys across modes and from door to door, to be able to deliver an attractive network that fosters growth and trust.

The expected decline in bus patronage set out in the Assessment under all models – franchising, an enhanced partnership, and the reference case – comes as something of a shock. Figure 4.9 in the Financial Case (page 334) shows passenger journeys under franchising falling from over 80 journeys per head in 2024 to below 60 journeys per head in 2038, only 4.3% more than in the reference case and while Figure 11 presents a more optimistic forecast with a 7% uplift over the reference case it still envisages a sharp fall in patronage over this period. Figure 4.20 on page 361 of the Assessment suggests an even smaller differential between patronage under Franchising and Enhanced Partnership of just 3.4% on average. See also Figure 4.28 on page 375.

By way of comparison, a new Bus Strategy in Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) sets out an ambition for a 30% increase in bus patronage by 2030. Could you please explain why

you are expecting such a steep decline in patronage up to 2038 and why franchising appears to make relatively little difference to this decline when compared with the forecasts under an enhanced partnership and the reference case?

We can see how the proposed franchising scheme presents opportunities and flexibilities to improve local bus services which are not available through other delivery models. We would like to believe that franchising can have a transformative effect on local bus services in the LCR. We are not yet convinced by the evidence presented in your documentation that this will be the case – the forecast drop in bus patronage set out in your Assessment suggests otherwise.

8. Do you have any concerns about Franchising?

Passenger representation

Franchising would give LCRCA more control over bus services and provide some opportunity for enhanced public accountability at the ballot box. We welcome the plan to consult users on how well franchising is working. However, a key question for Transport Focus is how will passengers be given more say than they have currently and would have under an enhanced partnership? For example, what mechanisms will there be to enable passengers to comment on the network of routes and frequencies and service standards and feed into the broad content of contracts? Without understanding these, are consultees being invited to sign a blank cheque?

Transport Focus has been represented on the Liverpool City Region Bus Alliance for many years and we would be keen to discuss how we could continue to play a ‘critical friend’ role, to strongly articulate the passenger voice, should a franchising scheme be made. We would be happy to advise LCRCA on the best ways of capturing the voice of local passengers and non-users as well as commenting directly on behalf of passengers on detailed proposals to improve local bus services.

Passenger charter

We have been working with several local transport authorities and local bus operators up and down the country to develop bus passenger charters. We would be happy to also advise you on your bus passenger charter to ensure that it represents best practice in setting out what passengers can expect whenever they travel on local buses and explaining what to do if those expectations are not met, including any redress that may be available to them.

Impacts on persons with protected characteristics

We would be interested to learn what further work you are planning to undertake to develop your Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) and to test your initial judgements on the impacts of your proposal on groups such as young people and older and disabled people. EQIA impacts on key protected groups such as young people, older people and disabled people are assessed by LCRCA as positive, but the justification of this assessment seems thin (page 35 of summary document).

Action to make bus services more accessible should be closely defined. In Greater Manchester, new buses are to be rolled out across the network over the next few years. They will be fully inclusive, with two wheelchair bays, hearing induction loops, audio and visual announcement systems and anti-slip flooring. The existing bus fleet will also continue to be properly equipped under a comprehensive renewal programme.

Any other comments?

If properly funded and more closely defined, the proposed scheme has the potential to improve the bus journey experience, making local bus services more attractive to users and non-users and raising satisfaction levels. Transport Focus's research can prioritise the improvements that are important to passengers and thus realise that potential.

There is much in the proposed scheme that aligns with the needs and aspirations for transport in the Liverpool City Region. It focuses on many of the outputs that matter to passengers. We would, however like to see more clarity about what will be delivered.

The acid test for the proposal will be what benefits it will bring to passengers and how it will improve the delivery of services. The ten actions to benefit passengers, set out in Appendix 1, represent a checklist for assessing how the proposed scheme specifications and targets measure up to what passengers want and need.

We will be pleased to discuss the points raised in our submission in greater detail and to work with LCRCAs to support and underpin passengers' interest.

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Ten actions to benefit passengers

1. Improving punctuality and reliability

Bus passengers rank punctuality and running on time highly as priorities for improvement. Lateness of a bus arriving at a stop to start the journey causes more anxiety than a bus arriving late at the destination. Passengers can tolerate the arrival at the bus stop of departure up to five minutes late. After that satisfaction with punctuality decreases markedly, and again after 10 minutes. The new arrangements should:

- Have clear punctuality targets
- Targets for improving average bus journey speeds
- Include a statement on monitoring performance and publishing data.

2. Ensuring frequency and stability of bus times

Alongside punctuality, passengers want to know that the timetable doesn't change too frequently. Our research found that passengers did not think it was acceptable to make changes to services more than twice a year and more than six out of ten wanted to be given at least four weeks' notice of a major change. The new arrangements should ensure:

- There are minimal changes to timetables
- There is a clear process for consulting and informing passengers of changes.

3. Building trust: engagement and consultation

Buses need to run on time, be reliable, deal well with disruption and offer value for money. Our research shows that building a relationship with passengers helps build loyalty and repeated use of services. Passengers should feel that the company really cares about what happens to them, especially during disruption, and is not remote and aloof. Drivers have an important role in showing empathy and care (see 7 below). The new arrangements should require operators to produce a passenger engagement strategy.

4. Monitoring passenger satisfaction to make improvements

It is important for operators and authorities to research (quantitatively and qualitatively) how satisfied passengers are with services both on the bus and at the stop. Transport Focus's *Your Bus Journey* survey provides such an independent assessment which could be used providing vital feedback on critical factors such as punctuality and cleanliness. New arrangements should establish targets for service quality, how they will be measured and results published.

5. Passenger information in real-time

Real-time information displays are valuable in indicating to passengers when their bus will arrive, so reducing stress and anxiety and enabling them to make alternative plans when things go wrong.

The Bus Services Act has made more data available for public use, so new arrangements should set out, through an action plan, how real-time customer information will be provided – especially at bus stops and through developing apps

6. Improving fares and ticketing

Better value for money is one of passengers' highest priorities for improvement. It is also linked to getting a punctual, reliable service and a seat in return for payment. Our research has found that passengers often have poor information on fares and ticketing and types of tickets, often relying on word of mouth or the bus driver. Younger passengers have distinct needs relying heavily on bus travel. They require service flexibility but also resent paying adult fares. Smart ticketing can help with some of these issues and the new arrangements should

- Provide a central source of pre-journey information on fares, ticket types (including smart ticket availability) and bus routes
- Identify specific policies for 16-18 year olds, such as the range of tickets and price.

7. Boosting the role of bus drivers

They are the ‘face of the company’ providing the main contact with passengers. For a good passenger experience, they should provide a pleasant and professional service whether by providing information on disruption, delays, or ticket types, or settling disputes. Their role is essential. The new arrangements should therefore:

- Set standards of behaviour for drivers
- Provide training courses programmes that include customer service.

8. Customer care and satisfaction

Despite the best intentions, things will go wrong from time to time. An effective complaints system makes it easy for passengers to know who to contact and a range of ways to do so; has efficient handling systems; and uses the resulting data to make improvements. The new arrangements should set out

- Clear complaint handling processes and lines of responsibility
- How contact details will be publicised
- What response times will be and how they will be reported upon
- Clear guidance on where, when and how compensation will be offered.

9. Improving personal security

This features in our research both on the bus and at the stop, particularly for those with disabilities. The new arrangements should ensure that partners work together to deal with anti-social behaviour and that security is included in design guidelines for buses and stops.

10. Encouraging non and infrequent users

Our research shows why current non-users don’t use the bus: poor punctuality, failure to provide services when people want to travel (such as for work or a night out), length of journey and not knowing ‘the system’. We found that 28 per cent of non-users would support a bus service. Therefore, operators should produce a strategy for boosting bus use.