

South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) Bus Franchising Consultation

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 specifically responds to the plans for bus franchising in South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) 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.

1. (a) Overall, to what extent do you support or oppose the introduction of the Proposed Franchising Scheme? (b) Why do you say this?

Transport Focus' research has shown that the key priorities for bus passengers are an affordable, frequent and reliable bus service. From the information provided the proposal would allow greater 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. It would also seem to provide flexibility when it comes to providing a simplified and integrated fares and ticketing structure – another key passenger aspiration. Though we also note that some of the proposed benefits to passengers are also achievable under the Extended Partnership model.

We believe the proposal would be of benefit to existing and potential passengers across the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) area and, as a result, is something we would support – subject to the specific points we make below, especially around importance of reliability, engagement with passengers, commitment to satisfaction, and accessibility.

2. The Proposed Franchising Scheme will cover the whole area of South Yorkshire. This includes the four district authorities of Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield. It would apply to all services across South Yorkshire (other than some services excepted from the Proposed Franchising Scheme and services to which the Service Permit Scheme would apply).

Do you have any comments on this?

Having the proposal cover the whole area of South Yorkshire will help ensure consistency of delivery across the region. This in turn should help to foster a common understanding

and expectation amongst passengers on things like how to find information on routes, times and fares and on how to make a complaint. This familiarity should make it easier for passengers to engage more with operators. Transport Focus research '[Motivations and barriers to bus usage](#)' (2023) found that there are gaps in knowledge of local services, even for frequent bus users. A common approach across the whole area could help to address this.

We note that there are a number of cross border services used by passengers to access employment and education or for leisure. This has the potential for those services to look and feel different to those within the SYCMA proposal – or for some tickets/concessions not to apply. We are pleased to see that the proposal recognises the importance of planning reform in South Yorkshire being undertaken alongside engagement with neighbouring local authorities. There are benefits to passengers from presenting as simple and seamless journey experience as possible.

3. The Strategic Case summarises the South Yorkshire bus network's day to day challenges and concludes that it is not performing as well as it should be. Do you have any comments on this?

Transport Focus undertakes and compiles research on bus user satisfaction and perceptions across the country. As part of our '[Your Bus Journey](#)', survey specific research was also undertaken across South Yorkshire, from which a comparison of the Authority's bus performance and user satisfaction can be tracked against the rest of the country. The bar chart below shows headline satisfaction ratings (%'s) of different factors of a bus journey in South Yorkshire throughout 2023.



(SYMCA Your Bus Journey 2023) – a more detailed breakdown is at Annex A

When viewed within the wider context of a national league table, our findings show that currently South Yorkshire perform a little below the national average in terms of users' satisfaction across the seven metrics presented in the bar chart above. For example, South Yorkshire is placed 23rd out of the 34 areas studied for overall satisfaction, 26th for satisfaction with value for money and 27th for satisfaction with waiting times. In terms of areas classified as 'Urban Metropolitan', South Yorkshire was 3rd in ratings of overall journey satisfaction out of 6 areas. Further information breaking down user satisfaction among different components of a journey can be seen within the annexes of this response.

One finding that came from our Your Bus Journey research that was worrying was the current level of bus users who said that they were 'actively dissatisfied' with the level of service they were receiving. 1 in 5 respondents informed us that they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the waiting time at the bus stop / punctuality within South Yorkshire. This reinforces the importance of providing reliable and dependable bus services allowing people to easily and affordably access nearby goods and services. In addition to this, respondents who had difficulty gaining access to private transport were less satisfied when compared with users who had 'easy' access to private transport when it came to value for money, punctuality, and time waiting at bus stop.

The Your Bus Journey research also asks people for their general perceptions of local bus services. Key results include:

| Attribute | % rating as good or very good |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Cost of bus fares | 63 |
| Frequency of services | 52 |
| Reliability of services | 47 |
| Ease of getting to local amenities | 77 |
| Connections with other forms of public transport | 73 |
| Taking me to places I want to go | 79 |
| Range of different bus tickets and passes available | 74 |
| Information provided about bus services | 54 |

These results can be reviewed against bus passenger priorities, which emphasise the importance of frequency, reliability and affordability.

Your Bus Journey does not cover non-users within the survey. The consultation document states that the size of the bus network in South Yorkshire has declined from 43 million miles in 2006/7 to 20 million miles in 2024/2. This contraction of the bus network reduces access to bus services and makes it less attractive to potential users. SYMCA may find it helpful to engage more with non-users to understand what the key factors are as to why bus patronage has decrease and is forecast to continue to decrease in the coming years.

4. The Strategic Case concludes that a Proposed Franchising Scheme is the best option for South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (when compared to EP and EP Plus) to deliver its aims and strategic objectives for buses in the region.

Do you have any comments on this?

We note the conclusion that Franchising model offers the Combined Authority advantages over an Enhanced Partnership. We agree that franchising will give the Combined Authority more control over the design and implementation of the bus network, ensuring that the wider benefits from investment and enhancement target those who are likely to gain most.

5. (a) To what extent do you agree or disagree that the introduction of the Proposed Franchising Scheme will improve bus services in the South Yorkshire region? (b)

Why do you say this?

From Transport Focus's perspective the key challenge is whether SYMCA'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.

To that end we believe that the proposal could have a transformative effect on local bus services in South Yorkshire. Franchising 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. It 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 many of these could also be provided through the extended 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, to get the most value out of the proposal it will need to be accompanied by an engagement strategy setting out how SYMCA will engage with passengers and how they will use the information gathered through this. This engagement would include:

- Engagement and consultation with passengers and non-users – especially on significant changes to routes and frequencies, or fares, ticketing and information
- Measuring passenger satisfaction and making corresponding improvements to services. The best judge of how well services are being provided is the people using those services. Implementing standards and targets for passenger satisfaction will help create an environment of continuous improvement.
- Setting out passengers’ rights to standards of service, with effective mechanisms for redress.
- Making performance information available to passengers. Publishing this information is regarded as a right in principle and is good for trust because ‘it helps keeps the industry honest’. This is the case even if individuals have little personal appetite in seeking it out – the fact that others are looking at it can often be enough.
- A good complaint handling system.

Transport Focus would welcome a clear commitment from SYMCA on each of these above bullet points.

Building in such engagement from the beginning would help to improve the relationship between passengers and operators. Trust 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. Service delivery (in other words delivering the essentials) is at the heart of this rational element. The better the operator runs the service, the higher the levels of trust generated. Being unreliable or inconsistent has a large detrimental impact on levels of trust.

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 – as evidenced by interacting with passengers and involving them in the decision-making process. Passengers feel that more should be done to consult them and

their representatives. It also means operators communicating well, especially during disruption. The 'radio silence' approach leaves passengers unable to assess the alternatives, update work/family on amended arrival times and not feeling in control of the situation.

6. The Economic Case concludes that, of all the Bus Reform options considered, the Proposed Franchising Scheme would offer the best value for money for the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. Do you have any comments on this?

We again note the conclusion that the Franchising model offers the Combined Authority advantages over an Enhanced Partnership. The results show that, based on the current analysis and current network scenario, the EP Plus and Proposed Franchising Scheme would both achieve a positive Net Present Value (NPV) but that the Franchising scheme has the highest NPV. The Proposed Franchising Scheme therefore provides 'High' value for money whereas the EP Plus option would achieve 'Medium' value for money

However, it is disappointing to see that the economic case within the consultation document predicts a continuation in the decline of bus patronage across SYMCA, this decline being predicted in both the EP Plus and Franchising models to varying degrees.

Finally, we also agree that the franchising model could offer a more stable operating environment for operators while giving the MCA full autonomy over network design and enabling more effective cross-subsidy of routes. Conversely it would increase risk for the Combined Authority as it will become responsible for fluctuations in demand and cost inflation.

7. The Commercial Case concludes that the Proposed Franchising Scheme reduces barriers to entry by providing fleet and depots to operators, thereby supporting increased competition for franchise contracts. Do you have any comments on this?

Whoever operates services in the SYMCA area will need access to depots and buses. Incumbent operators already have this and would therefore have an inbuilt advantage over any potential new entrants to the market when bidding for contracts. By providing fleet and depot access to operators SYMCA will reduce this barrier to entry. We agree that this should encourage greater competition for contracts and, in turn, result in a wider range of high-quality bids to the benefit of passengers.

In saying this we also note that Transport Focus' *Your Bus Journey* findings did highlight some dissatisfaction from passengers towards the performance of some incumbent operators.

8. The Financial Case concludes that the Proposed Franchising Scheme would be affordable for the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, but that there are further risks which would need to be carefully managed.

Do you have any comments on this?

We note that the conclusion in the consultation that the proposed franchise scheme would be affordable. We also note, and agree, that the franchising scheme would increase revenue and cost risks for SYMCA. These will need to be carefully managed.

In addition, there are other risks to be considered when assessing the financial case proposed for franchising. One concerns the uncertainty of negotiating the transfer of depots and vehicles from bus companies. Another concerns the sensitivity of the affordability analysis within the consultation. This shows that fluctuations in operating costs and revenue can have a significant effect on affordability over a 30-year period. Careful consideration should be given to both these factors during the implementation of the proposal.

9. The Management Case concludes that the Proposed Franchising Scheme is deliverable and sets out how South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority would implement and manage it. Do you have any comments on this?

We agree with the conclusion that the proposed franchising scheme would mean a significant expansion of the MCA's accountabilities which would require additional skills and capabilities. Figure 5 (para 4.6.4) shows these new skills, many of which are based around transport and financial planning. We note that only two FTE posts are being considered for Customer Service. We would ask whether this is sufficient to fully manage complaints and consultations with passengers. As mentioned above, building a relationship and trust requires a focus on these qualitative functions.

It is also not clear from the consultation where responsibility for accessibility would fit within the staffing profile. Who would be responsible for producing Equality Impact Assessments, for ensuring compliance with disability regulations on such things as vehicle and passenger information designs, and on general efforts to make travel more accessible. We would also emphasise the importance (and the value) of engaging directly with people with a lived experience of disability. Where changes are being considered then it will be essential that disabled people have the opportunity to influence those decisions through public consultations, focus groups or other means.

10. Do you have any further comments?

In recent years the role of the driver has become even more prominent. The challenge to retain and recruit in drivers in some areas has been a significant challenge for the industry. In turn, shortages of drivers have been a significant challenge for the industry and impacted on the reliability of services for passenger. Our most recent research ([Making](#)

[great bus journeys](#) – 2024) showed that the bus driver is the second most important ingredient in terms of delivering a great journey (after timeliness/ punctuality). The role of the driver is instrumental in turning a good journey into a great one.

Transport Focus would like to see clarification of any strategy for driver training and standards. Will this be left to operators running the franchise services or would SYMCA be involved in things like training specifications. Effective recruitment and retention of drivers will be essential to support effective service delivery. The bus driver must also consider the comfort and safety of diverse groups of passengers, who may have a variety of needs. And while many passengers may have limited interaction with drivers, they do observe how drivers handle requests for such help from fellow passengers.

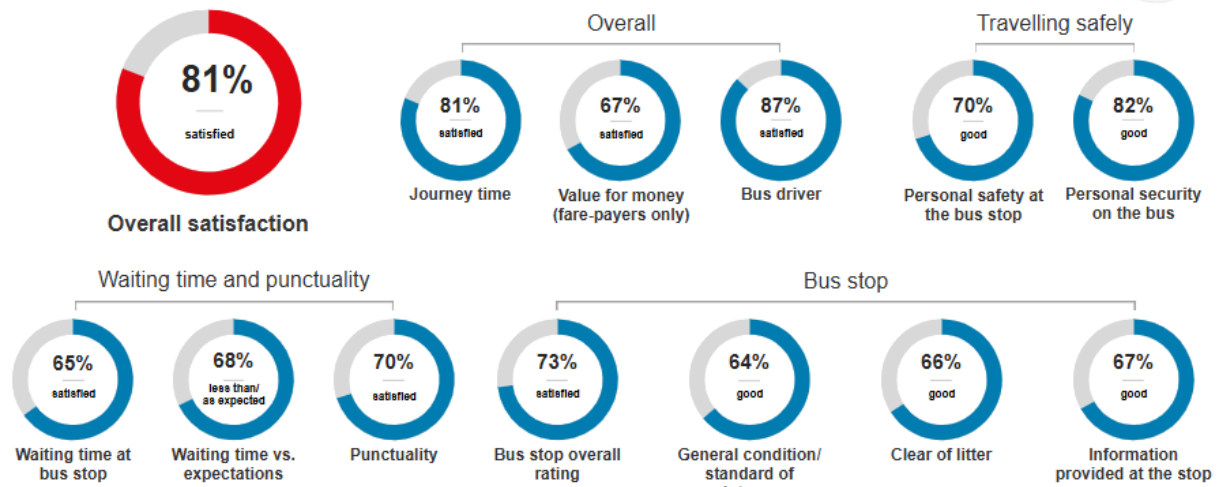
The role of the driver is often under the microscope and noted by passengers. Our research shows differences in satisfaction levels for passengers with a disability that for some is markedly lower. To improve this, there must be a focus on support and training for drivers, particularly for passengers with a seen or unseen disability.

Finally, we welcome the outline of the plan for consulting on how well the scheme is working set out in section 8 the draft scheme. However, we would like to see more detail on the approach to be adopted (e.g. written surveys, user groups, on-street surveys, focused meetings with individual stakeholders) and the information provided. In particular, we would like to understand how it is envisaged that these consultations will complement the regular performance monitoring which we expect SYMCA to be doing and how that performance data and any resulting action plans will be shared with users and their representatives. We would welcome an opportunity to work with the authority to develop the plan in more detail.

Annexes

Annex A – Showing the satisfaction, expressed as a percentage, of different components of a bus journey across South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.

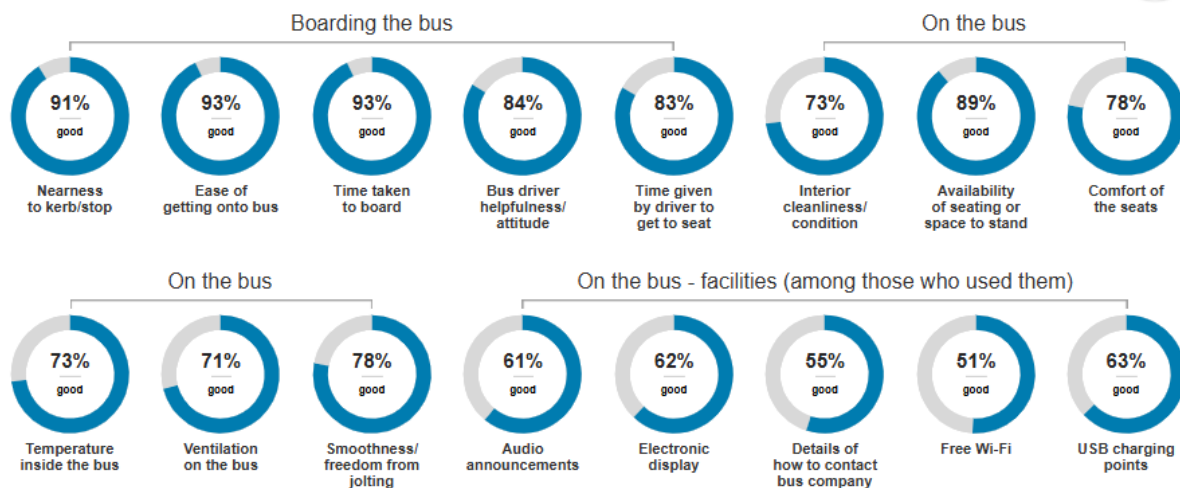
Snapshot of experience (1/2)



Year: 2023 Local Transport Authority area: South Yorkshire

* caution – based on 75-99 responses
** result hidden as less than 75 responses

Snapshot of experience (2/2)



Year: 2023 Local Transport Authority area: South Yorkshire

* caution – based on 75-99 responses
** result hidden as less than 75 responses