

TravelWatch NORTHWEST

Tel 07807 768124
 Email: admin@travelwatch-northwest.org.uk
 Website: www.travelwatch-northwest.org.uk
 Correspondence address – 11 Harvelin
 Park, Todmorden, OL14 6HX

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

promoting quality public transport.....

Mark Hodgkiss
 Scheduled Bus Services Officer
 Cumbria County Council
 PO Box 415
 Carlisle CA1 9GU

22nd July 2021

Dear Mark,

Buses Back Better in Cumbria

Introduction

1. As you know, 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 consultation.
2. People rely on buses for a whole range of activities for education, work, social, business and recreational purposes. Buses play a key role in providing an alternative to private transport and hence creating a more environmentally sustainable transport mix.

Decline

3. The decline in bus services over the past twenty or thirty years or more has left large areas with no bus services at all and many more with only a basic residual service with few if any journeys in evenings or at weekends. Cuts in local authority budgets have accelerated the situation. Even in major cities it can be impossible to get to hospitals, entertainment or restaurants in the evening because services do not run into the mid to late evenings. The decline has had a serious impact on the rural economy and this has spread to suburban and even some urban areas.

4. Life in rural communities has reached crisis point in many parts of the country with the closure of post offices, banks, village shops, pubs and bus services. Some parts have become uninhabitable by anyone without a car and younger people cannot afford to remain in rural communities and are moving en masse to large cities. A few local community bus services have been provided in some areas, usually operated with volunteer drivers, but these cannot adequately replace scheduled services available to all passengers.

5. The tourist industry has suffered, especially in national parks such as the Lake District, because of the reducing accessibility by public transport and the resulting serious congestion caused by too many cars attempting to use narrow country lanes. Funding for local initiatives has been precarious and difficult to obtain and sustain.

Effects on Society

6. In general terms the cost to the NHS and social care budgets as a result of people having no access to transport, not to mention the damage to local economies, is likely to outweigh the savings that have been achieved by Councils. There has been increased cost to the public purse through unemployment benefit, housing benefit, increased healthcare costs (buses keep people healthy), etc. The impact has been greatest in rural communities, where residents have lost essential links to the rest of society, resulting in social isolation. The cuts have also adversely affected businesses as people travel into towns by bus to spend money in shops, restaurants, pubs, etc. These cross-sector benefits should have been included in some way in the buses "balance sheet".

7. 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.

Resources

8. The decision of Cumbria CC not to subsidise timetabled bus services has appeared to be a political strategy to attempt to demonstrate the inadequacy of the Government Grant element for transport. Rural areas have suffered service loss unless there has been an entrepreneurial project from the private sector. Even when bus operators have tried to build extra services onto schools contracts a change in those contracts to coach operation with no interest in regular service provision has meant the loss of such initiatives.

9. To make better use of resources we suggest consideration is given to more co-operation/ co-ordination amongst the various public service (e.g. health associated) and goods delivery vehicles, etc. For example, the return of post buses – in remote areas they were a useful link until security regulations apparently put paid to this.

10. We cannot overstress the absolute need for better public transport in the wonderful county of Cumbria. The Covid pandemic has given rise to yet more pressure from cars on the fragile road network and from the environment and health standpoint greater attention must be given to the provision of local buses and publicising the advantages of using them.

Community Transport

11. Community Transport has/is playing a role but we aspire to its integration into the network of commercial and supported services. Replacing bus services with Demand Responsive (DRT) and Community Transport (CT) has not always been effective and such services are often not accessible for all visitors, not just tourists, to the area. Scheduled bus services provide a means of transport which people can choose to use, while CT and DRT are transport means of last resort. CT and DRT services have a much higher cost per passenger than bus services, so spending on them actually benefits fewer people. On a pound for pound basis there may be better public benefit in supporting a timetabled bus service than a community transport service.

12. It is essential that any CT style services are open to all users and that their existence is well publicised nationally as well as locally to ensure maximum awareness. This is especially important as visitors from other areas e.g. the towns and cities - to the many attractions of Cumbria are an important rural economic benefit. There should be scheduled rural bus services (not pre booked demand responsive services) which are well advertised so they can be used by tourists too, helping their financial viability. Consideration could also be given to allow free travel to concessionary pass holders on rural community transport with the extra cost being funded by central government. This could help to stem further decline and the growing number of villages now ending up with no service whatsoever.

Information and Accessibility

13. We understand that the Bus Services Act provides for measures to improve information which can go some way to making bus travel more attractive and hopefully contribute to reversing the decline. Accurate real time information at bus stops and next stop information on buses would help prospective passengers' confidence in using buses.

14. Publicity for existing services needs improving! For example, we understand that Stagecoach omits other operators' services on its routes, or links to them on publicity and websites as do most operators on their websites. It is difficult for visitors to find local services who do not know the local operators name, and County websites are not often updated quickly when there is a change in a local operator's service.

15. Whereas most buses are now fully accessible, many bus stops still do not meet the required standards and are unwelcoming. There are too few bus shelters and seating at stops. Bus stations are often very poor and uninviting with poor waiting facilities and security issues. Many are little more than extended bus stops.

16. As people get older and less mobile they are forced to stop travelling by bus simply because some Local Authorities have failed in their duty to make bus services accessible. A fully accessible bus service generates users as it

makes the service so easy to use - especially important for parents with young children and the less mobile. Improving bus stops in this way need not be expensive.

Fares & Marketing

17. As well as funding cuts, very high fare levels have tended to price off most passengers who do not have concessionary fares, resulting in very high proportions of passengers travelling on free passes. The reduction of reimbursement for concessionary travel has been a major factor in the loss of commercial services with replacement services not being provided by Local Transport Authorities.

18. As an example of expensive fares. A journey from a given village to the closest town (Kendal) costs £8.80 return. If a couple travel (as is normal in many cases) the fare is £17.60. The journey takes around 15 minutes depending on traffic. Parking cost £1.20 per hour and the round trip would be 14 miles. So car travel is a "no brainer" and as a result there is a contribution to the traffic congestion in Kendal and an increase in local pollution. There are numerous examples of similar fares around the County. The Explorer ticket is good value at £11.50 but not everyone needs it for a single journey.

19. Here's an idea – on the continent e.g. France, Switzerland and Germany, some authorities, especially those with significant tourism, charge a mandatory tourist tax which offers free travel on public transport. In addition to public transport the tax can help cover the additional costs of refuse collection, etc. Perhaps Cumbria could look at a similar system at least in the Lake Windermere area with potential for a significant reduction in traffic congestion.

20. We have noted very little effort to persuade latent markets to try the bus and whilst printed information in the Lake District is quite good a lot of gaps remain, particularly in the 70% of the County that is not covered by the National Park. This does not help residents and visitors to have confidence on the reliability of the bus to deliver journeys that are needed. We have also detected no real entrepreneurial efforts to persuade visitors to use bus services by liaising with accommodation providers (holiday parks/ hotels, holiday cottage companies and B & B's) to offer customers good transport deals without using their cars.

21. Exercises we have conducted in the past have shown the difficulty of finding out about bus fares before travelling. In 2014 we found that bus fares information was not widely available. Traveline and Transport Direct (now closed) did not give 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.

22. Overall in the North West, there is some improvement. However, Traveline says "in most cases you'll need to contact the transport operator for fares information. We're working on getting access to bus fares but at the moment

they're only available to us electronically on each transport operator's website." Some bus operator's websites do not always give specific fares information for individual journeys, at best often just a range of prices relating to "length of journey" (as well as multi journey day and other period tickets). But on the plus side, we understand that Stagecoach does now give individual fares on its website which is commendable and shows some progress.

23. The move towards new technologies is to be welcomed (e.g. smart cards and contactless payment) which will help to alleviate slow boarding times caused by passengers finding correct change.

Integration

24. Much more thought needs to be given to multi-modal connectivity or through journey tickets linking, say rail and bus. The odd "Plus Bus" ticket is available but this is certainly not all encompassing. Equally, unless you have the NW Explorer only single journey options are available.

25. Lack of integration between bus services is indeed a major issue. There is a need to give higher priority to integration and co-operation than to preventing collusion between operators. It is difficult for local transport authorities to plan effective long-term networks, while buses compete with, rather than complement, rail and light rail services. Bus use could be encouraged by removing some of the anti-competition rules which inhibit multi-operator return and other tickets.

Passenger Representation

26. We have welcomed the comments in the National Bus Strategy on passenger representation and on complaints procedures. These include passengers charters and "mechanisms for redress at a local level and means to ensure these standards are met, which could include forums such as Bus Advisory Boards being set up". Transport Focus is currently the statutory body representing bus passengers but unresolved complaints are dealt with by the Bus Appeals Body, run by Bus Users UK.

27. Currently complaints procedures regarding buses are not well publicised. There should be accessible information for passengers on buses and at other locations including bus stations explaining not only how to complain but also how to appeal if the complaint is not dealt with satisfactorily. TOWNW would be well placed (subject to funding) to deal with unresolved complaints about local bus services.

28. The alternative of falling back on Bus Users UK as the Appeals body would be unsatisfactory. Bus Users UK's complaints procedures are limited and attuned to a deregulated rather than franchised operation. ***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.

29. We trust that the local forums envisaged in the strategy will take on this matter effectively. TWNW would be very happy to contribute its experience in passenger representation and advise on complaints and redress matters. One simple step would be to provide “how to comment/ complain” information on board buses and at bus stations.

Concluding Remarks

30. We consider that Local authorities are best placed to develop transport services in rural areas given their local knowledge and understanding. Funding is of course the main stumbling block. Funding will, presumably, have to come from central government as local authorities have no means of raising the necessary funding. We continue to stress that to achieve this requires funding to be paid as revenue grants to Local Authorities and it must be ring fenced so it can only be spent on providing bus services. We strongly believe that the provision of a socially necessary network should be an essential rather than a discretionary duty.

31. Therefore, it follows that Transport Authorities should be compelled by statute to apply Government funding to this sector by hypothecation, rather than just withdrawing it as a political gesture. We consider that the role for the private sector is extremely limited if it is expected to work on a commercial basis.

32. Additionally, with the Government’s drive to create new housing and industrial development in rural areas, often on green belts, public transport needs to be a statutory consideration in the Planning process and in Local Authority Development Plans. These are likely to come up for renewal in 2025 and the PT element must be strengthened.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond

Yours sincerely,

John

John Moorhouse, Company Secretary