

Questions from the Elders Council of Newcastle to the strategic bus board, Newcastle City Council, June 2024

1: Can you guarantee the reliability of services which to passengers is more important than the speed of a journey.

A: The reliability figure for buses in Newcastle (whether or not a service operates) was 90.8% for the month up to 18 May and there is a wide range between operators, with Go North East at 94.1%, Stagecoach 92.3% and Arriva below 80%. A major factor in reliability is availability of bus drivers; there continues to be a high turnover of drivers and operators have stepped up recruitment and training to try to counter this. Arriva has a plan to improve its reliability through the summer with an enlarged training programme and by using agency drivers in the short term.

A second factor is to give buses greater priority on roads, so they are less likely to be held up in traffic and so fall badly behind timetable and so miss part of a route. There are two major programmes underway to improve bus priority in and around Newcastle, funded through the North East Combined Authority (NECA): Almost £90 million from the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan funding is being invested to create new bus priority on key roads across the region, while Newcastle City Council is alongside this leading the Intelligent Traffic Signals project which will identify buses as they approach junctions and make sure they are kept on time, as well as capturing real time data to transmit to signs and digital information providers.

2: Are you fully aware that smart phone communications are limited for many people, not just our elders? Digital inequality is across the age ranges.

A: Yes. We understand that people of all ages may not want or be able to use apps or smart phones. Nexus provides a bespoke printed timetable for every stop in Newcastle, and bus companies and Nexus provide timetable leaflets for most routes. The NECA has commissioned a new travel website for the region which will contain a full range of bus timetables and real time information without someone needing to use an app. In addition to this the work being carried out to replace the regional Real Time Passenger Information System will also be integrating the existing signage meaning that up to 500 stops across the region will have the most accurate data on next bus arrivals displayed for those without access to smartphones.

3: Our members tell us there is a need for real time electronic information at bus stops. This could prevent issues such as bus drivers speeding past some stops, leaving waiting passengers stranded and not knowing when the next service will be. Also occasionally drivers take diversions and miss out stops because of delays or incidents. Electronic information should advise when this is happening.

A: There are obvious benefits to real time displays at bus stops, but these are also costly to provide and maintain; right now there are 400 displays across the region concentrated on the busiest stops and station. It would be very hard to include diversion information on these small screens both because of space and the practicality of updating the message – this more detailed information is something which will mainly be found online, and we do want to make it simpler for people to find and use online information during their journey through the new website. These screens will have investment in the back-office software system to restore real time information. Investment in Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) will improve

the accuracy and quality of this information and the screens will be upgraded to ensure this real time data can be displayed.

4: Can/Will you ensure drivers on layovers stop engines from running unnecessarily, emitting fumes in the area?

A: Yes. New diesel buses have an automatic engine cut-out after three minutes, and bus companies are active in monitoring driver behaviour to make sure engines are turned off whenever they can be. Bus companies, with the support of the North East CA, are also investing in more electric buses to replace diesel on city routes.

5: Will you properly inspect bus shelters at busy stopping areas to ensure other traffic is not impacted or change times so that not all busses arrive at the same time?

A: Buses have priority over other vehicles ([Highway Code rule 223](#)) at all times, and particularly when stopping and pulling away from stops. Nexus works with the different bus companies to space departures from busy stops, though this depends on buses being on time. The Intelligent Traffic Signals project will help buses keep time better and make this planning more effective on the ground.

6: Will you regularly inspect on/off accessibility for passengers with mobility issues and/or aids. Ensure testing with actual users! Some drivers are very helpful, but not all!

A: Yes. Bus companies take accessibility very seriously, and if a customer has any problems they should contact the bus company, or Nexus, noting the time, date and location of the issue, and the vehicle serial number (normally displayed on the outside) so this can be investigated. The council has its role to play in making sure buses can pull in properly to bus stops

without parked cars getting in the way, and uses enforcement cameras to look for and investigate problems. Newcastle and Nexus have trialled a beacon system with RNIB that offers people with a visual impairment a stop and next bus announcement via their mobile phones. Once we have examined the trial in more detail following the rollout of the regional RTPI upgrade we will make recommendations to NECA.

7: EC members are reporting that many regular services have been removed which leave older people unable to now get out and about. Some were suggested for a trial period only but nothing has replaced the original services. Where services have been reduced this means more passengers (wheelchair users) are likely to be refused access because the bus is full and therefore our most vulnerable users are left behind!

A: Commercial bus companies did reduce some services in Newcastle in 2022 and 2023, after passenger numbers fell steeply during the pandemic leaving them operating at a loss, and in order to make sure services which ran remained reliable as drivers left the industry in large numbers. It is not true to say that nothing replaced these services, as Nexus has stepped in using funding from the Government's Bus Service Improvement Plan to either take over routes or provide alternatives in all cases: For example the new 653 route from Walkergate to Freeman Hospital replacing the previous 553, and new community transport was provided for Vale House in Jesmond. Nexus and Stagecoach have also worked together to provide some new links, for example evening and Sunday services in Red House Farm on the 35 route, and between Freeman Hospital and Forest Hall on the 38 route. If there are any routes or links which EC members feel have been cut and not replaced Nexus would like to understand where these are and look at what can be done.

8: How do you ensure changes to regular services are notified to users in a timely fashion and trial periods are regularly reported on?

A: Bus companies and Nexus put information about changes on their websites, normally a month in advance, but we accept this could be clearer. Nexus is going to make this more prominent on its existing website and build it into plans for the regional website. Bus timetables at stops are updated within one week either side of a change though it may not be clear what has changed. Bus companies also put posters on board vehicles.

There is only one bus service currently in a 'trial period' and that is the new 787 night bus between Newcastle City Centre and the Airport; any such trial will be reported back to the Bus Board.

9: Bus users feel they are not properly represented in local or central government or society as a whole despite having the largest user base. How do they/we make representation on a regular basis?

A: It is true that bus often feels like the poor relation in public transport compared to the time government and the media devote to car users and railways. Here in the North East the Bus Boards set up across the region are one way to redress this balance. The new North East Mayor, Kim McGuinness, has also said that looking at reform of the bus market is her top priority, and there is likely to be extensive consultation with bus users in the coming years as a result. In addition, we now have a Stakeholder Relationship Officer (Jamie Robson) within Nexus dedicated to engaging with the community specifically in relation to bus services. This is funded through the Bus Service Improvement Plan, along with a Community Bus Engagement

Lead within North East CA. There is also funding for minor interventions to improve passengers' journeys and they will be working with communities to identify these opportunities.

10: Monitoring buses effectively is a vital way of tackling environmental concerns as well as social exclusion. Is this question asked?

A: Yes. The emissions buses produce in Newcastle are a small fraction of the emissions produced by cars, but we want to reduce this much further. The age of the bus fleet in the North East and the emissions buses produce are being measured as part of the Enhanced Partnership agreed between the North East CA, local authorities and bus companies. We have agreed to reduce emissions – all new buses must be Euro VI engine quality or cleaner and we are using Government LUF and ZEBRA funding to introduce more electric buses in the region.

11: How do you ensure sufficient ongoing revenue and capital funding is available to maintain existing services and ensure improvements when the services are privately operated?

A: The current network of buses in and around Newcastle is supported by a combination of fares income, private investment and public subsidy, the largest portions of which are £35 million which Nexus pays to bus companies for the carriage of older and disabled customers in Tyne and Wear. This is a statutory obligation paid on a no-better, no-worse principle. Nexus also pays £18 million in Tyne and Wear for services operated under contract. Bus companies also get repayment from the Government for the national £2 bus fare and from the North East CA for £1 fares for those aged 21 and under, and for cheaper multi-modal fares, again on a no-

better, no-worse basis. Alongside this they continue to earn a large part of their income from commercial fares, and have generally struggled to break even in recent years. Both the Nexus contracts and subsidised fares are time limited – the £2 fare is only guaranteed by government until the end of 2024 while Bus Service Improvement Plan funding covering some contracts and other subsidised fares is currently due to end in March 2026. Without additional revenue funding beyond this date Nexus will need to review the services it contracts.

It is simplistic to say that private companies invest any more or less in public transport than would be the case in an alternative model: Most buses in Newcastle are less than five years old due to investment by bus companies, for example, while the region's local rail and Metro trains under public control are all between 30 and 45 years old.

12: Is there a Bus friendly Policy in Newcastle (and other local areas) and what involvement does the user have in contributing/agreeing to this?

A: Yes. Newcastle, along with the NECA, Nexus and the other local authorities in North East England is a member of the [Bus Enhanced Partnership](#) with commercial operators. The Partnership has been developed and refreshed through public consultation, notably the Big Bus Conversation events in 2021 and 2023 and the Moving Buses Forward events earlier this year. These events and surveys have generated thousands of comments to help inform how Bus Service Improvement Plan funds are spent.

Council officers in Newcastle meet weekly with bus operators to discuss operational issues over the course of that week and the following week. This is to ensure the running of the network is as smooth as possible with minimal disruption and that issues are dealt with very quickly.

13: Will the strategy include tackling crime and anti-social behaviour on buses and at stops/stations. Many older people are reluctant to use services at night or in the winter because of this.

A: Yes. Operators and local authorities take anti-social behaviour seriously. While it is a problem not limited to public transport we are active in combatting it: modern buses have extensive CCTV used to identify and investigate troublemakers, and Nexus has increased security presence across its bus stations and interchanges with the help of funding from Police and Crime Commissioner, as well as being part of specialist police operations deploying knife arches and high-visibility patrols. In Newcastle City Centre a new partnership between the police, retailers, the council and Nexus has improved reporting of trouble such as persistent begging so there can be a faster response.

14: Are there bus friendly planning policies which can be employed for housing, health, business and retail properties. Many new estates are built without the proper infrastructure in place. Street design does not always take into consideration the movement of larger vehicles.

Yes. Newcastle City Council's requirements around public transport requirements are set out in its Local Plan policies. Specifically, Policy DM11 of the Development and Allocations Plan states:

1. Major development will be required to promote and facilitate the use of public transport and demonstrate accessibility by public transport to the Urban Core and other key local facilities.
2. Callerton Parkway, Newcastle Great Park, Kingston Park and Regent Centre are designated on the Policies Map as park and ride facilities. The designated Callerton Parkway

site has potential to accommodate up to 600 park and ride parking spaces.

Supporting paragraphs to this policy states to ensure major developments are accessible by public transport they should be within 400 metres walking distance of a bus stop or 800 metres of a Metro station. Major developments must be served by existing or new bus services at a frequency commensurate with the scale, nature and location of the development proposed. The layouts of new major developments should be designed to facilitate the efficient operation of bus services and routes should be as direct as possible. These are all assessed at the Planning Application stage.

15: Improvement to driver training, using real passengers so new drivers better understand their issues.

A: Enhancing the customer experience is an increasingly key component in driver selection and driver training, both at induction and ongoing throughout the course of a bus driver's career. Within this there are specific modules recognising the differing aspirations and needs of customers, and this is led through a range of interactions, including videos, and role play. These enable scenarios to be better understood, considered, and discussed in a structured and educational environment. Then, as new recruits progress from the classroom to the platform, they are aligned with experienced driver mentors who accompany them in to the real world, aiding the transition, enabling classroom scenarios to be experienced, further developed, and ultimately resolved, in a live setting. The North East CA is funding additional training for drivers to help improve the customer experience. This will be rolled out as part of drivers' regular Certificate of Professional Competence training.

16: Joined up and quicker thinking with other services (not just buses) so if one service is withdrawn something else is in place.

A: Yes; this is something we've been working on as partners so, for example, when Metro has unplanned problems such as an overhead line failing customers can immediately switch to local buses. Similarly, if a bus company is affected by strike action then other companies, and Metro, will accept its season tickets.

17: What consideration is being given to older North East bus users being issued with a Concessionary pass from the age of 60, as they are in London?

We have heard that Greater Manchester has or is considering a similar scheme, is this correct?

A: The challenge with reducing the age at which people in the North East get free travel on buses is cost.

Right now local authorities spend more than £40 million a year on providing free bus travel for older people across Durham, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear because we have to reimburse private bus companies for every journey, on a no better-no worse basis. The Government funds local authorities in England directly for most but not all of the cost of free travel for people aged 66 and over, with the balance coming from local council tax.

The Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different funding models and schemes to that in England through which they provide free travel from age 60. Greater London and the Merseyside city-region provide free travel to local residents from age 60 which they fund themselves, but Greater Manchester has no plans to do so, as is the case with most English cities.

Nexus looked into the question of reducing the age limit to 60 in 2018; at that time it would have cost a further £20 million a year in Tyne and Wear alone from extra payments to bus companies, with that money needing to be found locally. This

is difficult to afford at a time of many competing priorities to improve the wellbeing of families and communities across our region.

The new North East Combined Authority is seeking to make concessionary travel arrangements across the region simpler and more flexible for those that have cards. It has begun a review aimed at putting in place one set of arrangements for the whole region, as well as discounts for cardholders when they need to travel before 9:30am.

Questions sent by:

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5th June 2024

Responses received via:

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3rd July 2024