

News Update - Do Voluntary Partnerships really deliver better bus services?

Welcome to the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Users Group "News Update" focusing on the Bus Quality Contracts debate

If you want to comment on any of the issues we raise – or are interested in becoming an active member of Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Users Group and want to campaign on behalf of passengers – please contact us at twptug@phonecoop.coop or by using the 'Contact Us' form on our website <http://www.twptug.org.uk>

We'll keep on commenting about the issues until the Integrated Transport Authority makes a decision to go forward with a Quality Contract. If they did decide to abandon the idea of a Quality Contract and try to negotiate a Voluntary Partnership we'll be watching them closely to ensure that any deal provides real benefits for passengers and isn't just a form of 'business as usual' for the operators.

Once the Integrated Transport Authority make a decision we'll turn our attention to looking at how the voice of passengers will be heard in the future.

Do Voluntary Partnerships really deliver better bus services?

We know that all Voluntary Partnership Schemes are different and need to be judged individually but it has been particularly interesting to hear comments from others who have experience of partnerships in action. Stagecoach, on their website, assert that " *the bus partnership approach taken in Sheffield has delivered a stable, coordinated bus network, lower fares for passengers and agreed bus fleet investment. This has led to a 14% increase in fare-paying passengers to date and has resulted in a greener fleet of buses operating in the city, improved punctuality and better value fares for customers.*"

We decided to ask our colleagues in Sheffield for their views in the Stagecoach claim. They tell us there have been some improvements but that:

- The 14% increase in **fare paying** passengers, quoted in the Stagecoach Website, is only true for one quarter of the monitoring information to date and that the overall growth for the first 9 months was, in fact, 7.5%
- No mention is made of a drop, over the 9 months, of 9.4% in English National Concessionary Travel Scheme journeys and 11.2% in child concessionary journeys.
- In fact overall passenger journeys has fallen slightly over the first 9 months of

the partnership

- Key to the increase in fare paying passenger numbers is the fact that fares have been reduced from their previous very high levels. High levels that were a consequence of the fact that the main operator, First South Yorkshire, raised fares significantly more than inflation over the years and had reached the point of diminishing returns.
- Much of the investment came from Central Government Grants

We've also seen a South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive press release telling us that Government funding via the Better Bus Area Schemes will be used, in part, to minimise fare increases in the future.

We ask if the bus operators are exaggerating the benefits of the Sheffield scheme? In any case it depends on public money being made available to sustain it. Will the same money be available in Tyne and Wear?

We've also seen a News Release from South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive. The headline reads "**OAPS AND FREEBEE BUSES TARGETED AS TRANSPORT CHIEFS LOOK TO IMPLEMENT BIG BUDGET CUTS**".

[\[http://www.sypte.co.uk/media.aspx?id=3788\]](http://www.sypte.co.uk/media.aspx?id=3788)

Why is this important for us in Tyne and Wear? Well we need to remember that the bus operators keep telling us that a Voluntary Partnership is the answer to all of our problems - and that the model they present to us is the Partnership in Sheffield. The system that is the answer to our problems, according to the bus operators, is cutting some of the services that are funded by subsidy, scaling back the OAP and Disabled persons travel scheme, cutting grants to Community Transport Services and considering scaling back concessionary travel on rail services. South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive say that they have "largely been able to protect the bus network and that child fares aren't being touched **this year** [our emphasis]". But the sting is in the tail with the news that further cuts in their budgets mean that nothing, under a Voluntary Partnership, is safe in the future. Just think how much better for bus passengers it could be with a Quality Contract that both limited bus company profits and ploughed the money back into preserving and developing services.