A New Route?
Views on Local Bus Services in Scotland
The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) was set up by government in 1975. Our purpose is to promote the interests of consumers in Scotland, with particular regard to those people who experience disadvantage in society. While producers of goods and services are usually well-organised and articulate when protecting their own interests, individual consumers very often are not. The people whose interests we represent are consumers of all kinds: they may be patients, tenants, parents, solicitors’ clients, public transport users, or simply shoppers in a supermarket.

Consumers benefit from efficient and effective services in the public and private sectors. Service-providers benefit from discriminating consumers. A balanced partnership between the two is essential and the SCC seeks to develop this partnership by:

- carrying out research into consumer issues and concerns;
- informing key policy and decision-makers about consumer concerns and issues;
- influencing key policy and decision-making processes;
- informing and raising awareness among consumers.

The SCC is part of the National Consumer Council (NCC) and is sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry. The SCC’s Chairman and Council members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in consultation with the Secretary of State for Scotland. Future appointments will be in consultation with the First Minister. Martyn Evans, the SCC’s Director, leads the staff team.

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The Scottish Consumer Council supports the move toward an integrated transport system both in terms of social inclusion and sustainable development. We were therefore interested in exploring the views of Scottish consumers with regard to their local bus service. Which groups are more likely to use their local bus service? How can the use of local bus services be encouraged? How well are consumers served by the complaints procedures for local bus services? The research included both the views of respondents who reported using their local bus service and those who did not.

This research shows that there are clear differences in the perception of local bus services in Scotland between bus users and non-bus users. Furthermore, it shows that regardless of whether an individual uses their local bus service, the private car remains the preferred mode of transport for Scottish consumers.

While the majority of bus users reported that they were satisfied with their local bus service, the SCC believes that work has to be done to improve the perceptions of both non-users and the significant minority of bus users that reported dissatisfaction with their local bus service. The SCC makes a number of recommendations: the promotion of the high levels of satisfaction reported by bus users, the implementation of factors which were listed as important in encouraging bus use (such as cheaper fares, more frequent service, greater accessibility), and making explicit the true costs of private car use. However, the SCC believes that these measures will only go so far in promoting bus use, and will need to be augmented by the introduction of policies which highlight the environmental costs of private car use.

The research showed that respondents were in favour of a statutory complaints body which could decide on any disputes involving local bus services. The SCC supports the Scottish Executive’s plans for the Bus Users Complaints Tribunal (BUCT) and would like to see strong consumer representation within this new body.
The research on which this report is based was carried out for the Scottish Consumer Council as part of a larger survey by System Three.

Additional research data was also provided by the Welsh Consumer Council.

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The aim of recent government transport policy is to work towards sustainable, integrated and socially inclusive transport. This has focused on two themes: the need to change travel behaviour away from the private car and onto public transport in an attempt to tackle traffic congestion, pollution and concerns about climate change; and the need for specific action to promote more equitable access to facilities. The local bus is cited as the realistic means of delivering both objectives. The Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 gave additional powers to local authorities in Scotland to regulate local buses and to allow them to introduce road pricing measures and changes to bus regulation in their efforts to change travel behaviour.

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) was interested in exploring the views of consumers in Scotland about local bus services to determine whether their needs are being met in this changing policy climate. Research was commissioned to examine the views of consumers about their local bus service, including both the views of those who use local buses, and those who do not.

The research showed that the majority of users were generally satisfied with the reliability, journey time, clarity of timetables, comfort of journeys, and safety on a bus at night. However, for bus users, there was a significant minority who indicated that they were not satisfied with these factors, and therefore the service they were receiving.

Conversely, for those who reported not using buses, the perceptions of their local bus service were consistently lower for these factors, than for actual bus users.

The research found that certain groups in society were more likely to use their local bus service than others. In particular it was found that those on lower incomes, women, the young and old, and those living in urban areas were most likely to use local buses.
These specific groups also indicated higher levels of satisfaction in general with their local bus service compared to the groups less likely to use their local bus service. The groups less likely to use the local bus services were men, respondents in the middle age range, rural respondents and those in higher socio-economic groups.

The research found that both bus users and non-users indicated a preference to travel by car rather than by bus. It would appear therefore that for many, buses are used out of necessity rather than by choice.

Factors which would encourage respondents to use the local bus service were explored. It was found that price was cited most frequently, however other factors were important to different groups, for example, higher socio-economic groups cited reliability of service more frequently.

The study then examined views on whether the service had improved over the preceding 12 months and found the majority of bus users indicated that their had been no change.

The research also found that an aspect of the service, which appeared to be lacking consumer input, was complaints procedures. Although the research found a low incidence of complaints, there did appear to be problems regarding customer satisfaction with the handling of complaints and also some confusion about who to take complaints to. The evidence gathered from the report echoes the SCC belief that a statutory central complaints body for bus users would be the best solution to this problem. The Scottish Executive has put out a consultation paper on the establishment of a Bus User Complaints Tribunal (BUCT) which is expected to come into force in the early part of 2002.

The Scottish Executive needs to balance the objective of encouraging shifts away from car use with the separate objective of encouraging social inclusion through the provision of more
equitable access to facilities. This report makes the following recommendation in relation to the following:

- that improvements in consumer perceptions of local bus services are necessary to attract more bus users;
- that actual local bus services themselves have to improve both to encourage greater bus use and to promote social inclusion;
- that market prices will have to reflect the true costs of public and private transport;
- the need for the establishment of a statutory centralised complaints body in Scotland;
- areas for future research.
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Table 1  Principles of an effective complaints system
1.1 Introduction

Due to concerns regarding traffic congestion, pollution and climate change recent transport policy has focused on the need to change travel behaviour away from the private car and onto public transport. The Scottish Executive's aim is to achieve a sustainable, integrated and socially inclusive transport system. Through the *Transport (Scotland) Act 2001* it has strengthened powers for local authorities to regulate local buses and introduce road pricing measures.

The Scottish Executive has also introduced initiatives such as the *Learn to Let Go* campaign which aims to promote use of public transport over private cars. While bus use increased by four per cent during 1999-2000, private car use rose by three per cent in the same period\(^1\). In a recent press release the Scottish Transport Minister stated that “With the volume of traffic on the UK’s roads predicted to rise by fifty three per cent over the next 30 years we are acting now to improve public transport and promote better choices…Investment in modern, comfortable and fast public transport is crucial to make public transport an easy choice and not a last resort”\(^2\).

There is also a social inclusion aspect to the Scottish Executive's promotion of public transport over private car use. Various types of exclusion can exist in relation to transport. These broadly fall under the categories of economic exclusion, inaccessibility of services, and unavailability of services. While public transport may be more socially inclusive than the use of private cars, these issues of exclusion are still relevant to some consumers.

The Scottish Executive has introduced initiatives to tackle transport related social exclusion. For example, the Rural Transport Fund provides grants to communities in remote areas to establish public transport services, where previously there had been little or no provision.
As the local bus is cited as the realistic alternative to the private car, the SCC was therefore interested to see if local bus services were seen as a viable travel option for the people of Scotland.

The research examined consumer perceptions of local bus services in Scotland. This included both the views of bus users and respondents who indicated that they never use their local bus service. The research focused on the following aspects of the service: reliability, journey time, clarity of timetables, comfort of journey, and feelings of safety travelling on a bus at night.

The research also examined perceptions of bus use relative to the private car. Respondents were asked whether they would prefer to travel by car than by bus. Respondents were then asked to choose two factors, from a list of fifteen, which they felt were the most important in encouraging the use of local bus services.

The research went onto examine bus users' opinions as to whether they felt there had been any change in their local bus service over the past twelve months. The majority of bus users indicated that there had been no change in service.

Finally, the research examined complaints procedures for local bus services. The Scottish Executive has published a consultation document on the establishment of a Bus User Complaints Tribunal.

1.2 Method

The SCC commissioned System Three to undertake research on bus use in Scotland. The findings are outlined in this report. Over the period
22-28 March 2001 a sample group of 1,044 adults aged 16 and over were interviewed in-home at 41 locations around Scotland. To ensure that the sample was representative of the adult population of Scotland in terms of age, gender and socio-economic mix, it was weighted to match population estimates from the National Readership Survey of April 1998-March 1999. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

Last year a similar piece of research on local bus services in Wales was carried out by the Welsh Consumer Council. Several of the questions in this report were also asked in the Welsh study and comparisons were made where appropriate.
Chapter 2  Perceptions of local bus services

The SCC was interested in finding out consumers' perceptions of their local bus service. In particular we wanted to see if perceptions differed between respondents who were bus users and those who claimed not to use their local bus. This section of the report examines various factors which could affect consumer perception of local bus services including whether: the local bus service is generally reliable; journey times are fast enough; timetables are easy to understand; the ride is comfortable; and whether respondents felt safe on a bus at night.

2.1 Service reliability

The results indicate that the percentage of bus users who felt that their bus service was reliable (79%) is much higher than that of non-users (46%). See Figure 1. Although the majority of bus users felt that the service was generally reliable, almost a fifth (18%) did not. A reliable bus service is important for users especially those who have to arrive at their destination at a certain time. Such users could include people travelling to work or passengers who have to make a connection time for another bus or other modes of transport. A similar study carried out by the Welsh Consumer Council (2000) linked unreliability to poor expectations of buses and noted that:

Interestingly the exploratory survey carried out on Rhonda buses (1997) found that passengers often perceived that buses were running late even if they were running to timetable. It seems that the perception of buses being unreliable is so ingrained that only a consistently efficient service is likely to overcome these expectations.
If bus users themselves often have negative preconceptions about buses then it is unsurprising that non-users will also have unfavourable preconceived ideas about the local bus. Therefore, it is important to improve on the reliability of buses, but also on the perception of reliability among both users and non-users of the service.

2.2 Journey times

Rather than focussing on whether the bus runs to schedule, this question is concerned with how long the scheduled journey actually takes. The percentage of bus users giving a positive response to this question is much higher than the percentage for non-users. See Figure 2.

Eighty three percent of bus users felt that the journey times for their service were generally fast enough compared with only 35% of non-users. Almost half the non-users polled (49%) did not express an opinion as to whether journey times were fast enough.

2.3 Clarity of timetables

An important aspect of providing good customer service to bus users is that timetables are clear and easy to understand. This may either be in leaflet form or displayed at bus stops. The SCC wanted to find out whether respondents found timetables for their local bus service easy to understand. See Figure 3.

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**Figure 2**
Journey times are fast enough

- **Bus Users**: 83%
- **Non-users**: 35%

**Figure 3**
Timetables are easy to understand

- **Bus Users**: 72%
- **Non-users**: 47%
Seventy two percent of bus users indicated that they found bus timetables easy to understand. However, as with other areas of bus service that we have looked at, there is a large minority of users who identified having problems with timetables. Nineteen percent of bus users did not believe that the timetables for their local service were easy to understand.

Among non-users there appeared to be more of a problem. The results indicate that 38% of non-users felt that the timetables for their local service were easily understandable. However, 15% answered no, and 47% report that they didn’t know.

Timetables that are not easy to understand may act as a barrier to potential users, and especially to people using the service for the first time.

2.4 On bus comfort

Another factor examined in the survey was consumers’ perception of comfort on buses. See Figure 4, which summarises bus users and non-users views on comfort.

The research shows a larger positive response by bus users, with 78% of bus users indicating that the bus ride was generally comfortable compared with only 39% of non-users. As with the other factors we have examined so far there is a high level of non-users (47%) answering “don’t know”. While this does not necessarily reflect a negative view of the service among non-users it may indicate an apprehension to use the service in the future.
2.5 Safety on a bus at night

The survey examined respondents' perceptions of safety when using their local bus service at night. See Figure 5.

The results indicate that 65% of bus users would feel safe on a bus at night. While this is still high (almost 2 out of 3 respondents indicating feeling safe at night), it is the lowest percentage of positive responses among bus users in any of the factors we have looked at in this section. Furthermore, one quarter of bus users said that they would not feel safe using their local bus service at night. It is quite possible therefore that many bus users only use the service during the day or feel unsafe if they have to use the bus at night. The results suggest that even among bus users there may be preconceived ideas which stop them from using buses at certain times or in certain areas.

The research also found that non-bus users were less likely than bus users to report that they would feel safe on a bus at night with 46% of non-users indicating that they would feel safe.

As we will observe, women are more likely to use bus services than men (see section 3.2, Gender). It is therefore a worrying finding that women respondents in the survey felt less safe on a bus at night than men. See Figure 6. From the research, we were unable to break down male and female respondents into users and non-users in order to examine their feelings on safety. However, over a third of all women respondents (35%) reported that they would not feel safe on a bus at night, more than twice the figure for male respondents (16%). This constitutes a significant proportion of women both as bus users and potential bus users.
Behavioural research has suggested that fear for personal safety on public transport has increased in line with the apparent increase of fear in general within society. This is particularly the case when incidents are highlighted which raise the awareness of safety issues among members of the public. Women are especially affected by the perceived dangers involved with using public transport.
Chapter 3  Bus use in Scotland

The SCC wanted to find out whether respondents used their local bus service, and if so, how often. See Figure 7 which shows the frequency of bus use as reported by respondents in the survey. We also wanted to examine whether certain groups are more likely to use local buses than others.

The majority of respondents indicated that they do use their local bus service with 41% indicating they use the bus once a week or more and 30% indicating they use it less than once a week. However, while 71% of respondents indicated that they used their local bus service even if only occasionally, there is still a significant minority who claim never to use buses (29%). The research shows a number of factors which influence bus use. These include socio-economic status, gender, age, and whether a person lives in an urban or rural area. The findings in this section are broadly comparable to those of the Scottish Household Survey for 1999/2000 regarding convenience of public transport.

3.1 Socio-economic status

When broken down according to socio-economic characteristics, the results indicate that levels of bus use are not uniform throughout Scottish society. While 41% of all respondents indicated that they use their local bus service once a week or more, this dropped to 28% for respondents in group AB. See Figure 8. Groups C1 and C2 also showed below average
levels of use with 39% and 35% respectively. Conversely, for those respondents in Groups DE, 53% reported using their local bus once a week or more.

This trend was echoed by respondents who indicated that they never use their local bus service. Groups AB, C1 and C2 were above the average of 29% with AB and C2 being at 35% and C1 at 31%. Only 20% of those respondents from group DE indicated never using their local bus service.

The figures for occasional use of buses (less than once a week) were higher even between socio-economic groups, suggesting that respondents who were poorer are more likely to use buses as their main mode of transport, while better-off respondents tended only to use buses occasionally, if at all. These findings support the Scottish Executive's Integrated Transport Bill (2000)\(^{10}\) which stated that:

> Growth in dependence on the private car has led to the exclusion of some of the poorest sections of our community. For example, some 75% of households on Scotland's most deprived estates do not have access to a car and as a result find their access to centralised services curtailed.

### 3.2 Gender

Our survey found that respondents who were bus users were more likely to be women, with 44% of women respondents indicating that they use local bus services once a week or more compared with only 37% of male respondents. See Figure 9. Similarly, 31% of men indicated that they never use buses compared with 27% of women. These figures echo the Scottish Executive's report \textit{Women and Transport: Moving Forward}\(^{11}\) which also found that women were more likely than men to use public transport.
3.3 Age

There is a clear pattern of levels of bus use in relation to age. See Figure 10.

Regular bus usage peaks with the youngest and oldest age groups of the survey, with 47% of 16–35 year-olds and 50% of those aged 65 and over using their local bus service at least once a week.

Bus use drops off considerably between these two age ranges, possibly due to increased access to private transport, although this was not explored by the research. Thirty seven percent of 35–54 year-olds reported that they never use local buses. This contrasts clearly with the 16–35 year age range with 23% reporting they never use the bus and 21% of the 65+ year group who reported never using the bus.

3.4 Geographic location

The divide between urban and rural communities is perhaps the most striking of the factors which affect levels of bus usage. See Figure 11.
Urban respondents were almost twice as likely (60%) than their rural counterparts (32%) to use a local bus once a week or more. Just under one in five (17%) of urban respondents said that they never used their local bus service. This figure is lower than the overall percentage of respondents who indicate that they never use the local bus (29%). Moreover, it is half the proportion of rural respondents who said that they never used the bus (34%). From these figures it would appear that people living in urban areas are about twice as likely to use buses than those living in rural communities. The research did not seek an explanation for this but it is likely to be due to a lack of, or low frequency of, local bus services in rural areas.

The WCC report on buses found similar results regarding geographic location. Rather than using “rural” and “urban” classifications, the WCC divided Wales by regions. The report stated that “the frequency figures appear to reflect fairly similar patterns of bus use across the regions, except for the more rural area of Mid/West Wales. In this region the local bus service tends to be used less often”.

3.5 Levels of bus use in relation to perceptions of service

The factors examined (reliability, journey times, timetables, comfort, and safety) were cross-tabulated with frequency of local bus use among different groups to discover if the levels of bus use displayed a similar pattern to that apparent for users and non-users of local bus services. In the majority of cases it was found that groups who were more likely to use buses reported higher levels of satisfaction with their local bus service, while those groups who were found to be less likely to use buses displayed less positive views of bus services. This is most noticeable in terms of socio-economic status and geographic location. To give an overall view of the levels of satisfaction for different socio-economic groups, and for rural and urban respondents, the mean values for responses to each question on perceptions of service were taken. This gives an average figure of respondents from each groupings' satisfaction
with their local bus service. The five factors examined were presented to respondents as statements to which they could agree or disagree with (by indicating “yes”, “no” or “don’t know”). Here we have taken “yes” to indicate that the respondent is satisfied and “no” to indicate that the respondent is not satisfied.

In socio-economic terms, respondents in Group DE had the most positive perception of their local bus service (70%). See Figure 12. Groups C1 and C2 displayed lower levels of satisfaction (61% and 63% respectively), while respondents from Group AB reported higher levels of satisfaction than might have been expected (67%). This figure was, however, still lower than that for respondents from Group DE.

Similar results were found for geographic location. See Figure 13. Urban respondents, who were found to be more likely to use their local bus service, displayed an average of 70% satisfaction with their local bus service. For those respondents living in rural areas perceptions were lower (63%).

These figures indicate that perceptions of the local bus service are not uniform throughout Scotland. They also can help us understand the different levels of bus use among different groups.
4.1 Preferred mode of transport

The survey asked for views on whether respondents would rather travel by car than by their local bus. See Figure 14.

The majority of respondents displayed a preference towards private car use over buses. Seventy eight percent of bus users indicated they would in fact rather make their journeys by car. With only 16% of bus users indicating that their local bus service would be their preferred mode of transport it would appear that the majority of people using buses are doing so out of necessity rather than choice. The groups that were found to have higher proportions of bus users (e.g. people on lower incomes, the young and the old; women; and those living in urban areas), are the groups are also less likely to have access to a car. For example, those in the age ranges with the highest levels of bus use (16-35 and 65+) may be excluded for driving on account of their age, health or financial situation (e.g. students, pensioners).

However, it appears that although the majority of respondents who reported using their local bus service, would prefer to travel by car than by bus, they also reported high levels of satisfaction with the aspects of service examined in the research. This conclusion is a positive reflection on service providers and policy makers.

Ninety percent of non-bus users reported that they would rather travel by car than by bus, and a mere 2% displayed a preference towards using a bus. This highlights the difficult challenge in attempting to attract consumers who do not currently use the bus, to do so. If a continued public policy objective is to change travel choice in favour of public transport rather than private cars then strong disincentives to car users will be necessary as the promotion of customer satisfaction will only be effective in encouraging new bus users up to a point.
4.2 Factors that would encourage local bus service use

Participants were asked to choose from a list of 15 options the two factors they viewed as being most important in encouraging them to use their local bus service more often. See Figure 15.
The most important factor listed by respondents was cheaper fares, while other widely reported factors included a more frequent service and guaranteed connections with other buses. Also present were factors which we have already looked at: reliability and speed; a number of factors related to making buses more comfortable (e.g. comfort, cleanliness, space); and increasing safety both on buses and at stations. It is possible that the emphasis on cheaper fares reflects the finding that the users of local bus services were likely to come from lower socio-economic groups. This raises issues of transport-related social exclusion.

It is also important to acknowledge that this list of preferences is not universal for all groups within society. For example, the importance placed on different factors varied between men and women with men generally emphasising the importance of a reliable and efficient service citing factors such as a more frequent service and faster journey times. Women, on the other hand, appeared to look for improvements to customer services such as improved access for people with mobility difficulties or with children, and more helpful drivers.

The data collected also showed differences in socio-economic characteristics with respondents in the lower two groups placing more emphasis on cheaper fares. They also displayed greater interest in service factors. Respondents in the AB and C1 groups, however, placed greater importance on factors relating to reliability and efficiency.

These differences reflect the suggestion that while cost and time are generally the main factors which affect a person's decision to use one mode of transport over another, other factors may be seen to have increased importance by certain groups within society.
Given that the majority of respondents in the survey indicated that they would prefer to travel by car than by bus, service providers will have to think carefully about what changes they can make to encourage people to use buses and also to ensure that existing users are doing so out of choice rather than necessity. Even though in most cases the majority of responses by bus users were favourable there are still significant minorities who expressed dissatisfaction.

It is also possible that bus users' expectations are lower than they should be, especially given that they are likely to experience one or more form of social exclusion. The issues around expectations were not pursued further in the research and is an area where further research would be useful.

4.3 Change in service

The research indicates that the respondents to the survey clearly have firm ideas about what factors would encourage them to use the local bus service more frequently. The SCC wanted to know whether bus users felt that improvements had come into practice. The survey examined whether bus users thought that their local bus service had changed in the last twelve months. See Figure 16.

The results show that 54% of bus users did not feel that there had been any real change in their local bus service over the last year. Meanwhile, slightly more thought that the service had improved (21%) than thought it had got worse (17%). It therefore appears that a large majority of bus users did not believe that their service operator was being responsive to their needs.

![Figure 16](image)
Effective complaints procedures are important in providing good customer service. This section looks at respondents who had made complaints about their local bus services over the past year and whether they were satisfied with the way in which their complaints were dealt with. It also poses the question of whether a central complaints body that could settle disputes involving local bus services would be beneficial.

5.1 Complaints in the last 12 months

Despite most respondents reporting that there had been no perceived improvement of their local bus service, the majority of respondents (79%) indicated they had not had reason to complain about the bus service over the last twelve months. See Figure 17. Only 8% had actually complained about the service, while a further 11% reported having cause to, but never getting round to following it up. There also appeared to be some confusion about who complaints should be made to with complainants variously going to the bus company, the local authority and other bodies with their grievances. This may have been a factor in deterring those who had a complaint but did not lodge it, as it is possible they were unsure who to contact. However, this was not followed up in the research.

5.2 Complaints handling

The survey asked respondents who had reported making a complaint over the past twelve months if they were satisfied with the way their complaint had been handled. See Figure 18. Although the numbers of respondents complaining were quite low (n=82), of those who had complained in the the past year 55% were unhappy with the way in which their complaint was dealt with. This indicates that there are definite problems with the complaints procedures for local bus services in Scotland. Only 31% of those who complained said that they were satisfied with the way their complaint was handled.
5.3 Central complaints body

With low levels of satisfaction in regard to customer complaints reported and an apparent amount of confusion as to whom complaints should be taken up with it seems clear that steps must be taken to improve the process for complaints relating to local bus services.

In 1998 the Bus Appeals Body was established by bus operators as a UK wide body for handling complaints. In its March 2000 Response to The Integrated Transport Bill, the SCC expressed concern that the Bus Appeals Body was not effectively representing bus users in Scotland. The SCC also felt that local authorities, along with private service providers, have public transport responsibilities which fell outside the remit of the Bus Appeals Body.

The SCC recommended that the Scottish Parliament establish a statutory central complaints body which would have the power to settle any disputes about local bus services. This would provide consumers with an independent body that can address their complaints. When questioned, the idea of a central complaints body proved popular with 77% of bus users and 65% of non-users who indicated that they would be in favour of such a body being established. See Figure 19. Among those respondents who had made a complaint about their local bus service over the last twelve months the figure was even higher, with 90% believing that it would be useful to have a central complaints body. See Figure 20.

![Figure 19](image1.png)

**Figure 19**
Do you think it would be useful if there was a central complaints body that could decide on any disputes you have about local bus service? (users/non-users)

![Figure 20](image2.png)

**Figure 20**
Do you think it would be useful if there was a central complaints body that could decide on any disputes you have about local bus service? (complained/not complained)
In the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001 the Scottish Parliament made provisions for the establishment of such a statutory complaints body:

The Scottish Ministers may by regulations establish a tribunal to be known as the Bus User Complaints Tribunal for the purpose of determining any written complaint made by or on behalf of any individual-

(a) about the manner in which a relevant complaint has been dealt with; or

(b) appealing against a decision made on a relevant complaint.

The establishment of a central complaints body such as the Bus Users Complaints Tribunal would reflect the recommendations of the SCC and also the responses provided by participants in the survey. This would bring bus services into line with rail services which already have such a body (the Rail Passengers Committee).

The Scottish Executive has released a consultation paper on the establishment of the Bus Users Complaints Tribunal and the regulations for the BUCT are expected to come into force during the early part of 2002. It is proposed that the BUCT will report to the Traffic Commissioner providing “information that assists the Commissioner in considering whether to take action against, or to instigate an investigation of, a particular operator”.

In its responses to the Integrated Transport Bill and the consultation paper From Workhorse to Thoroughbred, the SCC recommended that there be regional representation of bus users.

The SCC also recommends that the following principles set by Service First are adopted as standard by service providers. See Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Clear defined</strong></th>
<th>There should be a relevant and consistently applied definition of what a complaint is.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accessible</strong></td>
<td>The procedure should be accessible and well publicised. People should be told at the beginning what to do if not happy with the service provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barriers to complaining should be removed to ensure access for all</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedure</strong></td>
<td>There must be a formal written procedure for handling complaints. This should be clearly written, simple to understand and use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speed</strong></td>
<td>Complaints should be resolved quickly. There should be published targets for acknowledging and responding to complaints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fairness</strong></td>
<td>All complaints must be dealt with impartially. The complaints procedure must be fair, open and understood by all involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effectiveness</strong></td>
<td>The procedure must be effective, dealing with all points raised, and providing suitable remedies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Complaints recording</strong></td>
<td>There should be a system for recording complaints, whether dealt with formally or informally, in writing or by phone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monitoring and auditing</strong></td>
<td>This should be done regularly to ensure improvements are made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Review</strong></td>
<td>There should be a system for review which is seen by the public to be independent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cabinet Office (1998) Service First - How to deal with complaints
6.1 Conclusions

The research found that different views exist between bus users and people who indicate they do not use the bus. The majority of bus users (between 65% and 83%) were satisfied with the various aspects of their local bus service examined in the research: reliability, journey times, timetables, comfort, and safety.

However, in each case there was a significant minority of bus users (14% to 25%) who were not satisfied with an aspect of their local bus service.

The majority of bus users also indicated that they would rather travel by car than by bus, and that they did not feel that their local bus service had changed over the past twelve months – neither getting worse, nor better.

Seventy seven percent of bus users supported the idea of a central complaints body that could decide on any disputes regarding local bus services.

The views of non-users about local bus services are generally less favourable than bus users. Only 35% to 46% of non-bus users thought the aspects of bus services reviewed were satisfactory and nine out of ten non-bus users indicated that they would rather travel by car than by bus.

However, like bus users, respondents who do not use the bus were in favour of the establishment of a central complaints body responsible for settling disputes relating to local bus services.
The high preference for car use by both bus users and non-users is significant in public policy terms. The market response to high preference for car use by these consumers would be to suggest allowing free individual choice. However, the real cost of car use on society is not explicit and therefore consumers are not aware of costs such as congestion, health impacts from pollution, road safety etc. Therefore, in the interest of wider society and in line with government policy, alternatives to the car should be promoted.

The challenge therefore, is how to make bus use accessible and desirable for both bus users and non-users. This will require solutions that not only improve bus services for those who have negative perceptions of them, but also actively promote the high levels of satisfaction found among bus users. There is a need to promote positive improvements that take place. There is also the need to raise the awareness of the social and environmental costs of car use.

The research found the following groups more likely to make use of their local bus service: those on lower incomes, women, the young and the old, and those who live in urban areas. The majority of respondents from these groups reported positive views of their local bus service. This echoes the findings regarding bus users' perceptions of their local bus service.

Respondents on higher incomes, men, those in the middle age ranges, and those from rural communities reported lower levels of satisfaction with their local bus service, reflecting the findings regarding non-bus users' perceptions of service.
The research also explored what factors would encourage respondents to use local bus services. It found that price was cited most frequently. However, other factors were important to different groups such as reliability to higher socio-economic groups.

The majority of respondents had not had reason to make a complaint about their local bus service in the past 12 months. However, the majority of those who did complain indicated that they were unhappy with the way that their complaint was handled. Most respondents, regardless of whether they used buses or not, were in favour of a central complaints body that would have the power to settle any disputes about local bus services.

6.2 Recommendations

To change travel behaviour and lead to increased bus use, the perception of local bus services will have to be improved. Therefore, it is important that steps are taken to encourage people to use buses. In particular, it is necessary to make bus services a more appealing option to the groups identified in this report as being less likely to use buses: those on higher incomes, men, the 35-54 age range, and people living in rural areas. These groups are most likely to have access to private transport and should be targeted as potential bus users. In rural areas there is the added problem of adequate service provision which needs to be addressed. This includes initiatives such as the Rural Transport Fund and will require innovative thinking.

There may also be a need to raise the awareness of social and environmental costs of car use and make these explicit to both users and non-users.
6.3 Improve perceptions of bus services

There is a common perception of bus services that they are not operating to standard regardless of whether they actually are or not. This is despite the high levels of satisfaction reported by the majority of bus users in our survey. In relation to the aspects of bus services examined, non-bus users in the survey consistently displayed a more negative perception of their local service than respondents who did use buses.

Non-users also displayed high levels of apprehension or lack of awareness about their local bus service with between quarter and half responding "don't know" to each factor. As a result of this any improvements made to bus services must be clearly visible to potential bus users.

The high levels of service satisfaction found by our research should be maintained and built upon. It is also necessary to publicise the positive aspects to encourage sceptical consumers that their local bus service does provide a viable travel alternative to private car use. However, this promotion must take place as part of a socially inclusive transport system which also aims to increase the expectations of consumers.

6.4 Improving bus services

Despite the positive feedback from bus users regarding aspects of their local bus service, for each aspect there was a significant minority who reported being dissatisfied with their service. The high levels of service reported in the research must therefore be maintained and built upon to make the promotion of local bus services effective. In particular those areas where problems have been identified need to be explored more fully and measures to address these need to be implemented.
However, for any changes to be effective it is vital that the added costs are minimised. When asked to choose the two most important factors that would lead to increased usage of local bus services, the most common answer was “cheaper fares”.

This finding raises the issue of social exclusion as the groups identified in the research as being more likely to use public transport are also groups often seen to be more likely to suffer social exclusion. Initiatives which have been recommended to combat the forms of social exclusion linked to transport include: subsidised bus fares, extending entitlement to concessions, redesigning buses to make them more accessible for those whose access may be restricted in some way, and promoting community transport initiatives. Clearly, if buses are to be presented as a more attractive mode of travel they will have to be seen to be affordable and offer consumers better value for money.

6.5 Market prices

The promotion of local bus services will only work up to a point as the majority of consumers would prefer to travel by car, regardless of whether service standards were satisfactory or not. Therefore, it will be necessary to make the true cost of car use explicit in relation to bus use, to enable true comparisons to be made. The externalities of private car use (eg. social and environmental costs) should be taken into account and consumers should have information available to accurately compare different journey costs.

6.6 Establish a statutory centralised complaints body

The SCC supports the Scottish Executive's plans to establish a Bus Users Complaints Tribunal as published in their recent consultation paper.
The SCC believes that the BUCT must meet the needs of consumers. In addition, the SCC believes that the Scottish Executive needs to pursue the idea of establishing regional representative bodies accountable at the local level.

The principles set out by the Cabinet Office in *Service First* (1998) for an effective complaints system should be followed by the Scottish Executive.

6.7 Areas for future research

The findings in this research have raised a number of issues which could not be examined using the data available. These issues were the restriction on mobility and access to services placed on those without cars, the number of consumers living at least 500 yards (for example) from a regular bus service (e.g. quarter-hourly); the finding that high fares were seen as the main issue in encouraging greater bus use; and the possibility that expectations for bus users were lower than they should be. The SCC believes that all these issues are important from a consumer perspective and merit further investigation.
References

4 The National Readership Survey publishes data on the number and nature of readers of around 270 publications. The sample for the survey is chosen randomly by domestic address and controls are applied to ensure it is representative of the British Population.
8 Urban and rural are defined by System Three according to constituency.
15 Scottish Executive (2001d) Transport (Scotland) Act Section 41(1), Edinburgh.
17 SCC (2000) op. cit., paragraph 17.
21 Scottish Executive (2001c) op. cit.
Appendix

B.1 READ OUT
Now changing the subject, I would like to ask you about your local bus service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image-url" alt="Image of table with options" /></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B.2 SHOW CARD
How often, if at all, do you use a local bus?
- Every day [1]
- 4-5 days a week [2]
- 2-3 days a week [3]
- Once a week [4]
- Once or twice a month [5]
- Less often than once or twice a month [6]
- Never [7]

B.3 SHOW CARD
Which two factors on this card would influence you to use the local bus more often? Please choose the two most important factors.
- Speed - a faster journey time [1]
- Better timetable information [2]
- More comfortable buses [3]
- More spacious buses [4]
- Improved access for people with mobility difficulties or with children [5]
- Guaranteed connections with other buses [6]
- More frequent service [7]
- More luggage space [8]
- Cleaner buses [9]
- Newer buses [10]
- Cheaper fares [12]
- More reliable services [13]
- Safer buses [14]
- Safer bus stations [15]
- None of these/ nothing would make me use buses more [16]
- Don’t know [17]

* Continue if itemCount (B3 - Factors of influence) > 2 Else Goto [B4 - Change in services]*
PLEASE ENSURE ONLY TWO ANSWERS ARE GIVEN. PROBE FOR TWO MOST IMPORTANT.

- Rollback To [B3 - Factors of influence]

B.4
Overall, how do you think local bus services have changed in the last twelve months? Would you say they have...?

READ OUT
○ Improved [Y]
○ Stayed the same [R]
○ Got worse [N]
○ (Don't know) [R]

B.5 SHOW CARD
Have you ever complained about local bus services in the last 12 months?
○ Yes. To local authority [Y]
○ Yes. To bus company [Y]
○ Yes. To other [R]
○ No. Never had cause to [R]
○ No. Had cause, but never got round to complaining [N]
○ (Don't know) [R]


B.6
When you complained about the local bus service in the last 12 months, were you satisfied with the way your complaint was dealt with?
○ Yes [Y]
○ No [R]
○ Don't know [R]

B.7
Do you think it would be useful or not if there was a central complaints body that could decide on any disputes you have about local bus services?
○ Yes [Y]
○ No [R]
○ Don't know [R]