

Northumberland Rail Consultation

Response by CPT (Confederation of Passenger Transport) on behalf of the North East Bus Operators Association (NE Bus)

Introduction

North East Bus Operators Association (NE Bus) represents operators of bus services operating within the area of the North East Combined Authority (NECA) and North of Tyne Combined Authority. NE Bus represents the major bus groups namely Arriva, Go North East and Stagecoach North East and also represents a large number of smaller, independent operators.

The Confederation of Passenger Transport UK (CPT) is recognised by the Government as the UK trade body for bus and coach operators with in excess of 90% of bus fleet, and 55% of coach fleet within its membership numbering around a thousand business members. In the Northern region, CPT represents 50 operators ranging from SMEs to the larger group operators. CPT provides the Secretariat for NE Bus and has prepared this response.

Role of Buses in the Region

NE Bus would make the point from the outset that buses are part of the wider regional solution both in terms of capacity benefits and in working towards providing cleaner and newer vehicles. The Government's Air Quality plan also recognises this fact.

Bus commuters nationally generate £64bn worth of goods and services and are essential to the local economy. In the North East region bus operators have invested over £80m in new vehicles since 2015 to serve local people and the regional economy.

Buses provide the most flexible means of public transportation and require limited up front infrastructure capital compared to other modes. In comparison to the proposed scheme, bus links into Newcastle offer penetration to the centre of the retail and City core without the need for walking or further interchange.

Buses are the most efficient use of road space. Buses are also by far the largest provider of public transport journeys in the Region, so measures which provide greater priority and additionally help tackle congestion are essential and overdue, and they will enable bus operators to deliver even better journeys for passengers and make public transport a viable choice for more users.

Even with progression of the proposals, bus remains the only consistent public transport mode available to all localities. It is important that whilst the rail proposals will bring benefits to some, working with bus operators to support bus will significantly increase the benefits and reach of improved public transport.

The bus sector is committed to working with local authority partners on improving air quality and journey times in a way that is proportionate.

Prioritising road space for buses and coaches to ensure a fast and consistent journey time is essential to encourage people to make the switch to more sustainable and environmentally friendly forms of transport.

The local authorities appear to recognise the detrimental effect of car usage on air quality and congestion and will among the main area of focus of the proposals.

Furthermore, within South East Northumberland, car ownership is low, for people on low incomes public transport is their only source of travel. We do have major concerns that without further measures to prioritise or promote bus travel any mode shift from bus to rail will result in patronage reductions and bus service reductions across a far larger area, as a result the most socially deprived in the region will suffer the most.

Wider Measures to Support Buses

- Further bus priority measures – There are many other pinch points across the region that affect the dependability, and therefore viability and usability, of bus services.
- Market forces and the concept of pricing to drive behaviours must also be appreciated and its logic applied. For example the current lack of modern vehicle age limits and emission standards on taxi/private hire vehicles has led to the offering of very low headline fares which compete with and undermine the public transport network of Metro, rail and buses. It cannot be right that a single occupancy taxi is cheaper than using public transport. This just further compounds both congestion and air quality issues.
- The three major bus operators have committed to invest in new routes, extended routes or increased hours of operation on existing services where a time or cost saving has been made leading to a reduction in the number of buses required.
- A joined-up approach to roadside infrastructure and customer information – Local Authorities have a key role to play in the provision of road side passenger infrastructure in terms of waiting facilities, wayfinding and RTPI (Real Time Passenger Information) provision. All three of these are essential ingredients in the delivery of good quality local bus services and need a firm commitment to continuing to maintain and enhance these supporting arrangements, matching the investment from bus operators.

Specific Responses to the Proposals

- The project will provide six new stations at Ashington, Blyth Bebside, Bedlington, Newsham, Seaton Delaval and Northumberland Park with all but Northumberland Park seeing an increase in parking provision.
 - Whilst we fully recognise the benefits of park and ride, and understand the 'parkway' element of most of the stations, we see disadvantages to increasing car

parking at town centre stations namely in Ashington (166 more parking spaces than present). The car parks will act as a trip generator into town centres most likely at peak times increasing congestion which will affect bus services. This situation is not sustainable if we are serious about car constraint and measures to reduce congestion.

- The overall planning process should seek to prevent a wider deterioration in the Northumberland bus network as a result of the restoration of passenger trains and the greater level crossing delays, with counter-productive consequences. Any loss of passengers and resultant loss of bus service will hit hard on communities away from the rail network with no alternative options. If not managed and mitigated, the positive introduction of passenger services could result in unintended consequences including the wider deterioration of the local bus network.
 - Major bus priority measures, as have been proposed to the local authorities, need to be introduced. This will support buses both linking to the new passenger line as well as passengers making the choice to travel by bus.
- The video accompanying the consultation states that the new services ‘Will provide an attractive alternative to existing public transport and the private car.’ Whilst modal shift from car is important, partners in the scheme should not focus on initiatives encouraging significant modal shift between public transport modes without a balanced approach or support for other public transport modes.
- We acknowledge that there are options in the document on how to deliver the construction phase of the project; we would ask this is planned and considered with zero or minimal disruption to bus networks or passenger waiting environment and relevant operators are engaged where necessary.
- We acknowledge the stated intention to promote bus use as a means of interchange to the new rail service and the stated intention of ‘improving connections of existing public transport’ and also ‘engaging with local transport operators.’
 - The relationship with operators needs to be constructive and with bus operators as an equal partner.
 - Attractive ticketing options to promote interchange with bus need to be considered.
 - Financial support or kick start style funding should be made available to support new or diverted links to interchange with the new stations.
 - Passenger waiting facilities should be high quality with shelter, information provision and installation of real time displays.
 - Bus services providing interchange at railway stations need simple and quick access and egress to avoid inconveniencing through passengers using buses serving stations. This should include (if required) priority access over through traffic back onto main through roads.

- We note that at level crossings each time the barriers come down, they will remain down for 2 to 3 minutes. In addition, the level crossing at Front Street will stay down for longer to enable trains slowing down and stopping at the proposed Blyth Bebside Station.
 - Liaison with operators should include consideration of mitigation for delays caused by level crossings being used up-to 4 times per hour. Mitigation can include scheduled timing to avoid timetable clashes where possible, or bus priority provision elsewhere to mitigate any delays that cannot be avoided.

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