
Nexus Consultation on the Quality Contract Scheme proposal for Tyne & Wear

Bus Users UK's response

1. The main concern for Bus Users UK when considering any partnership proposal or assessing its implementation is the benefit to passengers.
2. In general terms, Bus Users UK has noted significant improvements for passengers as a result of voluntary partnership agreements between local authorities and bus operators in many parts of the country. As no local authority has set up a Quality Contract since the provision became available thirteen years ago, the effectiveness of this kind of scheme in addressing the concerns of bus users is, as yet, an unknown quantity.
3. Bus Users UK has substantial experience of talking to bus passengers about their needs, interests, concerns and requirements of bus service provision and our findings are backed up by Passenger Focus' research into passenger attitudes to the regulatory framework. These make it clear that bus passengers want:
 - A unified, integrated transport network for their region.
 - A simple, easy to understand fares and ticketing system
 - A single, comprehensive, easily accessible information system
 - A stable network, with protection for remote or marginal services
 - Transparent and common sense links between the operation of bus services and the provision of infrastructure for them
 - Local passenger consultation on service provision, plans and proposed changes
 - Fares to stay the same or rise at a reasonable rate and to be proportionate to the journey undertaken and to other available tickets
 - Their local authority to have greater control over the bus network
 - Effective bus priority measures, improving public transport access to town and city centres
4. When passenger needs are put at the heart of bus service provision, it is evident that a range of structures could successfully provide all these requirements.
5. Although this proposal addresses many of these issues, some of the detail that might be required for full consideration still needs development. We therefore reserve further comments until more detail may be available.
6. A zonal system for fares, which passengers want, has been proposed in several suggested schemes for the region. Caution should be exercised as there are often "winners and losers" with a blanket fare structure and early indications suggest that Gateshead passengers would be penalised disproportionately under the current proposals.
7. Passengers would also want to see time-based single tickets for bus journeys so that changes could be made within a single journey without cost penalty.
8. The welcome introduction of a young person's ticket is another element common to the QCS and NEBOA's Partnership proposals, although it would seem appropriate that child fares should be charged up to the age of 18 in line with the new requirement for young people to remain in education or training up to that age. Passengers would also like to see graduated increases on fares from the ages of 19-25 to encourage young people to continue to use public transport when car ownership becomes an option.

9. Proportionality between ticket prices needs to be present and, in this scheme, the relative cost of a day ticket seems disproportionately high for the 1-3 zone options compared with the single journey ticket.
10. It is not clear whether the proposed scheme would have a ring-fenced budget for the longer term. Bus passengers express concerns with regard to this proposal that funding for local bus services might be adversely affected if it is subject to local authority requirement to cut spending overall. Overwhelming evidence from local authorities is that transport has borne a larger and disproportionate cut in recent years whilst other services have been protected. With the continued threat to council's revenue support grants it would be helpful to understand whether discretionary spending on bus services is being protected for the life of the proposed QCS.
11. Passengers fear that investment could suffer as a result of budget changes or changes in political control or priorities, which would result in the lowering of service levels and/or standards. Recent events in Liverpool (with the complete suspension of bus priority lanes) have stoked these worries.
12. Passengers in Tyne & Wear have expressed a strong desire for a better evening bus frequency as the current service drops to an unacceptable level after 7pm. The current proposal does not appear to address this, which is disappointing.
13. Passengers in many parts of the country represent bus users on consultative panels and have concerns where there is an over-reliance on political appointees at such meetings. This proposal does not expand on the membership of such panels and it would be reassuring if the make-up of such panels were to be clarified.
14. Some bus users have expressed concerns about managing the transition between deregulated services and the proposed system. Also, in the event that a QCS does not deliver the expected results, what plans are in place to in order to minimise disruption to passengers?
15. Bus Users UK believes that the nature and management of the network scheme to provide bus services is not, in itself, a critical issue for bus passengers. What concerns them is that a bus system is provided based on needs and is organised, developed and resourced appropriately to deliver a sustainable and reliable transport network.