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THE NORTH WEST BUS DEBATE - CONFERENCE REPORT

**Thursday 17th October The Mechanics Conference Centre, Manchester
Conference kindly supported by The Bus Industry**

1. Welcome and Introduction

The Chairman, Chris Dale, welcomed delegates to Manchester and expressed thanks for the support of the region's bus industry.

He referred to the recently launched Consultation by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority on bus franchising and looked forward to the various arguments for and against this proposal during the Conference. The debates will inform the TWNW response to the Consultation.

He launched the TWNW Annual Review for 2018 – 2019 and urged all delegates to read it and will welcome any feedback they wish to submit.

Finally, he referred to the Annual General Meeting that took place in advance of the Conference and welcomed the re-election of the Directors.

2. Setting the Scene for Bus Passengers

David Sidebottom, Director, Transport Focus

David Sidebottom began by stating the role of Transport Focus in the bus sector which is to represent passengers as well as addressing non-users.

Transport Focus carries out a regular Bus Passenger Survey with feedback from 43,000 passengers of which 87% express satisfaction. Key issues that are raised are Value for Money, Journey Times, Punctuality and Driver Attitude and Behaviour. The results vary between regions. Additionally, a more focussed survey of 5000 passengers on priorities called for core services, better frequency and a wider choice of destinations. Younger users sought free WiFi and better frequencies. Also 2000 non-users were recently surveyed revealing that 43% would be prepared to use bus services if more destinations were offered and Value for Money could be proved. In a recent Clean Air debate, 57% of users thought that buses play a key role in providing transport solutions.

Some recommended key thoughts for Bus Operators to consider are:

- Measure current and potential Markets and react to them.
- Build Trust and Engagement with customers.

- Adopt Corporate values such as local management, driver empowerment and local control.
- Improve Punctuality and Reliability.
- Monitor satisfaction and react accordingly.
- Work to provide Real Time Information.
- Boost the role of Drivers in Customer Service skills.

Finally, David referred to the “Give Bus a Go” campaign recently launched in the West Midlands. This had reached 2.3 million people and several volunteers have agreed to use bus services rather than their car for a set period and provide feedback.

3. The Franchising Option

Pascale Robinson, Better Buses for Greater Manchester

Pascale said that bus travel accounts for 80% of public transport journeys in Greater Manchester. However, 8 million miles have been cut from network journeys and fares have increased by 50% over the last 5 years. Amongst many issues this has resulted in a decline in opportunities for job seekers, missed hospital appointments and failures to service changing work shift patterns in the employment sector.

The government de-regulated bus services in England (apart from London) in 1986, allowing operators to choose their own routes and set their own fares. Predictably operators have favoured the most profitable routes and ultimately this has led to greater profit driven commercialisation of the industry and has provided shareholders with dividends amounting to £1.49 billion. As 80% of revenue comes from the Public Sector in subsidies the ethics of this need to be questioned.

In London, where services are regulated, journeys have doubled compared with a 40% reduction in Greater Manchester over the same period. In Scotland local authorities have the option to bring buses under their control and deliver a service that is socially rather than profit driven.

Congestion is the primary factor in travel in urban areas and solutions need to be found. In London 64% of journeys are made by public transport compared with only 13% in Greater Manchester. Growth in the economy of areas outside London will only be achieved by finding solutions to traffic congestion and regulated bus services offer a major contribution.

Regulation compels bus companies to run stated services whereas Partnerships do not. Therefore, Regulation offers better value for money to the taxpayer and recent survey has shown that 76% of passengers support public sector control. This will result in affordable fares, Passengers over Profit and user-friendly SMART ticketing.

4. The Partnership Option

Gary Nolan, Chief Executive, OneBus

Gary emphasised that the mission of OneBus is to Improve Bus Services in Greater Manchester. However, the bus industry in the North West needs more funding and support.

The term “subsidy” is a myth, the more apt description being a “payment for passenger carriage”. It is illegal to have agreed standard fares amongst operators. Profit levels of bus companies quoted at £1.95 billion is fake news. In reality bus operators are only achieving a 5.51% profit year on year and this is under threat of reduction. It is also unrealistic to compare Greater Manchester with London, where fares are the most expensive in the world. London buses also receive a subsidy of £1.8 million per day and can operate to a Network.

In Greater Manchester passenger numbers are in decline but 65% of that decline is due to the arrival and continued expansion of Metrolink. Also it was clear that decline had set in before de-regulation as between 1980 and 1985 there had been a reduction from 417 million journeys to 350 million. In 2017 the figure had further reduced to 201 million, but the rate of decline had eased.

The 2017 Bus Services Act provides Mayoral Combined Authorities powers to implement bus franchising. Its process in harmony with bus companies is to set objectives, seek preferred options and implement them. Franchising is a last resort. The Bus Operators prefer Partnerships with agreed commitments, but local authorities must pro-actively address congestion. Operators are prepared to offer:

- Multi Operator and multi travel mode products with a simplified product range.
- Retention of discounts on Single Operator products.
- Guaranteed Evening and Sunday services.
- Next stop AV announcements.
- TravelSafe Partnerships.

The current status of negotiations state that after a full assessment of issues, implementation of the agreed way forward will commence in 2024. It is the view of Operators that Franchising addresses political goals rather than passenger needs and puts taxpayers at risk. It is also felt that the share of public money is imbalanced with only £1 million going to buses whilst Metrolink received £72 million and cycling facilities received £0.5 million. Equally it is surprising that, currently, the report contains no reference to Congestion Relief, Clean Vehicles or Flat Fares.

5. The Transport Authority

Cllr Roger Jones, Vice Chair, Greater Manchester Transport Committee

Cllr Jones welcomed the debate as this is a critical time for the industry and local transport authorities. He felt that bus operators have been in a position of dominance since 1986 but the system needs reform as it is currently not fit for purpose. Since 2009 there had been a reduction of 17% - 38 million journeys.

Bus Operators in the Greater Manchester region receive a subsidy of £27 million per year supporting 20% of the network. A 3-month consultation is now out and this will inform the decisions of TfGM. The authority is doing everything “by the book” with independent auditing. The current options are Do nothing, create a Partnership deal or invoke Local Authority control through Franchising. Responses from all parties are sought and encouraged. If franchising is preferred it will be implemented over a phased period.

He said that the greatest challenge to bus services is traffic congestion but this had not been resolved anywhere in the country. He cited the Leigh Guided busway as a major contribution to the issue as this now carries 50,000 passengers per week operating 18 buses per hour.

6. Buses and Equality

Mark Stone, Solicitor, Equality & Human Rights Commission (E&HRC)

The E&HRC is a Statutory body charged with enforcing the Equality Act 2020. Its role includes:

- Starting Inquiries and recommending Change.
- Investigating Breaches.
- Providing Advice & Guidance, both Statutory & non-Statutory.
- Undertaking Research.
- Liaison with Regulation Inspectors and Ombudsman's office.

The Commission is currently engaged in a legal support project for Transport and a well attended lunchtime fringe event took place. .

7. Questions for the Panel

The morning's speakers formed a Panel session during which several topics were discussed. These included

- Monopolies,
- Demise of printed timetables.
- Park & Ride and real time information.
- Harmful effects of road tyre and brake dust,
- Future of TfGM bus subsidy.
- Future transport provision in the light of new spatial development.
- Standardisation of audible announcements on buses.
- Early morning & late evening buses.

8. The London Model

Tony Francis, Secretary, The Omnibus Society

The Omnibus Society was formed 90 years ago. It has an extensive library of information of bus, coach and tram operations and systems over the years.

London has always had a dominant transport operation. Originating in the 1930's it was designed to be an independent commercial operator. In 2000, Transport for London was formed as an integrated system for all London's transport including buses, Underground, taxis, DLR, River services, trams, walking and cycling. It has responsibility for street design, emissions control, congestion charges and property rentals and creates significant revenue from these operations. 80% of journeys in Greater London are provided by TfL systems. The Bus network is substantial and is styled on a single operator although a variety of supply companies actually operate vehicles.

In finding the best solution for future management of transport it is essential to establish the final aspiration before deciding on the mechanisms to achieve it. Good teamwork is

vital with all stakeholders working in harmony. It also must recognise that commuter patterns are constantly changing with remote working and flexible hours on the increase, together with more work commitments outside the traditional day.

9. The Needs of Disabled People

Kay Fairhurst and others, Salford Disability Forum

Kay said that disabled people are only disabled by the environment in which they live. Many avoid using public transport due to perceived barriers.

Bus drivers are key personnel, being the face of the company to passengers. Good and robust training is vital so many bus companies are placing comprehensive training and refresher courses high on their company agendas. As disabilities vary it is necessary to be aware and able to accommodate the passenger's needs and whilst disabilities are not always apparent, such as in dementia sufferers, comprehensive recognition of the range is required.

Intervention techniques when conflict arises is also important, such as arguments between wheelchair users and those with pushchairs or shopping trolleys etc. This is a frequent issue and whilst intervention training is provided satisfactory results can be limited as there is no legal requirement for priorities, other than to request an area be vacated. Changes in the law may be forthcoming to amend regulation and provide better empowerment for drivers and operators.

At bus stops and bus stations it can be challenging for blind and partially sighted passengers. Consider the difficulty in hailing a bus so independent audits have been undertaken for RNIB and have received a positive reception.

The Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People is advising the transport authority on bus design to cater for disabled passengers addressing barriers to inclusion for disabled and able-bodied users. There remains a need for clarity about how to make a complaint with on-board information highly desirable.

10. What does the Passenger want

Claire Walters, Chief Executive, Bus Users UK

Jim Davies, Lancaster Bus Users Group

Claire Walters began by stating that buses are a lifeline to many. Their availability reduces inequality, social exclusion and loneliness and improve health and well-being. Buses contribute £64 million into local economies but in 2017/18, £20 million (45%) of subsidies were withdrawn. The alternative of private transport is often unaffordable and results in "transport poverty" with many communities cut off from bus services and being limited to less travel. It is a false economy. Local Government has failed to address changing social needs and use by young people is also eroding.

Those who rely on buses are the people who really matter. However, a simple "one size fits all" system, such as the London model is not suitable for every area. The only solution is a tailored service to fit local requirements. Reliable and punctual services, affordable fares clean and safe environments and comprehensive accessibility are what

passengers want. Better research is also required with greater dialogue with users and potential users. Local meetings, on street events, addressing local groups and panels and effective use of social media would provide greater outreach for the message. Added to this would be a need to engage with local authorities, community transport groups, planners, care professionals, estate agents and schools. This can create a pathway to a final solution which should be published and adopt feedback.

Change is needed to the legal framework as buses are currently subject to 380 pieces of legislation and this is a disincentive for potential new operators. The Transport Act requires major reform and local authorities should be given a “duty” to organise bus services rather than just a “power” and local partnership working should be a requirement.

Jim Davies stated that a simplified system was needed and one network that is easy to understand is desirable. Passengers do not care who runs buses as long as they are punctual, frequent, comfortable, affordable and provide a comprehensive set of routes serving communities on and off main thoroughfares. Evening and weekend services should also be strengthened. Drivers require better training and bus stops should be more welcoming and accommodating with shelter and seating. A more simplified set of fares usable on any bus is also an asset.

Local Bus User Groups should be encouraged to hold dialogue and engagement with service providers and they, in turn, need to have personnel who understand the market, have a guiding mind and a good oversight of service levels and fare structures.

A simple set of marketing and communication plans should be worked up featuring:

- One system of route numbers.
- Common timetable format.
- Network maps in common format.
- One system of fares and tickets.
- Operators working together under one unifying brand.

A stable set of principles to manage change, a limited number of timetable change dates mirroring those of the railways, effective and penetrating advance publicity and defined dates of timetable periods will also be important.

11. Questions for the Panel

These ranged around the overriding importance of drivers and training and various elements of disability, visible or otherwise and relations with the environment.

12. Date of Next Conference

Thursday 6th February 2020, Lancaster.

Attendance

Name	Organisation
John	Aaron

Norman	Adams	
Mike	Ashton	Lancaster Bus Users Group
Terri	Balon	Royal National Institute of Blind People
Colin	Barnett	
Roger	Barton	Goyt Valley Rail Users Association
Chris	Bates	TravelWatch South Central
Robin	Bence	
Kayley	Bowes	Stagecoach Manchester
Rick	Burkiss	Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People
David	Burton	SE Lancashire Rail Action Partnership
David	Butterworth	TravelWatch NorthWest
Mike	Cain	
Roy	Chapman	TravelWatch NorthWest
Stephen	Clarke	Lancaster / Kendal & District Bus Users
Judie	Collins	Greater Manchester Older Peoples Network
Ian	Conway	Lakes Line Rail Users Group
Jon	Croxford	Go North West Limited
Steve	Cullen	Blackpool Transport Services Ltd
David	Culshaw	TravelWatch NorthWest
Chris	Dale	TravelWatch NorthWest
Jim	Davies	Lancaster Bus Users Group
Sandra	Dutson	
David	Evans	Blackpool & Fylde Rail Users Association
Kay	Fairhurst	Salford Disability Forum
Helen	Farmer	Equality and Human Rights Commission
Tony	Fawthrop	Greater Manchester Transport Campaign
Tony	Francis	The Omnibus Society
Jim	Froggatt	TravelWatch East Midlands
Tom	Gibson	Stagecoach Manchester
Alan	Goater	Chinley and Buxworth Transport Group
Lizzie	Guinness	Equality and Human Rights Commission
James	Harkins	All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group
John	Hart	TravelWatch NorthWest
Mark	Hodgkiss	Cumbria County Council
Roger	Jones	Greater Manchester Transport Committee.
Louisa	Kane	Equality and Human Rights Commission
Josh	Kay	Salford Disability Forum
Colin	Kennington	TravelWatch NorthWest

Fred	Kennington	
Geoff	Kerr	
Matt	Kitchin	Stagecoach Manchester
Dave	Koring	Severn-Dee Travel Ltd
Peter	Lamkin	Wrexham- Bidston Rail Users Association
Mike	Laycock	Wirral Transport Users Association
Zachary	McAskill	Stagecoach Manchester
Robert	McCarthy	Stagecoach Manchester
Roy	McDonald	Agito Transport Planning
Alan	Mayor	Friends of the Settle Carlisle Line
Margaret	Mitchell	
Matthew	Moll	The TAS partnership
John	Moorhouse	TravelWatch NorthWest
John	Nicholas	Bus Users UK
Gary	Nolan	OneBus
John	Owen	TravelWatch NorthWest
Gillian	Pearson	Friends of Littleborough station
Phil	Pearson	
Julian	Peddle	D&G and High Peak Buses
Malcolm	Richardson	Blackpool & Fylde Rail Users Association
Pascale	Robinson	Better Buses for Greater Manchester
Stuart	Roughley	Stagecoach Manchester
John	Ryan	Wirral Transport Users Association
Michael	Sanderson	Stagecoach Cumbria & North Lancs
Andy	Saunders	Manchester Airport
Kay	Sharkey	Equality and Human Rights Commission
Maurice	Shaw	Equality and Human Rights Commission
David	Sidebottom	Transport Focus
David	Simper	Blackpool Council
Stephen	Slater	
Maisie	Smith	Better Buses for Greater Manchester
Phil	Smith	
Vernon	Smith	Blackpool & Fylde Rail Users Association
Mark	Stone	Equality and Human Rights Commission
Ian	Stuart	Friends of Altrincham Interchange
Ken	Swallow	Chartered Institute of Logistics & Transport (NW)
Robert	Talbot	TravelWatch NorthWest
Elisabeth	Tasker	Stagecoach Manchester
Claire	Walters	Bus Users UK
Miriam	Walton	Chinley and Buxworth Transport Group
Gillian	Woodford	Stagecoach Manchester
Craig	Wright	SE Manchester Community Rail Partnership
Tim	Young	TravelWatch NorthWest
Tony	Young	TravelWatch NorthWest

