

1. Introduction

We note the subject of the Motion being debated, and are similarly concerned at the need for public transport users to be provided with high quality bus services. However, we would note that the issues raised in the Motion may reflect broader trends within the industry. As the Scottish Ministers have indicated that they will address bus services part of the Transport Bill expected to be published later this year, it is these broader issues that this briefing addresses.

2. Key Points

We are in general agreement with the Scottish Ministers that local authorities should be given additional powers to specify bus services in their areas, although we consider the application of these new powers to be applicable only in accordance with the needs of individual situations.

However, we are seriously concerned that the Government's proposals represent a missed opportunity to address the factors underlying the long-term decline in bus use. The risk is of legislation which fails to tackle these factors, resulting in a preoccupation with re-organisation, while patronage and services continue to decline while these more fundamental problems remain unaddressed. We urge the Scottish Government to:

- Set out its aspirations for service levels, including network coverage, operating hours, frequencies, fares, environmental standards, cleanliness, personal security and customer care.
- Examine why patronage trends differ across Scotland, and what lessons which can learned from them.
- Set out the reasons for long-term decline, and remedies to address this (e.g. traffic management, bus priority measures, and enforcement of bus priority measures).

3. Wider issues facing the future of bus services

Rather than a preoccupation with organisational issues, we believe that future legislation must have a much stronger focus on addressing the following:

1. Congestion and its impact on journey times, reliability and costs.
2. The impact of parking.
3. The impact of lifestyle changes (e.g. online and out-of-town shopping) and potential future disruptive technologies (e.g. autonomous vehicles).
4. The relative low cost of car use.
5. Declining revenue from government, against a background of rising costs.
6. Declining revenue from passengers.

We urge the Scottish Government to consider how these issues can be addressed in forthcoming legislation – as the government's proposals have so far paid little attention to them.

4. Concerns regarding financial viability of bus services

1. The relative low cost of car use

Alongside congestion, we see this as the other principal threat to bus services. Steps should be taken within the forthcoming Transport Bill to legislate to allow Local Authorities to put in place Workplace Parking Levy schemes (such as successfully implemented in Nottingham in England).

2. Declining revenue from government, against a background of rising costs

Recent years have seen a flat, or in some years declining, overall budget for buses in the Scottish Budget. This has been in spite of substantial increases in the level of the overall transport budget.

The Scottish Government could instead decide to intervene more extensively in the price of bus travel. Given that buses are the mode of public transport disproportionately used by low income groups, there is a strong case for more intervention in order to keep the price of bus travel affordable for these groups.

We would note that the Scottish Government has intervened massively in the price of ferry travel (i.e. through the Road Equivalent Tariff) and has significantly grown ferry usage; and that it argues that intervening in the price of air travel (i.e. through a proposed cut to Air Passenger Duty) will significantly grow air travel (although Transform Scotland disagrees with the Government's approach on this matter). So if the Government can intervene massively to promote ferry or air travel, it seems to us that there is no reason why the same approach could not be taken to promote bus use.

3. Declining revenue from passengers

Steps also need to be taken to reverse the decline in passenger revenue. However, this will best be done if passengers' expectations and perceptions are met. Unfortunately, there are no widely-applied mechanisms to define a reasonable level of bus service, or whether it is being met. Therefore it is impossible to identify reasonable expectations, and it is difficult to compare services in different areas. The Government could indicate, for example:

- Desirable network coverage, operating hours, frequencies, fares;
- Fleet environmental standards;
- Cleanliness;
- Personal security;
- Customer care.

Such standards would not be set out in the Transport Bill, but in associated regulations or guidance; allowing flexibility to update them from time to time without fresh legislation. However, the Bill would establish that the Government should do so. When the time comes to setting the standards, they should avoid systems which lead to the manipulation of services to meet targets rather than actual need, and the creation of a bureaucracy to monitor them.

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We campaign for walking, cycling and public transport to be the easiest and most affordable options for everyone. Our diverse membership brings together public, private and third sector organisations from across Scotland. We are a registered Scottish charity (SC041516).