The future of bus services in Scotland

Passenger journeys by bus in Scotland have dropped by 5% in the past five years

Surveys show that passenger satisfaction with bus services continues to increase

The average bus journey in Scotland is 9 kilometres (5.5 miles)

35% of bus journeys were made using concessionary cards

1.3 million people in Scotland have concessionary cards

409 million journeys were made by bus in Scotland in 2015/16

Scottish bus facts
Buses are an essential part of daily life in Scotland with more than a million journeys made every day, helping people to access work, education, vital healthcare services, shops and leisure activities. Good bus services are essential to the Scottish economy and keep the country moving with three-quarters of all public transport journeys made by bus. Increasingly, modern buses are reducing congestion and helping the environment, with growing investment in cleaner, diesel-electric hybrids and fully electric buses. A modern city double-decker can carry between 70 to 80 people, the equivalent of 50 to 60 private cars. But there’s always room for improvement and the new Scottish Transport Bill aims to ensure that Scotland’s bus services are fit-for-purpose for the future. The Bill includes the provision of better information for passengers, an opportunity for local authorities to run their own bus services, and the introduction of smart ticketing with the potential to make travel throughout Scotland easier and more convenient.

Bus services in Scotland are run by a number of different bus companies, from big international groups like First and Stagecoach, to larger, Scottish-based companies like McGill’s and West Coast Motors. Some are run by smaller, locally-based independents and in the case of one, Lothian Buses, they’re owned and run by local authorities in and around Edinburgh. Bus services take many forms, from infrequent services in deeply rural areas to regular services in Scotland’s towns and cities. Eight out of every ten bus journeys in Scotland are run commercially and where these services are profitable, the operator can invest in new buses and introduce new routes.

Inevitably, there are services where the fares paid by passengers simply don’t cover the operator’s costs, particularly in isolated and less populated areas, or for services run outside of peak times. In these cases, local authorities can provide financial support to ensure that essential services continue to operate. But local authority budgets have to cover a wide range of social services and funding isn’t always available.

Scottish Government provides support for bus passengers in a number of ways. To concessionary cards allow older people and people with disabilities to travel free, while bus companies are reimbursed for just over half the normal fare, and it provides grants to local bus services based on mileage.

In all, 55% of money for Scotland’s bus services comes from fare-paying passengers while the remainder is provided by local or central government. To ensure bus services can continue to meet the needs of the community, Scottish Government is now consulting with bus passengers, disability groups, local authorities, bus companies and all other interested parties on the new Scottish Transport Bill.

Among the proposals in the Bill is the right of local authorities to franchise bus services. This would involve a tendering process where bus companies are invited to bid to operate services. Bus services in Scotland were deregulated in 1986, with the aim of allowing bus operators to compete with each other on the same or similar routes. In practice, there are now relatively few places where head-to-head competition still exists.

Under the current system, bus companies tender for contracts issued by local authorities to run socially-necessary services. In the case of franchising, however, bus companies could be bidding to run anything from a single route to a complete network of routes, as specified by the local transport authority.

Another proposal under the Bill is that local authorities could run their own bus services. But with Lothian Buses currently the only local authority-owned service, it’s unlikely that other authorities would have the resources to set up a town or city network. Local authorities are more likely to submit bids to run their own buses to compete with existing operators in order to keep costs down or where no competitive tenders have been received.

A further proposal under the Scottish Transport Bill would require operators to share information on routes, timetables, punctuality and fares. This is expected to be a benefit to passengers in Scotland, helping them to make informed decisions about transport, for example by allowing free access to web developers to produce apps for users.

Scottish Government is running a number of consultations on issues affecting bus users, so make sure you have your say.

For the Scotland Transport Bill visit https://consult.scotland.gov.uk/transport-scotland/improving-bus-services Closes 5 December 2017


For Smart Ticketing visit https://consult.scotland.gov.uk/transport-scotland/smart-ticketing-in-scotland Closes 5 December 2017