

TravelWatch NORTHWEST

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Winner of CILT award for best practice in passenger transport (2013)

promoting quality public transport.....

Transport Committee
 House of Commons
 London SW1A 0AA

26th August 2016

Dear Committee Members,

The Bus Services Bill

1. TravelWatch NorthWest is an independent Community Interest Company representing all public transport users in North West England. We are pleased to give our views to this inquiry.

The need for the Bill

2. There is a clear need to reverse the downward trend in bus patronage in our region. While recent trends show increases in London and in England overall, bus use since deregulation has gone down by 44% in Metropolitan areas outside London and increased by 105% in London which is not deregulated. Bus journeys per annum per inhabitant in London are 280 compared to 65 in the North West. The trend in our region has seen a drop of 11% from 2004/05 to 2013/14.

Whether the Bill addresses the correct issues

3. The emphasis in the Bill appears to be on urban areas and while many of the changes proposed are to be welcomed, there is scant mention of how to reverse the catastrophic decline in service levels and patronage due to local authority cuts and failure to recompense operators for concessionary fares, particularly in rural and semi-rural areas. Local Transport Authority (LTA) lack of support for rural and less used services has led to loneliness and isolation for so many who now have a free bus pass but no service to use it on. Community bus schemes are not a substitute. How will the proposals in the Bill rebalance bus service provision following these wholesale cuts to LTA supported bus services, indeed where will additional LTA funding come from? We are concerned that any government support for bus services must be ring fenced.

4. The greatest issue facing bus operation currently is the concessionary fare and lack of full re-imburement to operators. Having a free pass but no buses to use it on has ceased to be a prediction in many areas. Indeed there appear to be huge differences in reimbursement levels between authorities, often

because they are tailoring payments to fit a budget rather than ensuring operators are "no better and no worse off". It's hard to see how franchising or quality partnerships will address this. In rural areas and small towns this is perhaps the greatest issue facing operators as pass holders can make up 80% or more of total passengers. There is scarce mention of this problem in the Bill except for a brief reference under the Enhanced Partnership Scheme.

5. We always advocate passengers' rights and input to the services that they use. There is a need for passenger involvement in the creation of all partnership and franchising agreements. We also strongly feel that there is a requirement for passengers' views on routing, frequency and fares levels to be actively sought when changes are made.

6. In addition complaints procedures are currently not well publicised. We would like to see a notice prominently displayed in all vehicles used on Registered Local Services explaining how and to whom comments and complaints can be made and giving contact details of the appeals procedure. The Bus Appeal Body's current remit with regard to complaint handling is very limited. ***It is not a statutory body.*** We understand that its terms of reference only permit it to deal with complaints from bus users regarding specific incidents or operational matters such as running to time, charging the correct fare and the behaviour of staff towards passengers. It cannot deal with commercial or operational matters such as the level of fares, the level of service provided, or the routes taken by buses.

7. One of the major problems for operators is unreliability and increased costs due to congestion, especially in urban areas and at peak times. It is difficult to see how the provisions of the Bill will make any significant improvement. The step change needed in bus priority and segregation from other traffic (as commonplace in Europe for the last fifty years, albeit mainly for trams) does not appear in the Bill.

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.

8. Any Partnership or Franchising scheme should be viable for the long term given the history of continual cuts to LTA support of local bus services. As we have said above support is essential for areas and communities that have lost or are in danger of losing services and require subsidies for social purposes. As an alternative to local buses, community transport is limited. It is difficult for Community Transport or Demand Responsive Transport to replace bus services as such services are not accessible for all visitors, tourists and others, to the area. A widely advertised scheduled bus service provides a means of transport which anyone can choose to use.

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

9. We don't think it should necessarily be limited – rural areas could benefit more provided Local Authorities are allowed to any necessary revenue subsidy. The plan showing bus franchising and devolution clearly shows the Met counties but does not show how this can relate to shire counties and unitary authorities.

The likely effect of franchising on small and medium operators.

10. We have no comment on this aspect.

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

11. We welcome Open Data but there are some basic requirements for all passengers, not just those with smart phones -

At the bus stop, bus station.

- Accurate, up to date timetable and other information should be displayed in cases at bus stops. Many bus stops, particularly rural, have no information of bus times displayed at all. The operator of all services should be shown, as some passengers may have operator specific tickets.
- There should be real time information at bus stops and bus stations, especially at major stops - ideally at all bus stops. This must be “real-time”, not timetable times. With GPS now widespread digital real time displays should be mandatory at all locations.

On the bus

- Visual and audible information covering stopping patterns and next stop should be fitted to all new vehicles as standard as per the London model. In the meantime consideration should be given to audible location announcements during journeys.
- Clear instructions should be displayed for the use of passes on boarding the bus.

12. In general the decline in the provision of timetables and information to plan journeys and cater for tourists and visitors should be reversed. In many areas of the NorthWest it is the Local Transport Authority duties that have failed not the commercial services provided by operators.

13. Local timetables can be difficult to procure. For example, a passenger asked for a Knott End timetable at Lancaster bus station enquiry office recently but was told this was no longer available as the service was no longer run by Stagecoach. This was also true of long distance express

services although all of these arrive and depart from the bus station. Where an enquiry office exists (and many have been closed) bus companies should be obliged to stock information of all buses using that station. The same is true of departure boards which frequently seem to omit some services .

14. If Open Data leads to better information about fares that will be a substantial passenger benefit. In 2014 we carried out an exercise (following a similar one in 2009) to demonstrate the ease of finding out the cost of bus fares before travelling. In 2009 the conclusion was that bus fare information can only be obtained by actually making the journey or telephoning the operator or operators concerned. Web based journey planners such as Traveline or Transport Direct were of no help.

15. The 2014 report found that since the 2009 report no progress had been made on making bus fares information more widely available since the original exercise was carried out. Indeed in some respects the situation had worsened. Traveline and Transport Direct (now closed) were unchanged in respect of lack of fares information, most bus company websites did not give ordinary single or return fares and it was lamentable that many bus station enquiry offices had closed.

16. The report is available on our website - www.travelwatch-northwest.org.uk/Studies.htm

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

17. We see no reason for such a prohibition from a passenger's view.

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

18. In general we look to affordable fares with well marketed ticket offers. Often ticketing for single short bus journeys is dearer than train travel. Many people have day/area or other passes which are good value for multiple journeys but for others the price discourages bus travel. Single-operator ticketing means that a return or multi journey ticket is not always available on all services on the route - we have noted passengers being refused travel due to having other operators' tickets. This is not normally the case with rail.

19. In many cases it is cheaper to purchase a Day ticket for return journeys. However the large operators tend to promote their own day, weekly and monthly tickets quite heavily and do not mention the multi-operator ticket unless prompted. Even where there is an all-operator ticket, it is always undercut by the operator's own (often very good value) ticket from which the operator receives 100% of the revenue.

20. The move towards new technologies (e.g. smart cards and contactless payment) will help to alleviate slow boarding times caused by passengers finding correct change. We welcome the commitment in the Bill to ensure that

LTAAs continue to make multi operator ticketing schemes. This should apply to simple single and return tickets as well as multi journey tickets.

21. We also welcome the duty on LTAs to have regard to any ticketing, partnership or franchising scheme any other relevant LTA has (or is developing) when developing its own scheme. This will help passengers travelling across LTA boundaries.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond

Yours sincerely,

John A Moorhouse

John Moorhouse, Company Secretary