

# 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

19<sup>th</sup> September 2018

Dear Committee Members,

## **Health of the Bus Market**

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.

2. Firstly we have a concern with the title of the inquiry. Buses should not just be regarded as a market which is purely financial and related only to profit and loss. They fulfil a vital role in towns and cities and especially in rural areas as an essential influence on the local economy. 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.

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. Observations of loadings indicate that bus operations are operating on the margins of commerciality and so must be regarded as vulnerable. Cuts in local authority budgets have only accelerated an already dire situation. Even in major cities it can be impossible to get to hospitals, entertainment or restaurants in evenings because services do not run into the mid to late evenings. The decline is having a serious impact on the rural economy and this is spreading to suburban and even some urban areas.

### ***The effectiveness and ambition of the Department for Transport's policies on buses***

4. The few changes made by DfT since bus deregulation have had little impact on the provision of services and have not done anything to stem the overall trend in decline, except of course in London where bus patronage has until recently been increasing. There are various initiatives by transport authorities to use recent changes in legislation to regulate services in their areas or enter into closer partnerships with operators.

5. 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. We have recently responded to consultation from the DfT on this area. Accurate real time information at bus stops and next stop information on buses will be a boon for passengers but has to be paid for!

***Factors affecting bus use, including reliability, congestion and the ways bus companies are dealing with congestion, and the effectiveness of bus priority measures (for example bus lanes and priority signalling)***

6. Traffic congestion is probably the biggest threat to buses especially in urban areas because it has led to ever-increasing costs as more buses are added to the schedule for no extra revenue. Congestion is undoubtedly a major disincentive to use buses and therefore a significant major factor in the downward trend of patronage. However, the resulting unreliability is difficult for operators to address. It is only highway authorities who can implement bus priority measures and many are lukewarm or positively opposed to any measures which might be construed as impinging on the flow of cars, as illustrated recently in Liverpool. Only by providing buses with a congestion free alignment, as is accepted practice for tramway schemes (which have shown consistent increases in passengers), will the effects of congestion be eliminated for bus operators. The enforcement of parking, loading and waiting restrictions, essential to ensure traffic, including buses, flows freely, is often not enforced by LTAs /police.

7. Data from a 2016 report by Professor David Begg shows that, in Greater Manchester, reduction in bus punctuality has led to longer journey times (up to 100% longer in the evening peak). The same data shows that average journey speed has fallen from 11.2 mph in 1996 to 9.7 mph in February 2016. This suggests that, if traffic returned to pre-1996 levels, the current network could be operated with 15% fewer buses.

8. The Begg report estimates that every 10% decrease in operating speeds leads to an 8% increase in operating costs. Slower services are less attractive to customers and there is a direct correlation between operating speeds and patronage. A 10% decrease in speeds reduces patronage by at least 10%. Only proactive use of traffic management powers by local authorities can help to limit this effect, and this must include bus lanes, parking restrictions and traffic signal priority. However it appears that local politicians often fight shy of upsetting the "motor voter".

9. A not insignificant aspect is the impact on congestion of the government decision to allow parent preference on school places meaning more travel by car and for longer and less by a dedicated school bus network

10. In addition, road works cause significant delays and disruption to bus services. In many cases Local Authorities appear not to consider the impact on bus users. For example, a recent road closure in Lancashire did not produce any information about diversion of bus services either from the LTA

or the Operator. An approach to the Council engendered a very unhelpful response basically saying bus services were nothing to do with them and to approach the operator (Stagecoach). Bus users had no idea what was happening to the bus service and didn't know where to go to board a bus, leading to loss of confidence in the service. This lack of information and indeed clarity of rerouting in road closure circumstances is not uncommon. A further example of long-term roadworks near Lancaster has led to temporary traffic arrangements being put into place which include the removal of some bus priority measures. To overcome the traffic delays caused and subsequent removal of bus priority measures, bus companies have been forced to deploy more buses and drivers, with no compensation from the Local Authority.

11. Whereas most buses are fully accessible, many bus stops do not meet the required standards. 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.

12. Sunday and Bank Holiday services have declined whereas the demand for leisure travel grows. It is a frustrating paradox that exactly when one might expect increased leisure and general use of some bus services – on public holidays – operators and local authorities withdraw them. How are workers in furniture stores and the like supposed to get to work for Bank Holiday sales which are promoted on TV adverts over Christmas?

***The provision of services to isolated communities in rural and urban areas, and the reliance of particular communities and groups of people on bus services***

13. The decline in rural communities is reaching crisis point in many parts of the country with the closure of post offices, banks, village shops, pubs and bus services. Some parts are becoming 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. The tourist industry is suffering, especially in national parks, because of the reducing accessibility by public transport and the resulting serious congestion caused by too many cars attempting to use narrow country lanes. Some attempts are being made such as Dalesbus in North Yorkshire but funding is precarious and difficult to obtain and sustain.

14. 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 being achieved by Councils. There will be increased cost to the public purse through unemployment benefit, housing benefit, increased healthcare costs (buses keep people healthy) etc. The proposals

are almost certain to have most impact on rural communities, where residents lose essential links to the rest of society, resulting in social isolation. The cuts also adversely affect businesses as people travel into towns by bus to spend money in shops, restaurants, pubs, etc. The tourist industry is damaged as tourists may be unable to get around without a car. These cross-sector benefits need to be included somehow in the buses "balance sheet".

15. 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. As far as Community Transport is concerned we aspire to its integration into the network of commercial and supported services. We feel it to be essential that such 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 attractions; walking etc - are an important rural economic benefit. 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.

***The viability and sustainability of bus services, including the effectiveness of funding, fare structures and public grants***

16. Funding is the key issue in finding a solution. Cuts to local authority budgets have had a serious impact on bus services, particularly in rural and semi-rural areas where purely commercial services are impossible to sustain. Another factor is very high fare levels which have tended to price off most passengers who do not have concessionary fares, resulting in very high proportions of passengers travelling on free passes. Introducing at least a nominal fare of 50p or £1 would go a little way to ease the situation and would probably be acceptable to many concessionary pass holders but may not be politically achievable. The reduction of reimbursement for concession travel is a major factor in the loss of commercial services with replacement services not being provided by Local Transport Authorities.

17. Lack of integration between bus services and with rail services is another 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. For example, while there are exemptions which allow for multi-modal tickets, and such tickets are available in both Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire, they have to co-exist with operator-specific tickets which are heavily promoted and invariably undercut the cost of the all-operator ticket.

18. It is very difficult to find out about bus fares before travelling. 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. 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.

19. The situation today is little improved in our region though some companies e.g Stagecoach, Blackpool Transport, High Peak and Warrington Buses do have fares information on their websites. One positive step is the move towards new technologies (e.g. smart cards and contactless payment) which will help to alleviate slow boarding times caused by passengers finding correct change.

***Regulations affecting bus service provision and the quality of guidance to operators and local authorities***

20 In many areas outside London the decline in bus patronage goes back many years beyond in fact bus deregulation in 1986. Only in London where bus services are regulated has there been a fairly consistent increase over these years though we believe that it is now falling there.

21. As there is no legal obligation to provide local bus services, Local Transport Authorities may support them but, as spending cuts have deepened, support has fallen drastically and for one authority at least – Cumbria CC – there has been a complete cessation of all support. We strongly believe that the provision of a socially necessary network should be an essential rather than a discretionary duty.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond

Yours sincerely,

*John A Moorhouse*

John Moorhouse, Company Secretary