

# Focus on Bus Passengers and Services

## A RELBUS DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

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### **Introduction**

RELBUS campaigns for better rural bus services. RELBUS' main aim is to represent the passenger's voice. RELBUS, although a relatively young body, is well positioned to seek the views of East Lothian bus passengers through its network of members, local representatives and Community Councils, a web presence, and through local meetings. RELBUS aims to represent the passenger perspective at all opportunities to politicians, to government and to local government officials and to bus operators.

Bus operators, including those supported and run by East Lothian Council face many challenges. Public policies and strategies at Central, Scottish and Local Government levels are increasingly directed at stimulating patronage of public transport. East Lothian Council's Draft Local Transport Strategy echoes these policy directions, and the recent ELC mini conference on supported and community transport recognised the need for a more cohesive and directed approach.

Despite the significant subsidy that exists to support operators and passengers, bus users frequently feel their voice is not heard and that making public transport choices is neither easy nor any longer an affordable option. In rural areas in particular, there is great concern about the lack of bus services to local towns and amenities making it increasingly difficult to live in a village without owning a car. RELBUS therefore wants to see a new focus on passengers. RELBUS believes that to construct public transport services that are not only well used and well tailored to meet the needs of local people, but also well regarded requires adequate investment in wide passenger consultation.

The following is an assimilation of best practices and the types of measures that would make journeys easier and more pleasant. This would help passengers use public transport out of choice rather than just necessity in urban areas and provide a realistic option in rural areas. We set out what

RELBUS thinks companies and public authorities should be doing now and in the future.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Bus Services</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Rural Bus Services</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Background</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Bus Service Information</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Background .....	6
Now .....	7
In the future .....	8
<i>Bus stops</i> .....	8
<i>Information Hubs</i> .....	8
<i>Combined Timetable Information</i> .....	9
<i>Real Time Passenger Information</i> .....	9
<i>Public Transport Travel Guides</i> .....	9
<b>Bus Stops</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Now .....	10
In the future .....	11
<b>Fares and Tickets</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Now .....	11
Future .....	11
<i>Fair fares</i> .....	11
<i>Exact fares and no change</i> .....	12
<i>Payment by debit card/mobile phone and smart ticketing.</i> .....	12
<i>Day and season tickets</i> .....	13
<i>Joint ticketing</i> .....	13
<b>Timetabling</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Now .....	13
Future.....	14
<b>Complaints Procedures</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Consultation</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Buses and Accessibility</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Background .....	16
Now .....	16
Future.....	17
<b>Common Charter</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Now .....	18

## Bus Services

There are a number of issues which affect urban and rural passengers alike, such as availability of information, infrastructure such as bus shelters and buses, accessibility and fares. These are issues which, with willing from all, could be addressed fairly quickly and easily. The issue of most concern however, is the current level of bus service provision. Resolving issues relating to service provision is far more complicated due to the number of external factors, and is therefore a longer term aim. Associated with this is the lack of integration between bus services and bus and rail services and poor linkage of towns in East Lothian.

Current legislation means that commercial bus operators alone determine the main routes of the bus network, local authorities have no influence over these services, either routes or pricing, and can only seek to fill in gaps where supported services will not be in competition with commercial services. In East Lothian, this has resulted in patchy coverage with no strategic network of bus routes.

Many areas of England are now seeing co-operation between bus companies; In Sheffield, operators have common ticketing, timetables and routes, and in Oxford bus companies are working together with unified ticketing and co-ordinated timetables. RELBUS believes that a review of government legislation to encourage greater co-operation between public transport providers in Scotland is overdue.

The use of 'quality partnerships' between local authorities and bus companies to provide services and infrastructure is also becoming more widespread. Under a quality partnership, the local authority agrees to provide particular facilities at specific locations along the routes used by local bus services, and operators of local services who wish to use those facilities agree to provide services of a particular standard. For example, a local authority could invest in traffic management schemes that give buses priority and/or in better bus stations, shelters and other facilities for passengers, and in return, bus operators would invest in higher quality services, including new vehicles and/or routes and staff training. Often too there are concerted efforts to

improve passenger information, covering both timetables - how the buses ought to run - and information on how they actually are running.

### **In the future**

RELBUS would like to see more co-operation between bus companies and the introduction of quality partnerships in East Lothian. By working together to provide a reliable, more frequent and co-ordinated network of routes throughout East Lothian, bus patronage would increase. Links between commercial and non-commercial services and bus and train services must be established to create a fully integrated public transport system which connects rural areas to main bus and train interchange facilities and provides a network of routes connecting all main towns in East Lothian.

## **Rural Bus Services**

### **Background**

The current level of rural bus services gives a great deal of cause for concern. Existing Government legislation frustrates innovation and is not suited to rural areas. Commercial bus operators are free to pick which services they see fit to run, unsurprisingly choosing those that appear to be the most profitable. Councils can only attempt to fill in the gaps. Many villagers are feeling increasingly isolated; rural settlements are seeing their bus services reduced or withdrawn to a level which makes it impossible to live there without access to a car, yet housing development in rural areas continues, including social housing, without adequate bus provision.

### **Now**

RELBUS believes that the time has come to look at innovative ideas for rural bus services, including the following:-

- Community owned and run local minibuses services
- Volunteer drivers
- Demand responsive transport and bus stops
- Greater use of ELC green buses and school services
- Regular services connecting villages to local towns (hub and spoke)
- Connectivity between supported and commercial services

- Alternative ways to use ELC subsidies
- Co-operation between bus operators and ELC to provide a service which meets the needs of rural bus passengers
- Greater use of voluntary sector vehicles
- Re-introduction of the Post Bus or similar

RELBUS recognises that service issues such as these take a long time and a great deal of effort and co-operation to resolve. However, they have to be addressed to maintain the sustainability of rural living.

### **In the future**

There will be a network of reliable rural services based on the hub and spoke model linking villages to larger towns, amenities and longer distance public transport services. In addition, the hubs will be connected by a strategic network, possibly using large vehicle express services. The rural services will be tailored towards the communities they serve, using minibuses, school buses and volunteer drivers.

## **Bus Service Information**

### **Background**

Our research suggests that the lack of good information about bus transport choices is an important barrier to people using bus services as a travel option, rather than out of necessity. The problems are compounded on certain routes where multiple operators run services in competition. There is no ELC policy on the provision of harmonised information and therefore there is a glut of information, which users find on the one hand confusing and on the other inadequate.

The future holds considerable promise of improvement, as electronic forms of information take hold. However the diffusion of information via the internet and mobile applications is not as wide as it could be and the quality of the services does not compare with those available for rail users. Many bus users do not have access to the internet so paper timetables which are easy to use and obtain will be the primary source of information in the near future.

## Now

RELBUS believes that all bus operators should provide up to date and accurate information about their services as a minimum:-

- Clear and easy to read timetables
- Maps showing routes
- Schematic maps showing connections
- Fare information
- Information about special fare deals
- Accessibility of services to passengers with mobility requirements
- Information about changes to services, permanent or temporary

All timetables and timetable leaflets for all local services should be easily accessible through a range of outlets, situated close to where people are travelling from (e.g. a local shop in a small community that has reasonable opening hours). These outlets should display recognisable advertisements and be listed on the ELC website. Timetables should be clear and easy to understand and should also take into account the needs of partially sighted users.

Printed information should also carry an *Effective From* date, and all information about changes to services should be distributed to outlets well before the start date.

Important information such as the 'No Change' policies should also be displayed on relevant timetables, together with useful or indicative information about fares to major destinations.

It is not reasonable to expect passengers to have the correct fare if that information is not displayed prominently.

The above should be available from:-

- Bus stops
- Leaflet dispensers on buses
- Local outlets such as tourist information offices, council offices, job centres, doctors surgeries, libraries and High Street shops located near major bus stops or community based organisations
- Bus Operator's websites

- Telephone enquiry services provided by the Bus Operators, which should be open during bus operating hours (??). A common out of office hours enquiry service could be jointly funded by all bus operators
- Independent travel advice websites such as Traveline Scotland
- Secondary schools and further information establishments
- Mobile phone TXT services and Apps

## In the future

### *Bus stops*

Major stops display QR (Quick Response) coded information. This is a bar code which is readable by mobile phones, enabling the user to link quickly to the bus operator's website. It would be useful to explore best practices in this area.

Major and certain other well-used bus stops (e.g. in East Linton) should have combined standardised timetables in the East Lothian Council area livery.

### *Information Hubs*

There are no bus stations in East Lothian. Bus stations offer a variety of benefits: Protection from the elements; a safe and unthreatening shelter for passengers; visible staff on duty to deal with enquiries and problems. Clear and up-to-date information on bus services can be provided. Bus station facilities can include an enquiry/ticket office, open at sensible times and facilities such as toilets.

However, it is unlikely that bus stations will be introduced in East Lothian. As an alternative RELBUS believes that the idea of *Transport Information Hubs* should be developed for the major settlements in East Lothian. Hubs could display the up to date information covering all the principal public transport routes, including information about bus transfers, bring together public transport options, bus and train, and could include connections for those whose journey begins or ends on foot or by cycle. Hubs could provide shelter, extra security and illumination, cycle parking and potentially satisfy other functions too such as providing information about local facilities and tourist information.

Maps showing bus routes and estimates of travel time and bus frequency would also be required. These hubs should also provide useful information about connecting services to major destinations in adjoining areas not served by direct routes, including information about walking and cycling.



This assumes some co-ordination with bus and train operators, and walking and cycling groups, but which could be overseen by ELC or a partnership project board.

#### *Combined Timetable Information*

RELBUS would like to see greater emphasis on producing combined timetables, which list all services serving particular destinations. There is considerable demand by passengers to see all available options and collaboration and co-operation between Bus Operators could encourage greater bus use by providing services which complement each other and provide an attractive service as a whole.

We understand operators' reluctance to promote competing services, but we are aware that in other areas some operators already include competing services in their timetable books, (and according to Bus Users UK have done so for many years.) By showing the full range of travel opportunities available bus users are less likely to be dissuaded from using the bus if the return journey is available at a time that suits them.

#### *Real Time Passenger Information*

Real Time Passenger Information (RTPI) plans for East Lothian remain at an early stage. RELBUS understands that the costs of RTPI fixed infrastructure are considerable and supports efforts to site (less expensive) display screens in shop windows and coffee shops, e.g. near or at a major terminus or principal High Street bus stop or interchange point; and efforts to provide information by mobile telephony.

Real Time Information must be just that, rather than simply detailing scheduled departure times (though in the absence of other information this would be a good place to start.)

Displays are often provided in urban situations, where frequencies are high, but this information would be considerably more valuable on rural or interurban routes, where frequencies can be low and where passengers need reassurance a bus is actually coming.

#### *Public Transport Travel Guides*

RELBUS would like to encourage Bus and Train Operators, and ELC to fund the production of a 'Getting around East Lothian' public transport guide with

detailed insets for all major settlements. This could serve regular travelling public as well as tourism markets. Travel information from major settlements in East Lothian to specific destinations such as *hospitals, further education establishments* and *tourist destinations* would be held in one place. The information guide could be paid for through advertising.

This should include a full service list with frequencies, an index to places served, including major visitor attractions and places of interest, service interchange stops, operator details and a list of major timetable outlets.

Park and Ride and modal interchange points should also be highlighted. It is anticipated that this map would be updated and republished at least yearly.

## **Bus Stops**

The passengers journey starts at a bus stop and all too often the infrastructure is to be found wanting. If the timetables are present and up-to-date and also clearly displayed then often the condition of the shelter may be found wanting. Sometimes the infrastructure itself may be older, but some newer infrastructure has not withstood the vagaries of time so well. Poor hygiene is a problem for certain stops, with both the building, and pavements inside and out unappealing or foul smelling.

RELBUS supports Sustaining Dunbar's project to carry out a wider survey of the condition of bus stops around East Lothian.

## **Now**

The minimum standard should be:-

- A clean bus stop where passengers can wait without fear for personal safety
- Up to date bus timetables which can be easily read during operating hours
- Bus stop location plates and SMS identification number

ELC should police and enforce the obligation that operators' timetables and related information at bus stops is clear and up to date.

## In the future

RELBUS supports the work of Sustaining Dunbar on the 'adopt a bus stop' project, which has seen the ELC open up displays to additional useful travel information alongside community information.

Opening up community bus stops to displaying wider information about what is going on or is available in the community could encourage people and local groups to take greater pride in the infrastructure and help to police issues such as cleanliness and timetable quality. In the future we would like to see:-

- Combined timetables, with a uniform East Lothian livery
- Bus stops which enable bus services to be accessible to all. These should be well-designed and subject to strict parking regulations
- Clearer naming conventions and indications of direction of travel
- Adequate levels of lighting at stops to ensure that timetables can be read
- Restrictions on unnecessary idling, (apparently is enforceable in Edinburgh)
- Resident and bus user consultation & approval of new stop locations

## Fares and Tickets

### Now

Bus operators should provide summary fare information on their own timetables, all major stops, and on all their websites. As a minimum, this should state the cost of adult and single fares to major destinations.

Bus operators should also provide information about their special fare deals.

This information should be available on the bus operator's websites and provided in the form of printed material to all main timetable outlets and displayed at bus stops where practical.

### Future

#### *Fair fares*

RELBUS believes there a number of ingredients to Fair Fares. Fair Fares need to be competitive as well as affordable. Innovative fare payment methods and ticketing approaches are required. 'Rewards' for regular passengers are also desirable. There is potential to link with other bodies to offer discounts and

encourage sustainable travel e.g. a percentage off the fair price for members of a car club, or holders of a rail season ticket.

Fare levels will always be a source of controversy among passengers, and while BUS USERS UK recognises the importance of viable bus services, it continues to campaign for affordable fares to ensure that bus travel remains accessible to all sections of the community. This is particularly important for those to whom the bus is the only alternative to not travelling at all.

#### *Exact fares and no change*

Easier fare payment can speed up passenger flow. While exact fare and no change policies can make sense to many regular travellers and can have distinct operational and security benefits, they are perceived as unfair by infrequent travellers and more likely to discourage than encourage regular bus use.

RELBUS believes that exact fare schemes are acceptable when there is a flat fare or the value can be made up from a minimum number of coins, and the information is clearly displayed at all stops.

#### *Multiple ticket purchases*

RELBUS would like to see more operators promote multiple ticket purchases such as '10 tickets for the price of 8' where the tickets can be used over a period of time. This not only encourages bus use but removes the barrier of needing to look out cash before boarding the bus (especially in cases where the fare is a matter of mystery).

#### *Payment by debit card/mobile phone and smart ticketing.*

Why not? It would make life easier for passengers. The development of smartcard ticketing is simplifying payment and developments in various parts of the country are being closely watched, but the ability to purchase tickets at outlets before boarding – commonplace in Europe - is also highly desirable.

The Scottish Government's long term aim is "that all journeys on Scotland's bus, rail, ferry, subway and tram networks can be accessed using some form of smart ticketing or payment". All of Scotland's buses are equipped with smart card readers and it is envisaged that future ticket machines will be capable of reading debit cards.

### *Day and season tickets*

RELBUS would like to see the greater use of Day Tickets and Season Tickets, sold by the driver or at selected outlets, which allow unlimited travel. Books of prepaid tickets should be available for journeys to major destinations from local outlets such as those outlined in Section 2. Bus Service Information.

### *Joint ticketing*

Passengers don't always distinguish between operators and cannot always understand why a ticket bought from one operator, should not be accepted by another if it is serving the same route.

Operators are often reluctant to provide opportunities for joint ticketing with other bus operators or rail services.

Operators may cite uncertainty about the response of the competition authorities as the reason, but particularly where service frequencies are poor, in the evenings and on Sundays, such availability would be invaluable for passengers.

## **Timetabling**

### **Now**

RELBUS recognises that punctuality and reliability are sometimes out of the control of the bus operator.

Companies should aim to provide

- a punctual service
- a reliable service
- as far as practical information on known delays
- compensation for passengers who inconvenienced by lengthy delays

Punctuality is important on all bus routes, whether frequent urban services or occasional rural services. Bus companies can do little when buses are caught up in situations beyond their control, but could do more to keep passengers informed of the reasons for delays. For example Prentice Buses are to be commended for making use of Twitter to keep passengers informed of the progress of their buses during the severe weather last winter. The use of apps giving information about delays from bus operators should be extended.

Reliability can be affected by external factors, but chronic, predictable and regular unreliability are unacceptable and require speedy service improvements.

Compensation should be offered to passengers in the form of bus ticket vouchers or refunds in the event of delays caused by events within the bus company's control - vehicle breakdown or non-availability, staff absences or shortages.

### **Future**

One award winning company provides a free journey if passengers reach their stop destination more than 20 minutes late.

RELBUS would like to see wider empowerment of drivers to administer refunds on the spot when things go wrong.

### **Complaints Procedures**

After a bus journey, bus users with complaints or suggestions should feel confident that

- complaints will be dealt with promptly and efficiently
- suggestions for service improvements and changes will be considered and acknowledged
- there is an appeal procedure to which they can turn if they feel that their complaint has been handled inadequately by operators

Complaints procedures vary widely between bus companies and many bus users are cynical about the value of complaints processes.

RELBUS believes that representations from passengers can be a valuable source of customer feedback and, if handled in a positive way can help to ensure that problems are investigated properly and addressed.

Trends in complaints should be studied, to alert operators of problems and published regularly.

Companies should publicise Passenger View Scotland, which is set up to deal with appeals from passengers who are dissatisfied with the bus operators'

responses to their complaints about operational matters (for example - drivers' behaviour, reliability, information provision).

While there is no appeals machinery for commercial issues such as service patterns, frequencies and fares, RELBUS regards the formation of the Local Bus Forum as an important mechanism for registering these sorts of complaints.

## **Consultation**

It is therefore vital that we have a better process for consulting bus users. If the costs of consulting users are shared, there would be benefits to all the operators, not least by the market research it would provide, and to the Local Authority and fewer appeals to Passenger View Scotland.

There should be an additional non-statutory consultation at least every few years, with additional surveys when major changes are planned or ELC is preparing to tender supported services.

Suggestions from bus users should be encouraged. Better mechanisms for co-ordinating bus user feedback need to be put in place, using online surveys and feedback forms for complaints and compliments.

Suggestions for new services, re-timing and re-routing existing services, improvements to vehicles and the like should be both encouraged — perhaps by notices in buses — and discussed.

RELBUS has found that passengers get very upset about changes to services and the uncertainty that ensues. Lack of information and consultation with users seems to be the common factor.

There should also be more opportunities for passengers to discuss their concerns face-to-face with both bus company managers and local authority officers at Bus Users' Surgeries. Relbus supports the work of BUS USERS UK, which has pioneered work on bus surgeries and follow-up meetings.

RELBUS regards constructive dialogue between passengers and providers as the way forward.

## Buses and Accessibility

### Background

Bus services should be easily identifiable and their destinations and direction of travel obvious. We find that in East Lothian there are many different liveries and certain operators have multiple liveries. This is confusing.

Buses are not always clean nor comfortable and easy to board, though the practice of using coach style buses is hopefully a thing of the past.

However, accessibility will continue to be an issue, for even when a low floor bus is made available drivers who do not or cannot drive close enough to the kerb make it difficult for the less abled. We do not know whether there are many instances of built up / built out pavements to ease alighting for those with buggies, elderly or disabled.

RELBUS finds that general information about the accessibility of bus services to passengers with additional mobility requirements is wanting.

RELBUS has received complaints from members about the attitude of drivers, the public face of the bus operator. Customer care standards need to be maintained and seem to be a more pronounced issue with national operators.

### Now

Bus users want buses to be

- clean and fresh
- easy to identify
- easy to board
- easy to move about in
- properly heated and ventilated
- driven thoughtfully
- comfortable

And staff to be

- friendly and welcoming
- assist those with mobility problems
- provide useful and helpful information



Ease of identification is often a problem for users especially where there are a range of liveries. RELBUS would like to see a review of liveries and branding by the bus operators to create easily identifiable routes with local relevance. Possible opportunities for sponsorship and co-operation between local tourism and leisure destinations and bus operators should be identified.

Ease of boarding has improved greatly with the spread of low-floor buses, but the advantages are sometimes lost because illegally parked vehicles restrict access to bus stops, or where drivers make little or no effort to pull up.

Where it proves impossible to provide a service with the same type of bus throughout, journeys operated by low-floor buses should be clearly identified in the timetable and that type of bus should always be available for those journeys.

RELBUS welcomes the provision of proper luggage and buggy space, together with obvious and adequate handholds. Where wheelchair/ buggy space is provided, it should not make it difficult for other passengers to find their seat, especially those who are older or less mobile.

RELBUS would like to see operators making a serious commitment to providing space to carry bikes on their buses in the near future (either inside or outside); making it easier for people to complete their journey by bike is an important element of joining-up our public transport system.

Proper heating and ventilation would appear to be an automatic requirement, yet many complain about inadequately heated buses in the winter months or excessively hot and inadequately ventilated buses in the summer. Older buses mostly fall short of reasonable expectations. Operators should ensure that existing heating and ventilation systems are in full working order and well-maintained.

Personal safety is a matter of increasing concern for many passengers, and there is often a reluctance to travel later in the evening, or at the end of the school day, or on the upper decks of double-deck buses because of the threat of rowdy, anti-social and sometimes violent behaviour.

## **Future**

Quiet – green – smaller buses that are accessible to all.

So what would a quality public transport network look like? In the future there will be:

- A network of frequent local services with stops connected to the local cycle path network, which feed into rail and bus express networks joining major towns
- Prepaid and through ticketing available in local outlets / shops.
- East Lothian Councils own buses become 'Community Owned', helping to connect remote rural communities and joining up the many minibus and volunteer services used by local groups
- Fully integrated bus and rail services
- People consider bus travel as an attractive and viable option not as a last resort
- Buses are quieter, running on renewable energy

## **Common Charter**

### **Now**

RELBUS would like to see the bus operators, local authority, community councils and passengers groups all sign up to a Common Charter with agreed aims and timescales. The Charter would be reviewed bi-annually.