

28 February 2019

Birmingham Bus Survey

Birmingham Friends of the Earth (BFOE) welcomes Birmingham City Council's initiative in setting up the Bus User Survey and in being given an opportunity to comment. We are an environmental campaigning and educational organisation based in Birmingham, engaged with advancing the principles of environmental sustainability and positive environmental change with an emphasis on issues which affect Birmingham.

Introduction

Improved bus services will be crucial for creating a substantial modal shift away from the car. This is urgently needed to cut harmful air pollution, enable the effective functioning of Birmingham's proposed Clean Air Zone (CAZ) and to help the city achieve its wider air quality objectives. It is also essential for enabling the city to achieve its target of cutting carbon dioxide emissions from 1990 levels to 60% by 2027. Such deep cuts are essential to help us avoid the worst excesses of a climate crisis.

However it is noted that bus ridership in Birmingham, in common with most other English cities outside London has been in decline for many years. It is important that this trend is reversed.

Our consultation has been based on comments and suggestions from one of our meetings and feedback gathered from other members.

Executive summary

Bus user experiences

- **Frequency** - this is highly variable depending on routes. It is also poor after 6pm and on Sundays.
- **Reliability** - service cancellations occur outside the peaks when there is no traffic congestion - for no apparent reason. No warning is given of cancelled bus services on real time displays or mobile apps.

- **Route and timetable changes** - recent large scale revisions of networks and route renumberings (e.g. the recent South Birmingham Network Review undertaken by National Express West Midlands) have left passengers very confused - even regular users.
- **Information** - real time information is sometimes unreliable either on bus stop displays or on mobile phone apps.
- **Tickets** are expensive and have been rising well above inflation. There is a confusing range of tickets, especially multimodal tickets and multi-operator tickets. There is poor integration across modes and operators, especially for contactless payment.
- **Quality** - this can be very variable across routes; some buses are clean and comfortable while others are internally dirty. Sharp braking and acceleration can deter passengers from travelling.
- **Safety** – many people are deterred from using the bus in the evening owing to anti social behaviour and crime.
- **Redress and compensation** – it is often unclear how to report a problem e.g. cancelled buses, how to complain and which organisation to contact.

Solutions to problems and suggested improvements

- **Re-regulation:** we believe this is essential if we are to improve the current state of bus services in the West Midlands. The WMCA should take up its new powers to re-regulate bus services by having a franchised system similar to the long-established system in London.
- **Information:** real time information should give an indication of when a bus will be cancelled and should also indicate if arrivals at a bus stop are real time or scheduled timetable times.
- **Reliability:** more bus priority measures and bus lanes are required to improve reliability and journey times.
- **Tickets and fares:** re-regulation will be necessary for better value bus fares, better integration across different modes and an easier to understand system of tickets. Ultimately, consideration could be given to extending free travel to a wider section of the population. Free travel on local buses for all is already possible in a number of cities across the world, for example in Tallinn and Dunkerque.
- **Additional local funding mechanisms:** a work place parking levy or other similar local taxes should be investigated to improve services, provide better value fares and to provide free travel for a wider section of the population.

- **Redress and compensation:** an independent watchdog for bus users in the West Midlands should be set up and operate in a similar manner to London Travelwatch. Some form of compensation should be available to bus passengers in a similar manner to that enjoyed by rail passengers.

User Experiences

1 Frequency

Frequency varies considerably from one route to another and also deteriorates after 6pm and on Sundays and Bank Holidays. Journeys requiring two or more buses are considerably lengthened by waiting times for connecting buses. This is not an issue in places such as London where frequency and reliability are better and journeys involving more than one bus are generally not too difficult.

2 Reliability

Poor reliability of services and slow journeys is often the result of traffic congestion and can be addressed by bus lanes and bus priority measures. However it should be noted that many users experience late and cancelled buses outside the peak periods when there is no traffic congestion e.g. even after 8pm. Why? The bus passenger, unlike the rail passenger, is left without any explanation or advance warning of a bus service cancellation or diversion. Generally, the real time information either at the bus stop or on a mobile phone app will show a bus arrival which suddenly disappears with no warning or explanation.

3 Information

Scores of long established routes have recently been chopped and changed and renumbered. Some routes have been renumbered even when they have not been changed. This has caused confusion with regular passengers, let alone infrequent users.

There were mixed views on the 'NX' mobile app. Some thought the recently updated app was worse than the previous version. Real time bus info is displayed on Google maps which some of us thought was better than the NX App. Obviously the app only works for National Express West Midlands buses; other operator's buses are not covered and may not have a system of their own.

On some occasions it is not clear whether the information on a mobile phone app or bus stop display screen is real-time or has defaulted to the timetabled times. If the screen is showing the timetabled times and not real-time information, it should say so.

Information about different ticket types is regarded as poor and can be confusing. It is often not clear which is the best ticket to buy for a given journey, which may include rail or Metro legs. Combined tickets are poorly advertised.

Publicity and marketing should reach out to non-bus users as well as bus users. Often it doesn't.

4 Redress and compensation

If you have had a problem or a bad experience with a bus journey it is not clear how you report it and to which organisation. Also, cancelled buses do not trigger compensation payments whereas rail passengers can claim compensation for delayed train journeys.

5 Tickets and Fares

Fares are expensive and have been rising well above the inflation rate. There is poor integration between different bus companies and rail and metro. This is particularly the case with contactless payment. There is much better integration in London where Oyster Card offers seamless and contactless payment across all modes. Unfortunately, in the West Midlands, there is no equivalent of the Oyster Card which is valid for all operators and modes.

The relative cost to car travel should be compared and bus travel should be cheaper.

Revenue protection on buses is often heavy-handed and poorly executed by NXWM revenue protection inspectors. Buses are stopped while the inspectors check tickets which can significantly delay a bus.

6 Quality

Vehicle quality is very variable depending on the route. Some vehicles are very good, usually on the main routes, but in many other cases are internally dirty with lots of litter. Sharp acceleration and braking is also a common complaint and is unsafe for infirm and elderly people.

7 Air Pollution

The clean air benefits of buses and their more efficient use of road space need to be highlighted given the problems of air pollution and traffic congestion caused by the city's over dependence on the car. However more effort is required in reducing the contribution of air pollution from buses themselves by introducing zero emission buses. A few cities in the UK already have a fleet of battery electric buses such as London and Nottingham, but none are in operation in the West Midlands. This is unfortunate given the serious air pollution issues in Birmingham.

8 Safety

Many people avoid using bus services in the evening owing to antisocial behaviour and crime (e.g. fare dodging, smoking on board and even missiles being thrown at buses). CCTV on buses does not always deter some crime and anti social behaviour.

Potential Solutions

1 Governance

Currently over 90% of bus services in Birmingham are operated by one company (NXWM) which is effectively a private monopoly. As such, on commercially viable non-tendered services, it is able to

change timetables, chop and change scores of long-established routes with minimal warning and set its own fares. Routes and fares are generally determined to maximize profitability and therefore put the interests of shareholders first rather than those of passengers. It does not need to take into consideration input from local authorities or passengers. Following the recent South Birmingham Network Review in which scores of services were changed, even regular passengers were left confused, let alone occasional users.

Currently, local authorities and TfWM have little control over non-tendered commercial services in terms of specifying routes, timetables and ticketing for the good of the traveling public.

The current system is not working in the interests of the passengers and needs to be fixed. We therefore believe re-regulation is an essential starting point in improving bus services and making them better value for money. Revenues should be reinvested in the bus services rather than allowed to leak out of the system to pay shareholder dividends.

As a starting point we believe West Midlands Combined Authority should use the powers it has been given under the 2017 Buses Bill to take overall control of the bus system across West Midlands and introduce a system of franchising. This would be in a similar manner to the long-established franchising system in London where TfL are able to set the fares, specify routes, ticketing arrangements and vehicles. Such a system allows better value fares, enables the specification of zero emission vehicles where necessary and produces a properly planned route network better tailored to suit the needs of passengers.

It is noteworthy that since bus deregulation in the mid 1980s bus journeys in large cities outside London have fallen by half while in London where bus services were never fully deregulated, bus journeys have actually doubled¹. Furthermore while in London all classes of people commonly use the bus, elsewhere in England the bus is seen as a mode of last resort reserved only for the elderly, children and less well-off people without a car. This perception needs to change.

2 Reliability and journey times

To improve reliability and give shorter journey times, we advocate the creation of more bus lanes by the reallocation of road space away from cars and not by widening roads. More bus priority measures such as bus gates, intelligent traffic signals and priority at junctions need also to be considered.

3 Fares and ticketing

Fares have risen above the rate of inflation for many years and are now too expensive and ticketing is far too fragmented. Integration across different bus operators, rail and tram services is poor with multi-operator and intermodal tickets being poorly advertised, offer poor value for money and are difficult to understand. Re-regulation of bus services will be necessary to improve integration across modes and different operators and produce lower fares and an easier to understand system of tickets.

Ultimately we believe that consideration should be given to providing free travel on buses to a wider section of the population, such as the under 30s. Although this may seem too radical an idea at the moment, bus travel which is free at the point of use benefits society and the economy and should be considered in a similar manner to public libraries and health services. A number of cities across the world already have free bus travel such as Tallinn in Estonia and Dunkerque in France. In Tallinn the loss of fares revenue has been more than off-set by an increase in tax income as businesses and people moved into the city¹. Re-regulation of buses would be necessary to allow any extension of free travel beyond those groups who are already offered this benefit.

4 Air pollution

Currently, many bus companies are reluctant to invest in zero-emission buses despite pressure from local authorities. This reluctance is largely down to the higher initial cost of a zero-emission bus compared to its diesel-engined equivalent. However fleets of zero emission buses are already running in Nottingham and London where greater local authority control of buses has made this possible. We believe that re-regulation would facilitate the wider introduction of zero-emission buses in the West Midlands.

5 Redress and compensation

Some form of redress for cancelled bus services and other problems should be available in a similar manner to that enjoyed by rail passengers. A body similar to London Travelwatch should be set up as an independent watchdog for bus users in the West Midlands and should be funded by the West Midlands Combined Authority.

6 Safety

An additional human presence on buses such as inspectors or bus marshalls may deter that proportion of crime and antisocial behaviour which is not already deterred by CCTV.

7 Additional local funding mechanisms

Additional funding mechanisms will be needed to adequately fund an improved bus network. There are a number of different mechanisms which could be used to fund improved public transport which we think should be investigated as follows:

- a work place parking levy
- an employer levy (as used in France)
- property tax or property transaction levy
- land development levy

As an example, a work place parking levy has been successfully used in Nottingham to fund improved bus services and the tram network. Similarly councils in Scotland will soon be allowed to set a workplace parking levy.

We note that revenue from Birmingham's proposed CAZ will be used to improve public transport, cycling and walking provision. However, we believe that an additional funding mechanism should be in

place before the CAZ is operational.

Reference:

1. Taylor I, Sloman, L. (2016) Building a World Class Bus System for Britain Transport for Quality of Life <http://www.transportforqualityoflife.com/policyresearch/publictransport/>

Yours faithfully

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Birmingham Friends of the Earth