TRANSPORT SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY

NATIONAL BUS STRATEGY

ONE YEAR ON

Submission from the
National Pensioners Convention

March 2022

31 March 2022

Dear Transport Select Committee

NPC evidence for the Transport Select Committee Inquiry - National Bus Strategy - One Year On

Introduction

The National Pensioners' Convention (NPC) is Britain's biggest independent organisation of older people, representing around one thousand local, regional, and national pensioner groups with a total of 1.1 million members. The NPC is run by and for pensioners and campaigns for improvements to the income, health and welfare of both today's and tomorrow's pensioners and this response is based on the views and experiences of our members.

We wish to submit views to the Transport Select Committee Inquiry - National Bus Strategy - One Year On. Our response has been compiled by our Transport Group and will concentrate on the experiences and concerns of our members who are, by definition, in the older age range.

Consultation Methodology

The NPC hold deep concerns about the way in which the consultation has been conducted. The only way to find out about the consultation is via online methods. This will exclude millions of people from potentially giving their views on this important subject matter. The digital first approach must not be a digital only approach.

The NPC is campaigning for 'Connections For All', meaning that those who want go online and use the internet, computers and modern technology, should be given the access, help and training to do so to help digitally include them. However, we firmly believe that traditional forms of communication and services such as face to face, over the telephone and via post must remain in place. This is so as not to digitally exclude those who cannot use more modern technologies, those who do not wish to use them, and those who are priced out by equipment, broadband and upkeep costs, from our society.

It may be suggested that people who do not have access to the internet should use local libraries, which are likely to have computer facilities, or get help from a friend or relative, however this completely misses the point. Many people do not feel comfortable asking for others to respond on their behalf and not everyone has a family or someone they can trust to help them with technology – even if they wanted to. People who are not online have a right to be able to find out about government consultations and a right to respond. Traditional methods of publicising consultations and allowing people to respond by offline means, must be maintained.

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Transport Group Response

TOPICS

These are the topic headings set out in the consultation document with thoughts under the various headings.

a (i). CHALLENGES FACING THE SECTOR AS IT RECOVERS FROM THE PANDEMIC

There are many challenges for the bus sector as it considers its role following the pandemic. The first of these is the change in working practices with office-based staff continuing to demonstrate a preference for more flexible working with less time spent in the office, the continuing reduction in retail outlets in urban centres and the reluctance by many people to return to the real life world of stuffy overcrowded and frankly unpleasant bus journeys. This has been partly driven by the Government's pronouncements labeling public transport, however unfairly, as exposing users to Covid dangers. Even now as the Government continues to try to reassure people that current Covid strains are less dangerous there are still examples of people being taken seriously ill. People's confidence has been shaken and will take a long time to recover.

a (ii). EFFECTIVENESS OF STEPS TAKEN BY BOTH GOVERNMENT AND STAKEHOLDERS IN RESPONSE

Bus Back Better was conceived in late 2020 or early 2021 and is for the most part a wish list of improvements the Government wants to see in the future provision of bus services. Many of those ambitions will be shared and supported by bus users. However, as a strategy it has significant failings. Perhaps the most obvious is that it relies on individual Transport Authorities to deal with their own area which is a throwback to earlier concepts that failed to recognize the need for integration across Authority boundaries. In a corollary with rail, it deals with the local services and ignores intercity. That approach will never be effective. Neither will a strategy that ignores the on-street environment and on board difficulties as discussed below.

There is a commitment in Bus Back Better to ensure that buses have adequate wheelchair and mobility scooter space, but problems can arise should there be insufficient space to meet demand, especially where services are infrequent. Drivers must therefore be given authority by the bus operator to deal with such issues on the basis of clear guidance and this must be accepted by the public. In theory in an extreme case, it could result in someone having to leave or miss a vital bus service.

On a similar topic it is understood that the legislation governing wheelchair spaces on buses applies equally to foldable mobility scooters. Consequently, there should be Government action to ensure that Bus Companies can no longer refuse to carry these machines. The problem remains and is not being tackled.

Bus Back Better says little about bus stop infrastructure, but improvement is vital if bus travel is to be encouraged. Why would anyone want to stand in the pouring rain with no shelter or information for a bus that may be full, if they have an alternative? The whole journey needs to be considered, not just the vehicles. Bus stops must

cater for all types of users, so raised kerbs for mobility impaired people should be installed wherever possible, without compromising the ability of mobility impaired people to walk along the footway. However, there is no point in installing raised kerbs if bus drivers are unable to position their vehicles correctly, so any bus stop design must necessarily address this issue.

Toilets are a significant concern for older people Transport Interchanges and Bus Stations must include toilet facilities, including accessible toilets. Many older people are dissuaded from making journeys because there are no convenient toilet facilities.

For older people bus shelters are a welcome provision but do need to include adequate seating, a good degree of weather protection and good timetable information. They also need to be cleaned and maintained regularly. Far too often bus shelters appear to be ignored in maintenance regimes. Equally for older people there can be a concern about personal safety when using buses especially when it is dark. Good lighting (both on the highway and in any shelter), readable timetables and running time information are important elements in giving confidence. A well-maintained bus stop environment is also important. Litter, graffiti, and vandalism do not inspire confidence.

Failures in these areas are widespread and will compromise the effectiveness of improvements in the vehicles themselves.

b. PROGRESS AGAINST THE AMBITIONS AND TARGETS SET OUT IN THE NATIONAL BUS STRATEGY

The bus improvement plans promoted by Government have in many cases had little input from users, in part because of the short time allowed for them to be drawn up, and it has to be said the reluctance of many Authorities to involve the general public in the process.

We submit that the strategy such as it is outlined in Bus Back Better is already outdated and needs to be rethought. It is notable that of the four areas identified by Government as not having received the benefits gained by metropolitan area three South Northumberland, Lancashire and County Durham are constrained by one or more metropolitan areas whilst the fourth (East Midlands) contains three major non metropolitan cities each with their own agenda.

Therefore, it is clear that in order to be successful the bus network needs to be organized on a regional basis for other than local journeys. The other major inhibitor to progress is the potential takeover of Stagecoach. The original approach by National Express at least had some merit in the lack of much overlap in their activities and the possibility of an overall improvement, whereas the current front runner, a takeover by a foreign company, would seem to have little to recommend it from a passenger and operational aspect.

The main (almost the only) targets in Bus Back Better were the compulsion for Transport Authorities to commence the franchising or enhanced partnership Methods if future funding was to be enabled but, to reiterate, that in itself will not form a basis for success in the future.

c. INNOVATION IN THE SECTOR

Innovation is patchy and very dependent on Transport Authority resources, but it is important to get the basics right in the first place. Currently there is a focus on electronic ticketing systems and interchangeability of tickets. However, ticketing and information systems must be useable by all – not just by those who are IT savvy. Many, especially older, people find reassurance in information given by staff at bus stations, for example, and ticket offices at such locations should not be closed in favour of smart phone messages. Paper timetables are invaluable for many people and their provision must continue. Not everyone can afford the cost of broadband and the associated equipment.

d. BUS FUNDING OVER THE SHORT AND LONG TERM

From a pensioner's viewpoint major concern is fair funding for the English National Concessionary Travel scheme. There is no specific commitment Government to this. Critics often look on the Concessionary Travel Card (the bus pass) as a drain on the public purse. On the contrary several studies have shown that the contribution to society made by pensioners using their bus pass far exceeds the cost of its provision. Criteria used for assessing the net cost of subsidised services should therefore recognise that where pensioners are concerned a journey starting before 9.30 am on weekdays is not necessarily for leisure purposes.

Some older people use buses out of choice but for many others the bus is their only available means of local travel. It is thus very important that in rural areas bus services are available to major destinations such as Hospitals, local retail parks, railway stations and City /Town centres, and that bus stops feel safe and welcoming. Funding must address these issues.

The continuing reduction in finance available to support socially desirable bus services suggests that Local Transport Authorities and bus companies should work together with older peoples' organisations within their area to develop an integrated strategy linking locally important facilities and encompassing rural and semi-rural communities wherever possible. Such an approach would minimise social exclusion for older people by providing a greater opportunity to access major destinations either directly or indirectly.

e. DECARBONISATION OF THE SECTOR AND MODAL SHIFT FROM OTHER FORMS OF TRANSPORT

Public transport provision is inextricably linked to planning. It is no longer sufficient to rely on Section 106 agreements to provide and develop bus services to new industrial, housing and retail locations not currently served – or poorly served - by existing services. To argue, as developers do, that because a location has bus services nearby it is sustainable, is illogical because those services need to fit into an overall strategy. Decarbonisation is not just about moving to lower carbon forms of transport; it includes making those forms available for a significant time in new opportunities and that is not happening to any great extent at present.

Should you require any further information, please use the contact information supplied below.

Yours sincerely

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