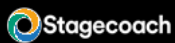


# BRINGING BACK LIVERPOOL'S

## Night Bus



Liverpool City Region  
// Music Board



METRO MAYOR  
LIVERPOOL CITY REGION



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# FOREWORD

## JON COLLINS

**All too often, live music spaces can feel unsupported as part of the nighttime economy, relative to their daytime counterparts. Despite towns and cities across the UK recognising the cultural and economic value that venues, gigs, concerts and festivals bring to their areas, we can often feel underserved when it comes to services like transport, waste disposal and policing.**

Nationally, the Government has identified the creative industries as central to growing the economy, expressing a desire to make the UK the best place in the world to make music and develop and deliver major events. But too often the barriers to achieving this goal lie in that fundamental need to get people to and from our shows safely, speedily and affordably.

It was, therefore, a welcome and positive step when the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (following advocacy from a range of stakeholders including the LCR Music Board) agreed to trial a night bus service as a step back towards the wider service offered pre-pandemic. Unsurprisingly, such services are hugely popular with industry and the public – both those on a night out and those working into the night.

And the trial has been an undoubted success, delivering a near 5x social benefit, helping people feel safer and offering an affordable route home. Significant gains for a place like Liverpool that prides itself on social inclusion. Now, imagine what we could deliver if, as is recommended in this report, we expand the network and shout about its success.

As Chair, LCR Music Board, I commend this report and welcome the evidence it sets out as to the benefits that flow from nighttime bus provision.



**As CEO, LIVE, I will, once again, be advocating to one and all that the rest of the UK follows where Liverpool leads.**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jon Collins'.

**Jon Collins**

CEO, LIVE/Chair of Liverpool City Region Music Board

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**This executive summary synthesises the findings of research supporting the “Bring Back the Night Bus” campaign and the subsequent N1 pilot service in the Liverpool City Region.**

Whilst Liverpool is widely known as a city characterised by its vibrant night life, and has been a UNESCO City of Music since 2015, following the 2020-21 pandemic, night buses to serve this economy were not reinstated due to commercial viability concerns. A multi-agency campaign launched in response developed data to show that nearly 200 city-centre venues, licensed past midnight, serve up to 60,500 patrons. Public consultation revealed that 98% of respondents demanded a night bus service. While 91% sought transport for leisure, 53% required it for work, highlighting the service as essential economic infrastructure for night-shift workers.

The N1 pilot bus service launched in December 2023. Since then, it has facilitated over 57,500 journeys. Although commercial operators initially hesitated due to high staffing costs, social value analysis by RealWorth demonstrates a compelling Social Return on Investment (SROI) of 4.93:1. With every £1 invested generating an estimated minimum of £4.93 in social value community benefits. Key impacts include improved feelings of safety for 85% of users and significant financial savings for 84%, especially those effectively “working final hours of shifts for free” to afford taxi home.

Despite these benefits, the service remains ‘Liverpool’s best-kept secret’, with 41% of students unaware of its existence. Furthermore, hourly frequency and limited routes are regularly cited as primary barriers to increased patronage.

The Bus Services Act 2025 and the transition to a franchised model provide a legal basis for the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority to prioritise “socially necessary” transport over route-specific profit. This report recommends maximising the potential of these two regulatory frameworks in addition to:

- Widespread promotion to address the awareness deficit.
- Increased frequency (half-hourly) to improve safety and reliability.
- Network expansion to North Liverpool and broader Wirral and other LCR districts.

Ultimately, the N1 proves that night-time mobility is a vital public good that fosters social inclusion, safety, and economic growth.

**NEARLY  
5X RETURN**

**in social and  
community benefits  
per £1 invested**



# NIGHT BUSES SERVICES IN THE UK AND LIVERPOOL

**Night bus services have a long history in the UK. The first services were established in London in 1913 to serve shift workers, journalists, printers and early morning market staff (Noble, 2025).**

By the 1980s services in London and Edinburgh were significantly expanded to accommodate the night-time economy and later closing times (Lothian Buses, 2026). Many UK cities including Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool introduced night buses from the 1980s, though deregulation of services led to periods of extensive provision followed by withdrawals at the behest of commercial concerns of individual private operators.

In Liverpool, cross-river services connecting towns in the Wirral and Chester to the city centre ran regularly until 2014 when Arriva ceased running these routes. Stagecoach ran a replacement pilot from 2016 but cut this in 2019 due to “low demand” (Thorpe, 2022). In South Liverpool both providers operated night services on the 86 route, popular with the city’s student population.

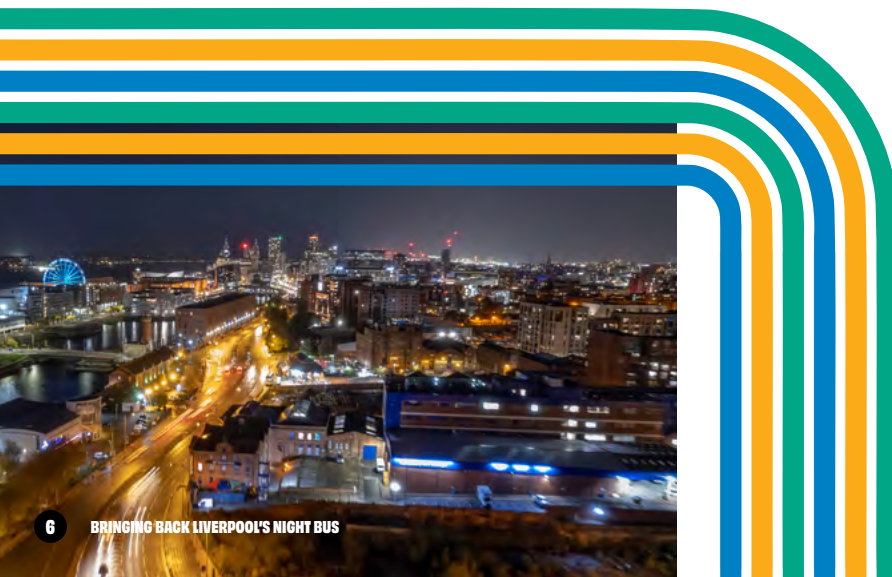
Whilst most European capital cities by 2019 provided some form of night-time public transport, the nature of this provision was highly uneven and susceptible to political and economic shifts (Plyushteva and Boussauw, 2020). The 2008 financial crash had curtailed many services across the continent and subsequent planning for night buses generally prioritised economic considerations rather than social inclusion or passenger safety.



Services were frequently framed as a drain on resources, making them vulnerable to budgetary cuts during economic downturns (ibid). In the UK this mirrored a general decline. Bus provision, defined as miles driven by buses per head, fell from 25 to 18 miles across a period from 2011 to 2023, a 28% reduction (DfT 2024a).” Meanwhile, the number of bus trips fell from 4.6 billion in 2011 to 3.4 billion in 2023 (ibid). The number of local bus services registered has also fallen by 27% in England in 2022/23 (TCGB 2024). Such reductions in provision, and consequently patronage, are detrimental economically, socially, and environmentally.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and associated ‘stay at home’ lockdowns effectively closed the hospitality sector and nighttime economy for extensive periods. Live music and nightclubs were prohibited for 16 months. Night Buses were deemed surplus to requirements and were generally suspended from March 2020 before the gradual resumption of services and travel patterns culminated in a ‘reopening’ of all activities in July 2021. Overall bus usage however was slow to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

Service operators cited unprofitability to justify reduced route offerings, which compounded the fall in patronage. London and Edinburgh as capital cities with transport services owned by their local authorities were able to scale up post pandemic night bus operations immediately. In London, 32 twenty-four-hour routes operate (Bus Routes in London Wiki, 2026). Edinburgh expanded its provision from 2021 to run 20 routes by 2024 with over 800,000 annual passengers (Lothian Buses, 2026). However, in many major UK cities including Manchester and Liverpool night bus services were not immediately resumed post-pandemic.





# NO NIGHT BUSES POST PANDEMIC:

## ANECDOTAL DISCONTENT

Prior to the pandemic, recommendations and consultations culminated in the creation of the sector-led Liverpool City Region (LCR) Music Board in 2018, one of the first of its kind in the UK.

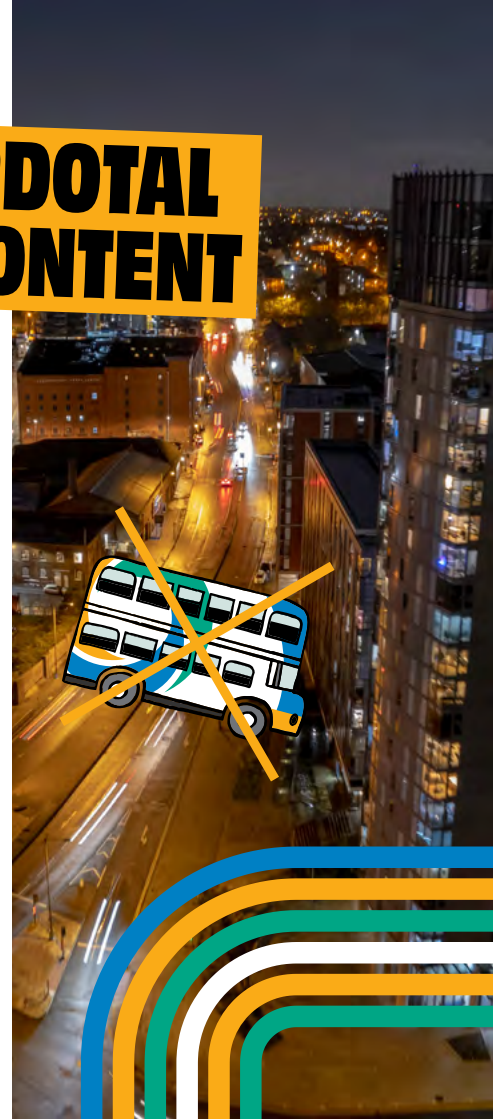
The Board operates independently, reporting to the Mayor of Liverpool City Region, and focuses on developing strategies for the music sector's economic and social impact (LCR Music Board, 2020). During the pandemic, the Board and Liverpool City Council's Music Office managed a £150k emergency fund from Strategic Investment Funds, mainly supporting live venues and promoters affected by lockdowns (Hopley and Lloyd, 2021; Anderson, 2025).

Music Board-commissioned research described a return to normal live music dependent on venue survival, especially grassroots spaces (Flynn and Anderson, 2022: 68). Anecdotal reports to Music Board members from grassroots venues and promoters highlighted limited late-night transport as a major barrier to audience numbers returning to pre-pandemic levels.

"We saw that late night transport didn't return post pandemic, and we were then at the mercy of taxis essentially for cross river travel which provided a number of different challenges, one around the audiences coming to shows and that being a barrier; and another around our staff not being not being able to get home at the end of shifts. We had various anecdotal **stories of people not being able to get home and then sleeping in sleeping bags in dressing rooms** and stuff like that."



**CRAIG PENNINGTON,**  
CEO OF FUTURE YARD



The recently established venue Future Yard in Birkenhead, across the River Mersey from Liverpool city centre, was particularly impacted by audience numbers and staff safety concerns, with both impacting on their programming opportunities. Independently highlighting these issues, the venue sought to invite Steve Rotheram, Mayor of the Liverpool City Region, to a meeting to discuss 'after hours' cross river transport (Manning, 2022). Also in attendance were representatives from Merseytravel, the executive body within the LCRCA, responsible for overseeing public transport strategy and delivery.

Following this meeting Future Yard maximised its position as leading a campaign for a 'Wirral Night Bus':

"Birkenhead is very well located through transport up until 11:30 at night. Which just **puts a limit on our programme capability** here. We can't really do anything later than that because we rely on audiences coming over from Liverpool, not solely, but quite a significant part. Plus, a lot of staff. So, anything that would traditionally have late nights, like club events, they've **struggled to the extent where we're not really able to programme them.**"

 **CHRISTOPHER TORPEY,**  
FUTURE YARD DIRECTOR

"Because individual artists or members of staff or people going to shows don't have that same platform, or access to power, we could put out a statement. **We could ask direct questions of the Metro Mayor** and invite the people involved in transport in the city region to Future Yard to have a conversation. So, **our role was very much in driving the agenda** and being that focal point."

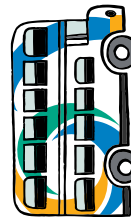
 **CRAIG PENNINGTON,**  
CEO OF FUTURE YARD

Concurrently, Nightlife CIC, an organisation focused on improving "the welfare of people in the city at night" (2026), were being made aware of the same concerns amongst city centre pub owners, staff and patrons.

The informal, anecdotal conversations being fed to the Music Board, Nightlife CIC's advocacy, and more formalised campaigns Future Yard and other venues were undertaking, coalesced into a proposal that the Music Board hold a public consultation with venues and promoters to gather the community of interest around late night transport.

"Just before COVID and then certainly after, **we've got a major issue getting people home overnight.** So, one of the big things that staff would say to me is, 'John, I can't get to work or I can't get home'. We've got major issues at the moments with black taxi cherry picking [fares]. What could normally be a £15 journey, taxi drivers asking £50, £60 even £80. So that just obliterates any type of earnings, including if they had tips. It normally used to be the tips that paid for the cab. Additionally, Uber drivers coming in adds to the problems with the taxis... I was out on Friday with the Council Licencing [Department] and you could see cabs with Wolverhampton plates and Tameside."

 **JOHN HUGHES,**  
LIVERPOOL NIGHTLIFE CIC





# THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION

A public event, held in Liverpool Philharmonic's Music Room venue in March 2022 invited the region's music venue infrastructure personnel to share their insights and concerns facing the sector with the Music Board.

A small anonymous survey associated with the registration process identified that for many planning to attend, late-night transport would be an issue they wished to raise.

"Are late night public transport services adequate given the number of people out and the value of the late-night economy?"



**ANONYMOUS  
PRE-CONSULTATION COMMENT**

The Music Board invited Huw Jenkins, Lead Policy Officer for Transport from the Combined Authority to sit on panel alongside John Hughes from Liverpool Nightlife CIC and Craig Pennington representing Future Yard and the Music Board.

Following the panel, sixty-four participants discussed issues affecting music venues and events. Lack of night bus services was a major concern, not only in transport centred discussions but across all focus groups, with many stating even a small extension in operating hours would help. Attendees felt transport decisions were focused too much on economic viability rather than a public safety service. There was a perception of poor communication between council departments, especially licencing and transportation, and the shortage of taxis and rising fares in the city centre since the pandemic was also raised.

The core message delivered to the Music Board from industry representatives was that late night transport links to venues had not normalised following the pandemic's disruption. All agreed that a night bus service would be the one change that would make the most difference to enable patrons and venue staff (particularly women and other marginalised groups) a means to travel home from the city centre safely, and affordably, in addition to being an environmentally sustainable solution in comparison to taxis.



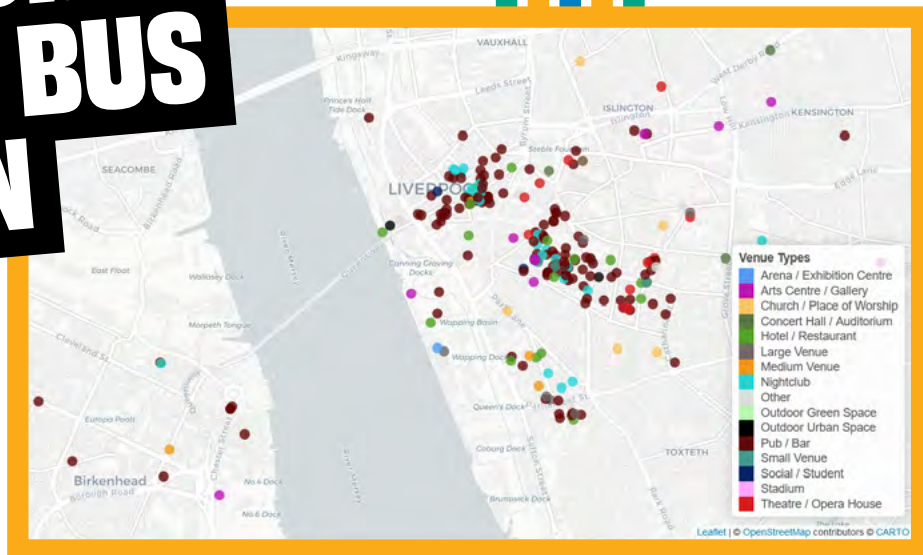
These findings substantiated anecdotal accounts venue owners had provided to the Music Board, and vindicated Future Yard's proactive campaign. Both the consultation and Mayor Rotherham captured publicly aired concerns from a range of stakeholders in the presence of senior Combined Authority Transport Department personnel. This evidence supported observers from LCC's Music Office and Combined Authority's Culture Office in advancing the case at Combined Authority/Merseytravel level. Meanwhile the Music Board's Venues Subgroup committed to the establishing of a concerted campaign to **'bring back the night bus'**.

# BRING BACK THE NIGHT BUS CAMPAIGN

Professor Mathew Flynn from the University of Liverpool's Music Department, and volunteer member of the Music Board, had been leading a team gathering and cataloguing music venue data which could be represented on a digital map (figure 1).

This data was analysed and made available to the Music Board's Venues Subgroup as evidence for use in developing a business case for a night bus which could be formally presented to the Combined Authority.

1. This figure includes the Ten Streets and Baltic Triangle areas.



**Figure 1:** LCR Music Board Venues Map circa 2022, showing geolocation of music venues in Liverpool city centre and Birkenhead

What this data was able to show was that of the 249 live music venues in Liverpool city centre, 196 music venues are licensed to operate beyond 23:59 at weekends. Again, using mapping data, these venues, on a busy night could have a potential combined capacity of ~60,500 people needing to leave the city

centre,<sup>1</sup> the equivalent number of people who attend a football match at Liverpool FC's Anfield stadium, which has dedicated public transport provision in place for every home game. Furthermore, these venues alone were estimated to collectively employ over 500 staff per night of weekend operations.

The research team also interviewed a senior representative from Liverpool City Council's Licensing Dept who described the post-pandemic taxi situation being characterised by fewer night-time drivers (Hackney cabs), tariffs being increased to entice driver's return, a small element of taxi fare 'over chargers', and a national problem of Uber drivers moving into high demand areas (e.g. travelling from the North East to Liverpool every weekend).

These figures were fed to Sarah Lovell, Lead Officer and Culture Coordinator at LCRCA, and were instrumental in providing an evidence base to sustain the campaign's goal as an agenda item within the Combined Authority.

"If we hadn't had the work that the [Institute of Popular Music] had done to support with quantitative information, then we would not have had the same impact."



**SARAH LOVELL,**  
LEAD OFFICER –  
CULTURE COORDINATOR, LCRCA

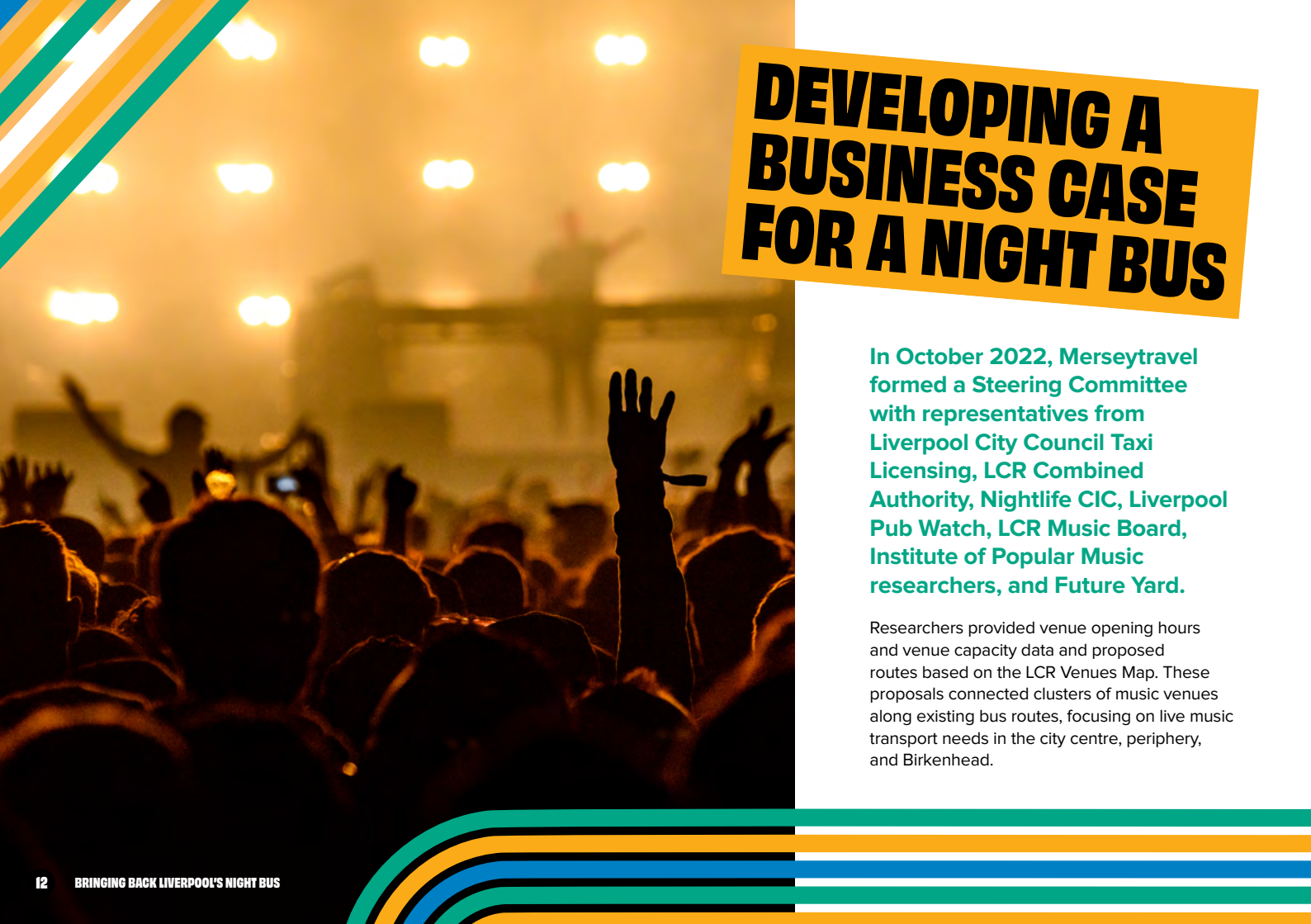
Sarah Lovell worked along with Tony McDonough, LCRCA's Bus Operations Manager to formulate options for a night bus within the existing frameworks available within the Combined Authority .

"I think **the mayor wanted us to explore the opportunities that were out there** to see how we could develop a service or see if we could get a pilot off the ground... obviously budgets were very, very, very tight. So, was there something we could do either to develop a service, or to work with a commercial operator to develop a project or a pilot scheme?"



**TONY MCDONOUGH,**  
BUS OPERATIONS MANAGER, LCRCA





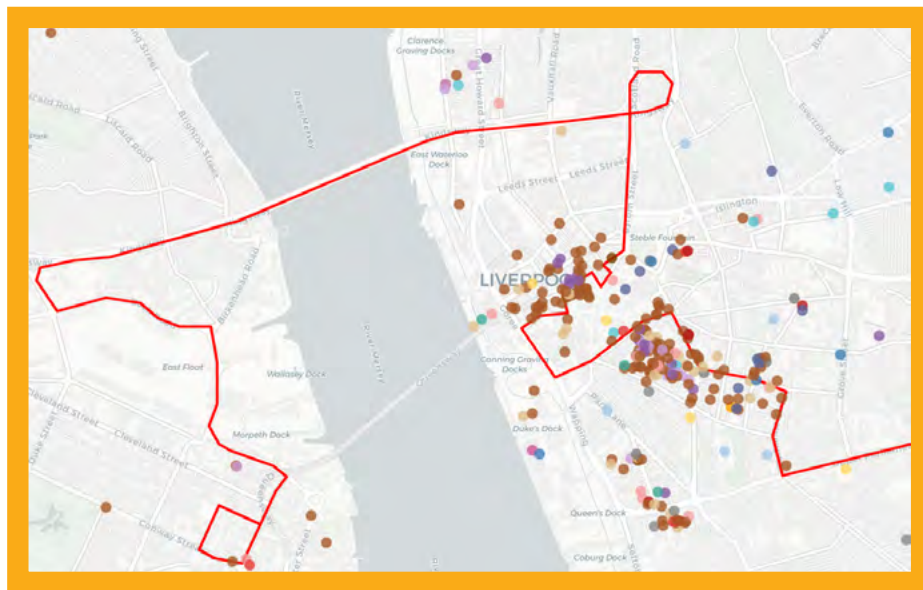
# DEVELOPING A BUSINESS CASE FOR A NIGHT BUS

In October 2022, Merseytravel formed a Steering Committee with representatives from Liverpool City Council Taxi Licensing, LCR Combined Authority, Nightlife CIC, Liverpool Pub Watch, LCR Music Board, Institute of Popular Music researchers, and Future Yard.

Researchers provided venue opening hours and venue capacity data and proposed routes based on the LCR Venues Map. These proposals connected clusters of music venues along existing bus routes, focusing on live music transport needs in the city centre, periphery, and Birkenhead.

The Steering Committee defined possible routes and invited bus operators to submit tenders for a commercial service. Contingency attempts by partners like LCRCa, the Music Board, and University of Liverpool's Music Department to fund a pilot scheme through institutional bids and loans proved unsuccessful, leaving the commercial tender process the only viable avenue. Despite over a year of limited progress, ongoing advocacy within the Combined Authority ensured the issue remained active within policy discussions.

Concurrently, researchers from the Music Department began working with Eleanor Fielding and research assistant Dr Vincy Huang in the Combined Authority's Civic Data Cooperative (CDC), to gather further data to illustrate the demand for Night Bus provision. Collaborating with regional partners, including the Combined Authority's data analysis team and Liverpool Business Improvement District (BID), the team began to source further key facts on Liverpool's night-time economy, to further demonstrate the business case for a Night Bus.



**Figure 2:** LCR Music Board Venues Map showing night bus route and geolocation of music venues in Liverpool city centre and Birkenhead.

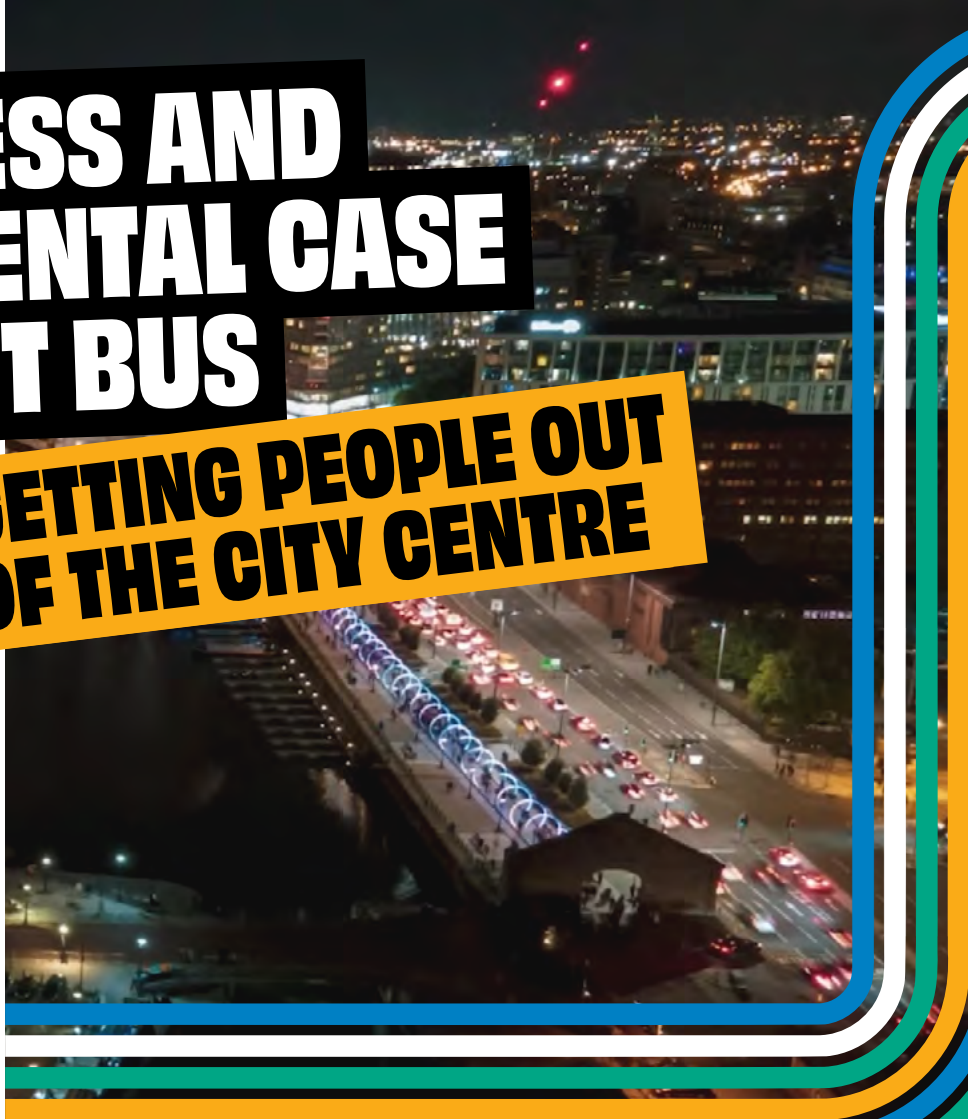




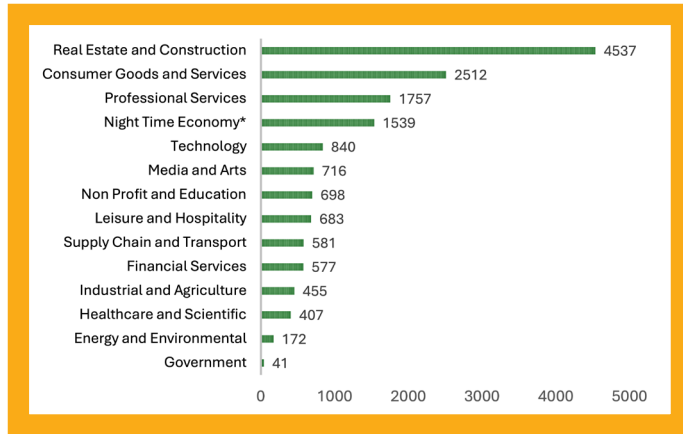
# THE BUSINESS AND ENVIRONMENTAL CASE FOR A NIGHT BUS

Making use of GlassAI – a data tool used by LCRCa to scan multiple datasets made available to municipalities which enables city region specific business intelligence – researchers were able to demonstrate that, the night-time economy has the 4th largest number of businesses operating in Liverpool City centre, with 1,539 organisations. The majority of these are hospitality and leisure (figure 3 – next page).

## GETTING PEOPLE OUT OF THE CITY CENTRE

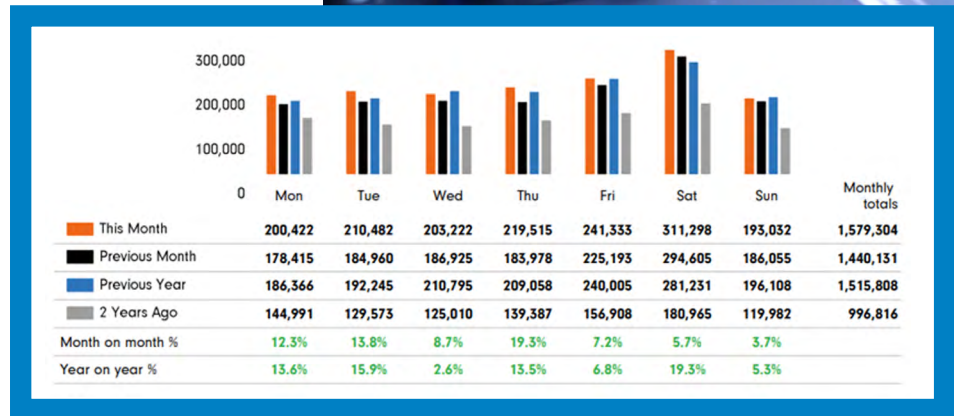






**Figure 3:** Number of businesses operating in Liverpool city centre. Glass AI (2023)

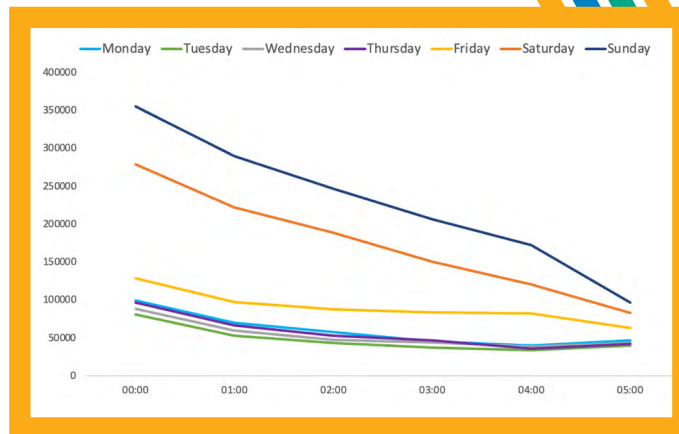
The team were then able to demonstrate that these night-time economy businesses were creating significant footfall within the city centre, making use of the nine city-centre footfall cameras operated by Liverpool BID Company. This data demonstrated that city centre footfall was increasing in comparison to the previous month, and the previous year (Figure 4).



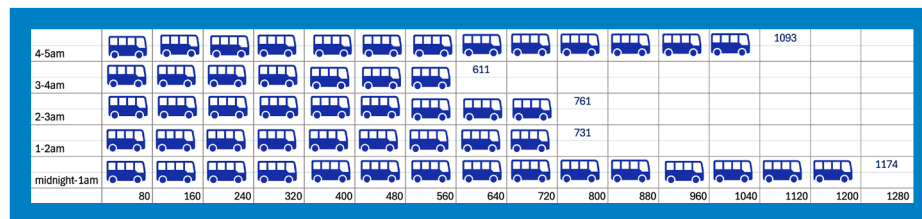
**Figure 4:** Liverpool BID Footfall Report for Liverpool 03 April 2023 – 30 April 2023 (Liverpool BID, 2023)

Combining this overall data with time specific camera footfall counts, reinforced anecdotal understanding that the numbers of people remaining in Liverpool city centre after midnight following Friday and Saturday nights was significant (Figure 5). Even at 4am, around 20,000 people were recorded as moving around the city which vindicated earlier estimates drawn from music venue capacity numbers.

Using April 2023 specific street monitoring footfall data at Church Street (BID's nearest camera to the Liverpool One bus terminal), 1,174 were counted passing between midnight and 1am on average on Sunday morning. These numbers alone would represent enough people to fill 15 eighty-seat double decker buses – at least one every five minutes. As footfall figures gradually drop by around 300 per hour, there remained enough people in the Church Street vicinity alone to fill an additional 46 buses on Sunday mornings up to 6am (Figure 6).



**Figure 5:** Post midnight Footfall Report for Liverpool 03 April 2023 – 30 April 2023 (Liverpool BID, 2023)



**Figure 6:** CDC diagram representing an estimate of the number of buses needed to transport Church Street passers-by based on BID Footfall Report for Liverpool April 2023 and double decker bus capacity (80 persons)

"If staff can't get into work, or get into work but can't come home two or three o'clock in the morning because the only way is by a taxi, it negates them earning their money. These people generally are [on] minimum wage, so to pay a **taxi fee home is basically their wage for the night**. Which is why [Liverpool BID] were very supportive of a night bus. For me a night bus wasn't just about making sure revellers and students could get home, but it's also about enabling [the] staff that delivered those services to those people to get home."



**SHAUN HOLLAND,**  
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS  
AT LIVERPOOL BID COMPANY

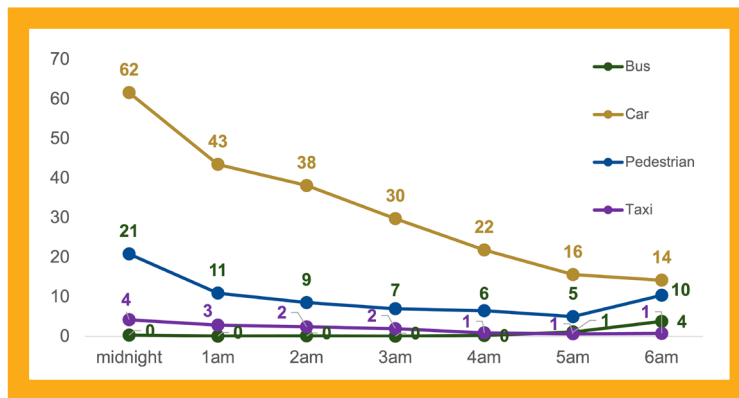
# REDUCING THE NUMBERS OF CARS ON THE ROADS POST MIDNIGHT

The Civic Data Cooperative (CDC) were able to access data via the Combined Authority for CCTV traffic cameras covering Paradise Street and Upper Parliament, which are closest to the 86 bus route, a popular pre-pandemic night bus route from the city into areas in south Liverpool with significant student housing.

This data showed that on average between February to April 2022, 96% of people exit the city centre by car – a figure made up of cars (including Ubers and private hire taxis) and ‘black cab’ taxis (Figure 7).

Similar data from CCTV of traffic travelling through the Queensway Tunnel to Birkenhead, also identified cars or taxis as the most commonly used form of transport when travelling from Liverpool to Birkenhead between midnight and 6am.

These cameras also identified that pedestrians, potentially intoxicated, and cyclists do attempt to use this tunnel at night. The below data demonstrates that a Night Bus would serve both a large population of night-time workers and city-centre revellers, who could use a more sustainable transport option than a car to exit the city centre.



**Figure 7:** Traffic camera transport mode averages from Paradise Street and Upper Parliament between midnight to 6am, April 2022, showing vast majority is by car (Source CDC use of LCRC data)

"I think we felt it was quite straightforward, and we felt that we'd built a case by this coming from the [music] sector. It was post-COVID[-19], and its impact on live events and venues had been significant. There hadn't been an awful lot of support for them in the way that there had been for retail and hospitality, so in trying to endorse that [introducing a night bus], **we were trying to build back the night-time economy."**



**SARAH LOVELL,**  
LEAD OFFICER – CULTURE  
COORDINATOR, LCRCA

To further support the business intelligence data analysis, the research team, consisting of researchers from the University of Liverpool's Music Department and Centre for Educational Development and Support, alongside the Civic Data Cooperative, conducted a survey on the public's opinion of the need for Night Bus provision. Across three weeks in June 2023 following distribution via posters in city centre venues and across social media channels, 2,600 responses were generated.

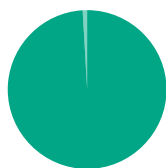


# SURVEY #1: 'BRING BACK NIGHT BUSES?'

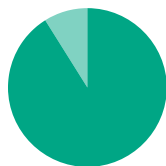


**Figure 8:** Poster and social media graphics designed by Blush Creative used to promote the survey.

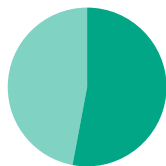




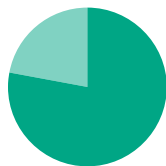
**98%**  
of respondents  
wanted a Night  
Bus service.



**91%**  
said they would use  
a bus to travel home  
from a night out.



**53%**  
said it would  
allow them to get  
home from work.



**78%**  
of the respondents  
were aged  
between 18-35.

**Figure 9:** Survey statistics demonstrating demand, demographics and projected uses of the night bus.

The survey results revealed an overwhelming demand for a night bus service, with 98% of respondents expressing their support for its re-establishment. The primary driver for this demand was leisure, with most indicating they would use the service to return home from a night out (91%), though its utility as a critical piece of infrastructure was also made clear with over half of respondents (53%) saying they would use it for commuting.



**“Please, please bring them back. I have to work an hour extra to afford to go home from work safely.”**

The survey data also highlighted a particularly strong resonance with the younger demographic (78% aged 18-35), suggesting that a service was considered essential for supporting young users of night-time economy, and the mobility of its local workforce. Anonymous comments from respondents supported these stand out findings.



**“My place of work has 30ish people that need to start at 6 with no availability for buses. Earliest time via bus is 6:30.”**

Uber was described as the most frequent method of travel for those returning home after midnight, yet respondents demonstrated a clear willingness to use a dedicated bus alternative. Across all surveyed demographics, regardless of age or gender, respondents indicated they would be prepared to pay £4 for a single journey, double the then flat £2 daytime cap. This highlighted that while safety, accessibility, and route availability were described as the primary needs that would be addressed by a night bus service, it would also provide regulated, cost-effective transport compared to the volatile pricing and availability of private hire options.



**“As a bartender, getting home after a shift is really difficult, after serving people all night, trying to get a taxi is not something I want to be worrying about.”**

# KEY CONCERNS EXPRESSED IN THE SURVEY

**Beyond the general demand for a night bus, respondents highlighted significant barriers within the existing transport landscape, particularly regarding taxis and private hire vehicles.**

While 24% of participants discussed these services, the primary concerns were high costs (18%) and difficulty in securing a booking (6%). These financial and logistical hurdles directly influence behaviour, with many respondents indicating that the lack of affordable, reliable transport throughout the night often dictates whether they choose to go out or curtail their evenings early.



**"It can be a nightmare trying to get a taxi or Uber and then it costs a fortune."**

Safety emerged as a paramount concern, mentioned by 32% of respondents. The night bus is widely perceived as a safer alternative to walking home, which many categorised as dangerous, or using taxis, which some respondents perceived as unsafe.



**"I work in a bar in the city centre, usually getting out of work at 00:30, I have been assaulted twice walking home in 3 months. Night buses would make me feel so much safer."**

This sentiment was particularly high among women, for whom a regulated night bus service would represent a vital security measure.



**"As a female who works nights, I would really appreciate the night bus back. I've been harassed and even followed home after shifts, and I simply can't afford to get taxis every night."**



**"I hope this comes into place because I've seen taxi drivers with girls in the cars unresponsive and speeding away. I will never forget it, protect our lovely women at night!"**

The potential of a revised service was also seen as a potential economic boost for the 23% of night worker respondents. Their reliance on expensive taxis was described as financially crippling, with 10% explicitly stating a need for affordable transport to prevent a situation where they are effectively "working for free" for the last hour or two of their shifts just to cover the cost of their journey home.



**"I work in a bar in town and ... spend a minimum £40-£50 on Ubers alone."**

Respondents additionally expressed a clear appetite for expansion beyond the proposed pilot phase of a cross water, Liverpool to Birkenhead route and one into south Liverpool. 37% of those who provided text-based feedback suggested extending the network further, indicating that while the pilot might provide a necessary first step, there was significant latent demand for broader geographic night bus coverage.

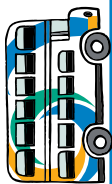
# THE REFINED PROPOSAL FOR A NIGHT BUS PILOT SCHEME

The survey findings were summarised and shared with the Music Board's Venues Subgroup, the Combined Authority and the Steering Group, to reinforce with an evidence base the public demand for a night bus.

## THE PROPOSED ROUTE

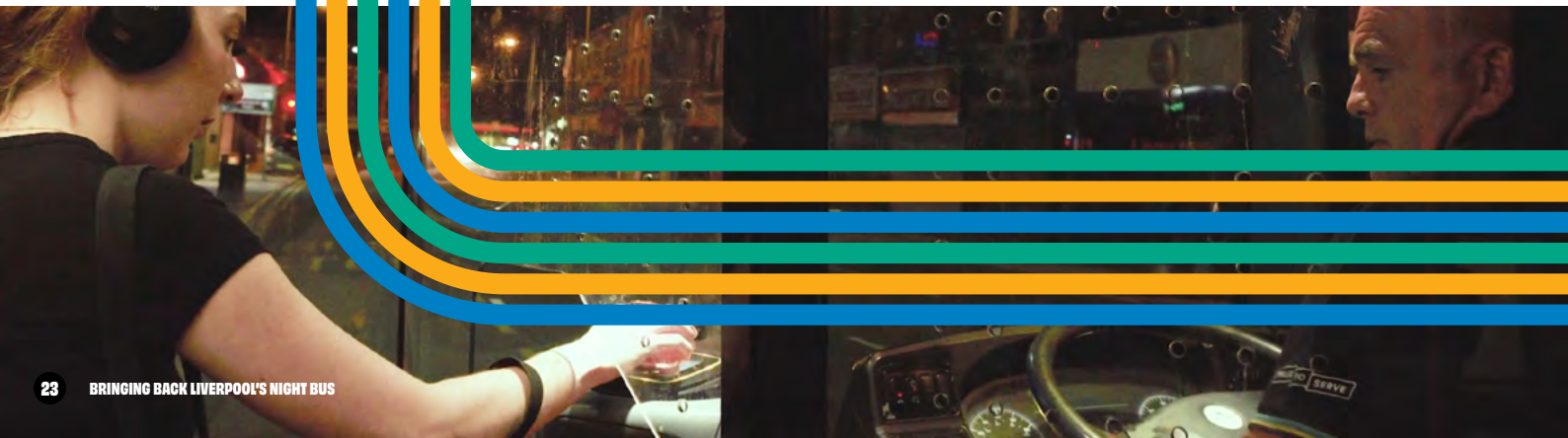
The Steering Group was guided by Merseytravel to adopt the minimal viable route for the pilot service proposal to present a minimal risk option for prospective operators. This route would still be in proximity of Future Yard and Birkenhead venues, and service the route from the bars and accommodation in south Liverpool, home to a large portion of the student population.

# PUBLICITY AND LETTERS OF INTEREST



The campaign was promoted via articles in regional BBC news (Koncienzczy, 2021), the city's university's student guilds aligned their social media campaigns in support, and Professor Mathew Flynn was interviewed on BBC Radio Merseyside to highlight the demand.

In a push to further illustrate support for the campaign, Professor Flynn elicited official letters of support from many of the city's largest institutions. All three of the city's universities expressed support for a safe and affordable transport option for their staff and student populations. Supporting letters/emails were received from The Royal Liverpool University Hospital, the largest and busiest hospital in Merseyside; The Knowledge Quarter, an innovation district covering more than half of the city centre and home to many student and hospital staff accommodation blocks; and Liverpool John Lennon Airport. Whilst the latter would not be served by the proposed initial pilot, the Airport was aware that future expansions could serve as affordable transport options for early shift workers.





# THE NETWORK INVOLVED IN THE NIGHT BUS CAMPAIGN

**As has been alluded to, many organisations and individuals were involved in the negotiations and discussions in building the campaign and corresponding business case for a night bus service.**

Subsequent analysis of campaign coordinator Prof Mathew Flynn's sent email headers specifically relating to the night bus, revealed 59 distinct organisations being involved to varying degrees in the broad campaign support network. This number illustrates the scale and complexity of the distinct organisations and departments involved in initiating this relatively small, socially valuable public transportation policy change.

Though initiated by the LCR Music Board, numerous University of Liverpool departments, individual music venues, nightlife representation bodies, the city council, regional combined authority, and many other Liverpool businesses and services all collaborated to advocate for the return of the night buses. In conjunction with these organisation's activities, critical "invisible" advocacy was maintained within the Combined Authority, with a persistent internal drive to maintain the night bus on the policy agenda. Ultimately it was internal discussions and decisions taken inside the Combined Authority, beyond the workings of the Steering Group, which led to a final decision.



# LCR METRO MAYOR ANNOUNCEMENT

In late November 2023, Steve Rotheram, Mayor of the Liverpool City Region, announced a new year-long trial of the night bus to be launched in Dec 2023 (LCRCA, 2023).

The announcement was framed within the wider context of proposed deregulated governance of the city region's transport system and the recent announcement of plans within the LCR to move towards a franchised model, similar to Transport for London or Manchester's Bee Network.

"We're about to enter the busiest time of the year for our visitor economy and, while we want everyone to have a great time celebrating in our region, we also **want them to get home safely**. We've worked closely with local campaigners, students, late night workers and our hospitality industry to bring back late bus services between Liverpool and the Wirral to make it **safer, cheaper and easier for people to travel home** – without having to cut the party short.

This is a massive result for local people, many who have been campaigning for this moment for three years. Following our decision to take back control of the region's buses and move towards a franchised system, this is another positive step on the journey to **putting the public back at the heart of public transport.**"



**STEVE ROTHERAM,**  
MAYOR OF THE LIVERPOOL CITY  
REGION (MERSEYTRAVEL, 2023)



The agreed routes were a cut down version of those proposed earlier in the campaign, however the fare was capped at £2 – the same as daytime travel, and a Thursday night/Friday morning service was included.

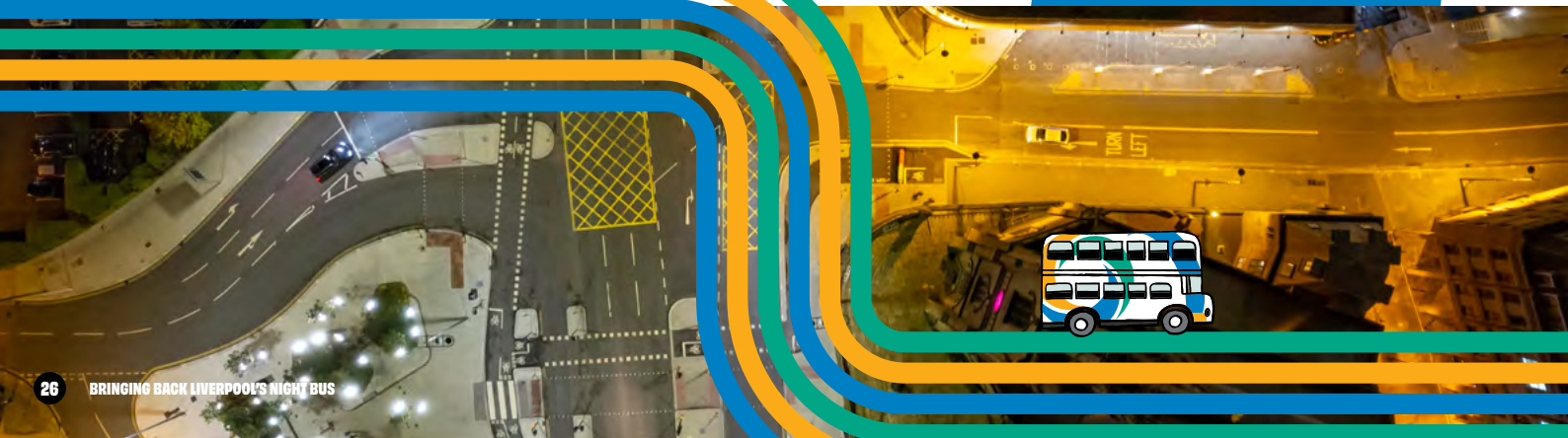
The drawn-out timeframe from initial presentation of a demand for the service in mid-2022 to the launch in Dec 2023 is demonstrative of the complexities in negotiating policy change within a hybrid public-private sector environment. Establishing the night bus service presented significant financial and operational challenges, primarily driven by the high costs of dedicated staffing and enhanced driver pay rates.

Attempts to secure a service through a traditional commercial tendering process saw limited market interest from bus service operators, yielding only two bids. This was described by Merseytravel as a reflection of a general reluctance among commercial operators to absorb the risks involved and mirrored their decisions to cut cross-river services in 2019. The pilot service that eventually emerged from the campaign was a hybrid commercial-led pilot, supported by supplemental funding from the LCRCA's supported service contracts (the same fund that underwrites non-commercial routes deemed a social requirement e.g. school bus services).

Consequently, the N1 Night Bus pilot would rely heavily on achieving specific patronage targets. The long-term viability and potential expansion of this service and any extension of a night bus network would be contingent upon meeting a commercially viable number of passengers per night.

**FARE CAPPED  
AT £2**

the same as  
daytime travel



# N1 NIGHT BUS BEGINS A ONE-YEAR PILOT SERVICE

In December 2023, to accommodate Christmas party season, the N1 night bus service commenced its pilot service, operated by Stagecoach.

The local newspaper, the Liverpool Echo, ran numerous articles to promote the service, interviewing passengers on the first night:

**"We're very happy to have it.** We often don't finish work until around midnight, and an Uber back home is so expensive... It can be anywhere from £13 to £16 to even when we split it's like £8. It's crazy that the night bus wasn't an option, **it's such a vital thing to have a cheaper way to get home."**



**A PASSENGER, LEAH**  
SPEAKING IN THE LIVERPOOL  
ECHO (HAYGARTH, 2023)





There was immediate impact at Future Yard and other Birkenhead venues who began programming later shows in celebration of the announcement (Future Yard, 2023).

Following the initiation of the pilot service, researchers from the University of Liverpool's Music Department and Centre for Educational Development and Support, alongside the Civic Data Cooperative initiated a second survey to record passenger sentiment and overall reception of night bus. The survey was designed in collaboration with RealWorth (2026), a Liverpool-based social value consultancy, who contributed questions which would provide data suitable for determining a 'social value' score for the night bus.



**Figure 10:** Facebook post celebrating later night programming and the return of the night bus, Dub Defenders (2023).

"In the last few months, **we've had more people come to our Open Mic on bus.** Beforehand you'd have loads of cars parked outside the venue, but now **we're seeing less cars and more people in the venue.** I'd like to think people think that the night bus is there as an option. ... it's hard to pin down those kinds of correlations one-to-one, but there is definitely a trend"



**CARRICK MORAN,**  
EVENTS 471, BIRKENHEAD  
BASED PROMOTER



# SURVEY #2: 'TELL US WHAT YOU THINK'

The passenger evaluation survey commenced in May 2024 and remains active at the time of writing in July 2026. To date, 823 passengers have responded.

The survey has been promoted via QR codes on posters (in venues and on the night bus itself), as beer mats in pubs, bars and venues, and predominately on social media. Respondents' data indicates that the service is used predominately by younger people with more than 75% of respondents under 34 years of age, and half were female.<sup>2</sup>

2. Based upon respondents who answered demographic questions. A full demographic breakdown of respondents can be found in Appendix 1.

The key findings were that:

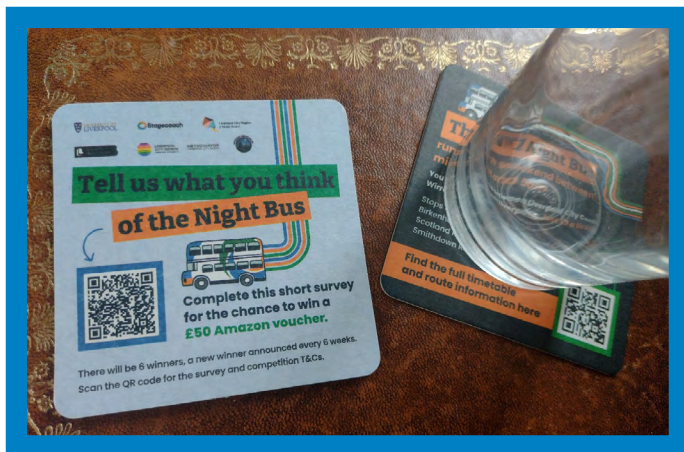
**52%**  
of respondents use the service  
to **get to/home from work.**

**79%**  
of respondents use the service  
to **get home from a night out.**

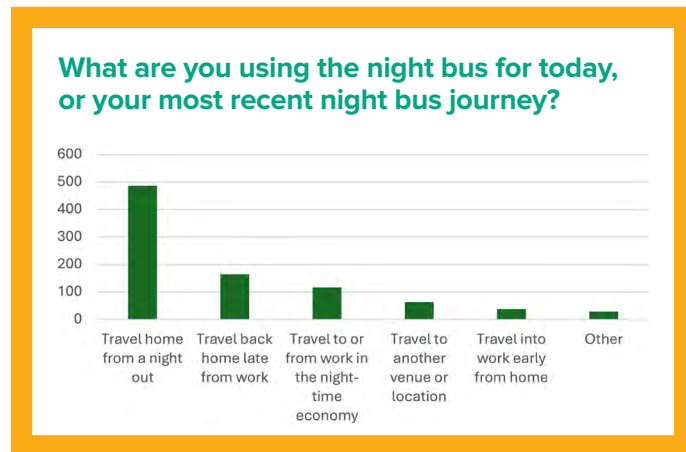
**81%**  
said using the bus  
improved feelings of  
**environmental consideration.**

**85%**  
said using the bus  
improved feelings of **safety.**

**32%**  
use the service at least  
**once a week.**



**Figure 11:** Beer mats to promote the second survey, funded by Liverpool BID and designed by Blush Creative. Photograph: Richard Anderson



**Figure 12:** Respondents reasons for travelling on the night bus from survey #2 data.

Core themes emerging from thematic analysis of free text responses to survey questions were that the night bus is considered safer, cheaper, increases employment opportunities, and enhances opportunities for sociality.



# FEELING SAFE ON THE WAY HOME

In addition to the survey recording that **85% of respondents felt the night bus improved their feelings of safety whilst travelling, 85% also stated that they valued safety as a very or extremely important aspect of what a night bus provides.**

This was supported by 31% of respondents who provided text responses about how the night bus had benefited them.

"Provided a cheaper alternative from Uber for getting home from a night out and a safer alternative than walking. **As a woman I feel safe on the night bus** even when travelling alone and use the service as my primary transport when coming back from a night out."



**FEMALE, 18-24**  
STUDENT

"I can go out like other people without fear of being scooped<sup>3</sup> or worse. Or at least less fear."



**FEMALE, 18-24**  
FULL TIME EMPLOYED

Previous studies have indicated that women unanimously report feeling less safe when traveling at night (Plyushteva and Boussauw, 2020; Skellington et al 2023). They often describe late night travel as necessitating states of 'constant vigilance' or 'anticipatory angst'. This lived experience of perceived unsafety directly shapes mobility choices, including selection of transport modes and routes. The high value placed on safety, and overall majority of respondents reporting that the night bus improved feelings of safety.

Our survey responses indicate night bus is valued for its affordability and independence option for females travelling alone. Many women prefer the bus at night because the driver is physically visible, accessible, and can be approached immediately if a situation escalates.

Whilst taxis and Ubers are frequently viewed as a safe late-night option because they provide 'door-to-door' service, removing the need to walk alone through unlit areas or wait at isolated stops, they are not seen as universally safe with several female survey respondents expressing concerns about being alone with a male driver or the lack of oversight in app-based services.

"I won't use taxis as I don't like to be alone in a vehicle with a stranger. I'd rather walk. **I always feel safe on a bus.**"



**FEMALE, 55-64**  
PART TIME EMPLOYED

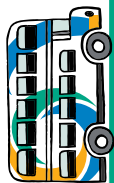
3. The term 'scooped' as used here is considered to refer to fear of being taken advantage of, either financially or sexually.

To date there have been no reports of violent, or sex crimes reported on the night bus. When asked 'Have you experienced any negative impacts or effects from using the night bus service?' only seven survey respondents reported feeling unsafe (0.8%).<sup>4</sup> Whilst 3% complained about drunken passengers, these were generally framed as annoying rather than dangerous. Service unreliability, such as delays or cancellations, was a concern as a safety issue due to the potential to leave people stranded and potentially vulnerable for longer periods.

"Feel so much safer getting home at night or travelling out at night and **has saved me a fortune**, used to walk to avoid having to pay for Ubers so the night bus is literally a life saver"



**FEMALE, 18-24**  
FULL TIME EMPLOYED



4. We acknowledge that we do *not* have data from people who choose not to take the night bus due to a perceived fear of safety on board.





# AFFORDABILITY IN A COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS

Nearly half (48%) of those who provided a text response relating to the benefits of the night bus mentioned financial savings.

"It means I don't have to pay £30-50 for an Uber home"



**MALE, 18-24**

FULL TIME EMPLOYED

The high cost of taxis/Ubers, the predominate pre-night bus transport option, creates an unequal relative burden for those on lower incomes who must spend a disproportionate share of their earnings on safe travel to/from work, or entertainment. For workers, especially those serving the nighttime economy, the night bus option was frequently described as a 'no-brainer' means to retaining a night's earnings.

"It's saved my monthly wage so much, it used to cost nearly 3 hours of my wages to get home from work"



**FEMALE, 24-34**

PART TIME EMPLOYED

# INCREASED EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

As has been described in a detailed study on nighttime transportation in London (Smeds et al, 2017), there is often a focus on late night transport as facilitating “consumption-focused” activities (drinking, attending nightclubs etc) despite these being sustained only through the labour of service economy workers.

The Liverpool campaign was attuned to this concern. The position of venue staff and other workers was reflected in survey questions. Likewise, the campaign sought buy-in from large scale employers with night time workforces (e.g. hospitals and the airport). This was vindicated with the survey revealing that 52% of survey respondents reported that they had recently used the service to get to or from work, and when describing night bus benefits, 7% directly mentioned the existence of a night bus as facilitating new employment opportunities.

“Allowed me to take on late jobs on the Liverpool side without a large financial impact from travel”



**MALE, 18-24**  
FULL TIME EMPLOYED

“Able to go to and from the Wirral without having to pay £20 for a cab. Enables me to take on shifts after 10pm. **Safe way to get home**”



**NON-BINARY, 35-44**  
PART TIME EMPLOYED

“As a manager who has to stay late for work, **I don't feel anxious about how I'm getting home after**”



**FEMALE, 25-34**  
FULL TIME EMPLOYED

“The night bus is **the best thing ever!** I live in Liverpool but work in Wirral and have friends in Wirral. Without the night bus I wouldn't be able to get home from work, or socialise”



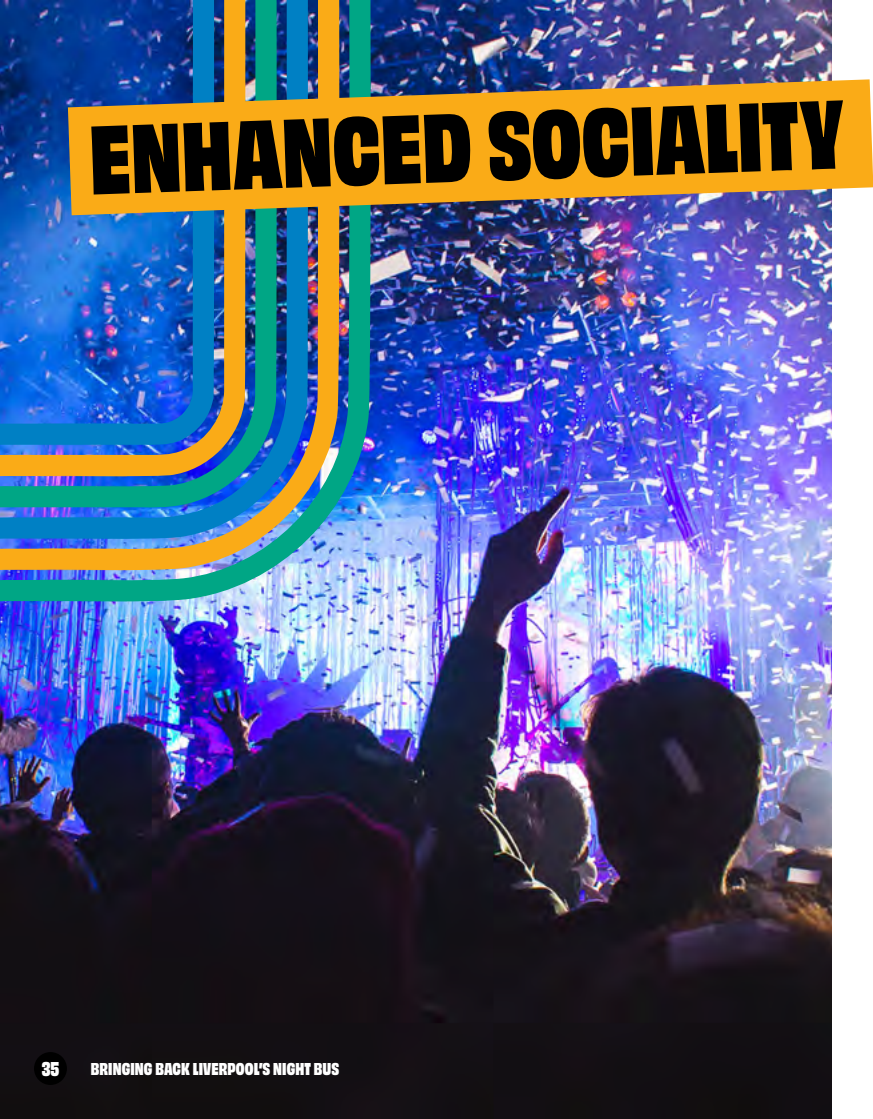
**FEMALE, 25-34**  
FULL TIME EMPLOYED

“I actually can get an extra job in the city as it's worth it now when I don't have to pay for a cab to get me home safe”



**FEMALE, 35-44**  
NOT CURRENTLY EMPLOYED





# ENHANCED SOCIALITY

A further significant theme to emerge from the passenger survey is the night bus' contribution to improved social connectivity and enjoyment of shared cultural events.

"This has **helped me to enjoy more nights out** with friends giving me the opportunity to socialise."



**FEMALE, 18-24** PART TIME EMPLOYED

Immobility is a common strategy for managing nocturnal risk. Previous research has highlighted that some people choose not to go out at night at all due to lack of transport options and general safety fears (Plyushteva and Boussauw, 2020). Others limit social activities to only local areas. The provision of a safe and affordable service can bridge the gap between 'immobility and mobility' and removes what are for some, significant anxiety inducing barriers to sociality. Several respondents to our survey described that the night bus meant they felt less worried about a night out and consequently less socially isolated.

"**It makes me feel much less isolated**, something I've been struggling with since the pandemic"



**MALE, 25-34** FULL TIME EMPLOYED

"If the night bus didn't exist, I wouldn't go to Liverpool"



**MALE, 35-44** PART TIME EMPLOYED



# THE SOCIAL VALUE CREATED BY THE N1 NIGHT BUS SERVICE

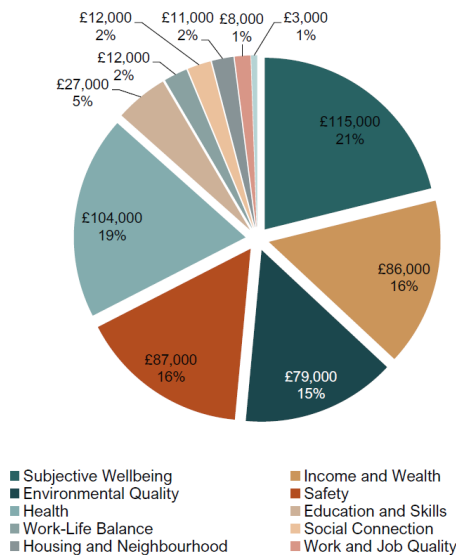
To provide a more thorough analysis of anticipated benefits, RealWorth were commissioned by the University of Liverpool to assess the N1 service's social impact using a Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework.

Specific questions were added to the survey which would enable an analysis focused on individual wellbeing and broader societal costs, using a methodology that quantifies community benefits in monetary terms, demonstrating value beyond traditional economic measurements (see figure 13). Their findings are fully documented in their own published report (RealWorth, 2026).

In summary, RealWorth's report identifies that the N1 delivered a tangible impact for 82% of users, with 44% reporting they would not have travelled at all without it.

Key outcomes include users making significant financial savings (84%) and marked improvements in safety and peace of mind (both 82%). Beyond transportation, the service generates social value by facilitating access to pursue hobbies, employment opportunities, and social connections. Additionally, by fostering environmental awareness (76%) and local pride, the night bus acts as a vital catalyst for community wellbeing, justifying future investment based on its positive impact on community health and safety rather than purely commercial returns.





RealWorth's report concludes with a calculation of social value. Based upon Merseytravel's estimates that the N1 service has a £110,000 annual gross cost, which has generated £542,000 in social value. This results in an impressive SROI ratio of 4.93:1. Consequently, every £1 invested in the night bus delivers a minimum of £4.93 in community benefits, which provides a robust financial case for the service.

"In the context of the Liverpool City Region Combined Authorities' broader focus on valuing social impact rather than just economic return, the study reinforces the argument that the Service should remain a fixture of the city's transport network. With its positive social outcomes, **its role is vital in enhancing the quality of life for a wide range of individuals**, providing a service that is already available in several major UK cities."



(REALWORTH, 2026: 20)

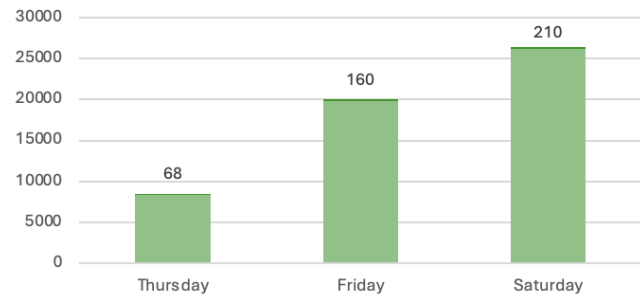
**Figure 13:** RealWorth's breakdown of total value created by the factor of social value which is created (RealWorth, 2026)

# SURVEY SENTIMENT VERSUS PASSENGER NUMBERS



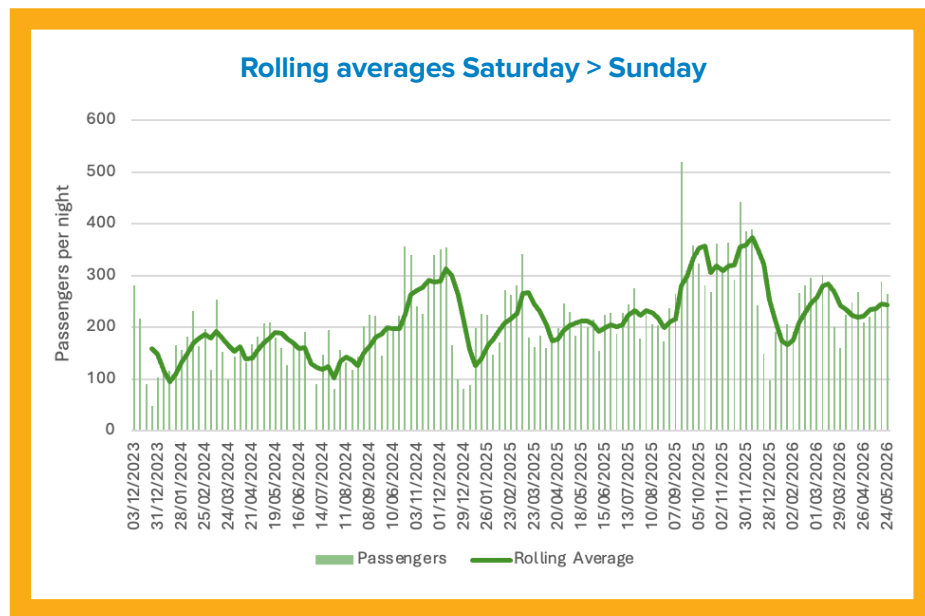
Despite the overwhelming positive responses to the 'tell us what you think' survey, and the findings of RealWorth's analysis, passenger numbers (see figures 14-15) are lower than anticipated, and on some nights are below a commercial break-even point.

Total and average passenger numbers by night



**Figure 14:** Table showing passenger journeys per night (left axis) with average passenger numbers per night at the top of each bar. Dec 2023 - May 2026

Whilst month on month averages are rising, they are doing so slowly. Passenger numbers are subject to season fluctuations with significant drop in numbers following Christmas and New Year, with January and February showing dips in usage as can be seen in the rolling average charts for Saturday night into Sunday morning services (see figure 15). Spikes are seen when the service is heavily used on special occasions, especially Halloween.



**Figure 15:** Nightly passenger numbers (vertical axis) and rolling average (dark line) for Saturday night into Sunday morning service Dec 2023 – May 2026.

Why do the sentiments expressed in the two surveys as to the economic and wellbeing advantages of the night bus service not translate into extensive usage?

A common hypothesis is that the service has been poorly advertised. This concern will be addressed more specifically in the next section of this report.

Another idea proposed is that the night bus may be considered a valuable back up option. The hourly frequency being somewhat limiting whereas a shared taxi/Uber fare may be more convenient than waiting or leaving an event early. Some responses in the survey allude to this.

“An option to rely on so won’t be stuck”

“I’m able to know if I’m out and miss the train I can get home”

“Assurance and comfort in having it as a viable option to travel home”

“Having the bus that runs to a schedule is also good as I know when it leaves so if my phone dies, I still know how to get home”



**SURVEY RESPONDENTS**

In this regard the night bus can be considered as having what are described in economic and social value measurement frameworks as having both a 'use value' and a 'non-use value'. For those using the service, it is highly valuable, bringing direct benefits of feelings of safety, and access to social encounters. Even though passenger numbers may not numerically make the service commercially profitable using market valuation, a 'contingency valuation' (DCMS, 2024:8) – a measure of willingness to pay – was evident in the result of our first survey, where respondents indicated they would pay £4 to use the service – double the eventual £2 flat fee. Non-use value refers to those who have not directly used the night bus service yet, but value its presence for others, or their own future use, even as a 'fail-safe' option.

"I think lots of people like having the option. Even if they might not necessarily use that option. We might want to get a taxi one night because it might be cheaper for five of us to get in a taxi. But if I'm in work, it'll be cheaper for me to get the bus."



**KATHRYN MANLEY,**  
FORMER LIVERPOOL GUILD OF  
STUDENTS VICE PRESIDENT

To test these ideas, Rowan Bradbury of the University of Liverpool Student Guild conducted a 'stop and ask straw poll' survey of 250 students in May 2025 around the campus to ascertain general awareness of the service amongst students, to try to better understand any inhibiting factors that may be preventing greater use. Their findings are as follows:

- Only 59% of students were aware that the night bus existed, with roughly half of these becoming aware through word of mouth (47%).
- Only 18% of those asked had actually used the night bus, with just 3% of all respondents using the bus 'a lot'.
- Those who were aware of the service but didn't use it were asked 'Why have you not used it?': 60% reported distance, either living close enough to the centre to walk home or occasionally living beyond available routes e.g. lived outside of Liverpool.
- Further routes, increased frequency, better advertising and cost all featured with equal weight as incentives which would increase usage.

The Guild's findings point toward (a) predominately occasional use, (b) continued deficiency in promoting the service to potential users, (c) concerns surrounding the frequency of service times, and (d) route limitations.





# 'LIVERPOOL'S BEST KEPT SECRET': THE AWARENESS PROBLEM

Passenger numbers provided by Stagecoach in the first few months of 2024 were considerably lower than the estimated passenger journeys per night needed to make the service financially viable.

It was apparent to many who had been involved in the campaign that promotion of the service was poor. Conversations with Liverpool residents and students in the first six months of operation invariably revealed a widespread lack of awareness that a night bus service was available again.

"Just need more advertisements to generate more awareness of what's going on [the night bus], you know? I mean, I looked out for it and there was nothing."



**PETER LEE,**  
LIVERPOOL PUB WATCH

Stagecoach had delivered leaflets to residents along the bus route and had promoted the service via their social media. The Combined Authority had extremely limited budget available for advertising. A major push for awareness occurred in May 2024 when students distributed posters and beer mats to venues and bars featuring QR codes for the bus timetable and to access the passenger survey. The posters were designed and printed using university research budgets.

"I think people just don't know about it as much. I think we try to do big marketing campaigns and push it as much as we can. But there is a limit to what is a Guild or the University could do. The city authorities and the bus companies have to promote it more"



**KATHRYN MANLEY,**  
FORMER LIVERPOOL GUILD OF  
STUDENTS VICE PRESIDENT



When interviewed, John Hughes of Liverpool Nightlife CIC, disappointed by this lack of awareness referred to the night bus as 'Liverpool's best kept secret'.

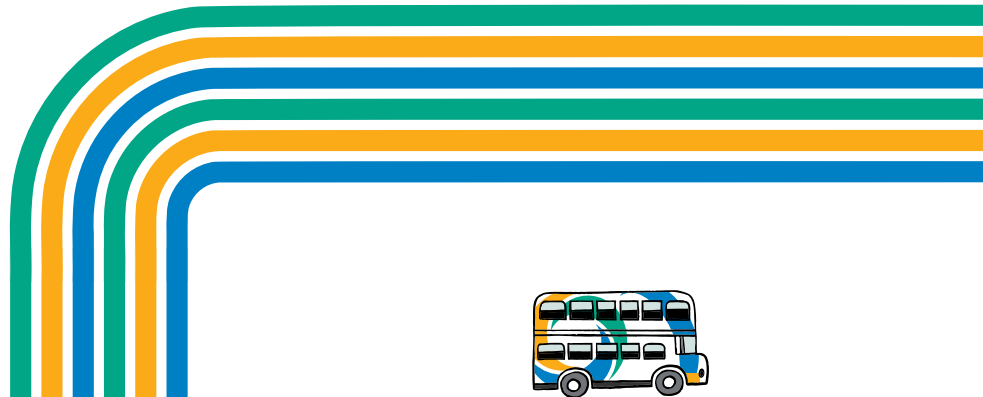
"I think it'd be nice to have it advertised in the street. I mean, when people are actually out and about. Social media campaigns are great, but a bus is a very tangible piece of infrastructure that people can see and relate to. If you're on a night out, you can see the poster and say, 'OK, that's my option next'."



**CARRICK MORAN,**  
EVENTS 471, BIRKENHEAD  
BASED PROMOTER

A sustained presence of the N1 service being advertised on all bus stop timetables and on electronic signs at Liverpool One's central bus terminal, was first observed in September 2024, ten months after it commenced operation. Prior to this, Saturday night into Sunday morning (consistently the busiest night) passenger numbers had only exceeded 200 on six occasions, with an average of 153 passengers. From September until the end of the year this average increased by 55% to 237.

Expanding advertisement of the service onto bus stop timetables beyond the N1 route (such as other cross-river services or the 699 student halls to universities bus, and even at cross river train stations) have been proposed to the Combined Authority and Merseytravel. A complex system of sign ownership and advertising restrictions reveal that, beyond budgetary constraints, further efforts to achieve alignment of cross-institutional and commercial interests are required to broaden advertising to increase awareness of the N1.



# KEY CHALLENGES

## INSTITUTIONAL DATA ACCESS

Prior to initiating the campaign, many people felt that the night bus would have a positive impact on reducing the incidence of post-midnight violent assaults as it would enable people to leave the city centre quicker after leaving an entertainment venue.

Two avenues were explored by researchers from the Music Department and the Civic Data Cooperative to attempt to verify this. Firstly, available datasets for hospital admissions were examined, but these do not record the precise time of day, or location of incident. Nor do these reliably record reasons for a patient's injuries, so were discounted as evidence sources.

Readily available Merseyside Police datasets that might support a violence reduction hypothesis also do not record the precise location of incidents, only street names. This data was further complicated by its aggregation of crime types (e.g. violence and sexual violence are grouped together).



# EMBEDDING SUSTAINABLE INCENTIVES



As highlighted in RealWorth's analysis, fostering environmental awareness, is an important aspect of the services' benefit for many passengers.

"Provided a greener way of travel at night"



MALE, 55-64

The five scheduled night buses, if full, would replace at least 133 taxi/Uber journeys (based on a generous average of three passengers per taxi ride). Yet, as has been made clear in the recent UK Government budget, economic growth remains locked into a support for car-based transport with fuel duty levies frozen at a cost of £3bn.

In 2025 average local UK bus fares outside London rose by approximately 15.2% (Department for Transport, 2025), whilst the introduction of a £3 fare cap in some areas represented a 50% increase.<sup>5</sup> Regulated train fares in England also rose by 4.5% in 2025 (Office of Rail and Road, 2025).

In 2024 Liverpool was named as the world's first 'Accelerator City' for climate action, "in recognition of Liverpool's impressive commitment to innovation and smart regulation to rapidly decarbonise the live music and TV/ Film production sectors."

"As an 'Accelerator City', Liverpool will expand on this use of policy, technology, infrastructure, and transport practices to pilot and then embed decarbonisation methods into the fabric of the city"



(UN CLIMATE CHANGE, 2024)

5. At the time of going to press new UK prime minister Andy Burnham announced a £2 cap on most bus fares in England from January 2027. This matches fares held at £2 by Liverpool and Manchester combined authorities. Bus usage remains below pre-COVID-19 levels despite a series of fare caps across the UK. (Austin, 2026)



The provision of late night transport for music and entertainment audiences aligns with any city's aspirations to progress towards at least two of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals:

**Goal 11: Sustainable Development**, specifically Target 11.2:

"By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons"

 (UNRIC, 2024a)

**Goal 5: Gender Equality**, specifically Targets 5.2 and 5.c:

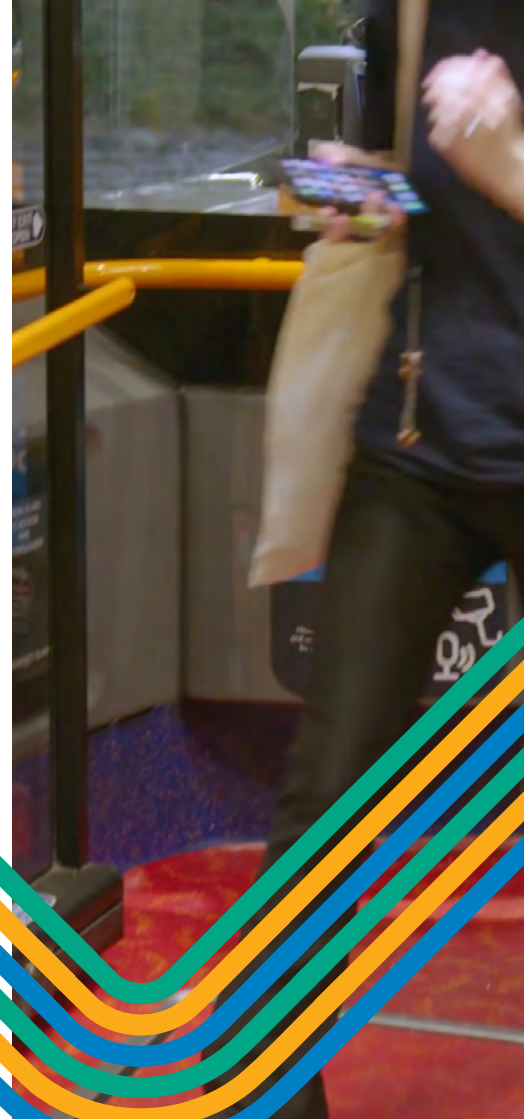
"Eliminate all forms of violence against all females in the public and private spheres..."

"Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels."

 (UNRIC, 2024b)

## The challenges of initiating and sustaining a night bus service serve as a microcosm of the broader struggles to promote global sustainability.

Despite the context and rhetoric surrounding Liverpool as the world's first 'Accelerator City' for climate action, at every level it would appear that people are not incentivised enough to change their behaviours. On the surface, in public statements and within our survey responses everyone thinks having a night bus service is a good thing. However, low passenger numbers indicate that for most people leaving the city centre, the buses are not necessarily cheap enough, available enough or convenient enough compared to taxis/Ubers.





# KEY CAMPAIGN SUCCESS AND FINDINGS

## The story of bringing back Liverpool's night bus has been characterised by multi-agency collaboration and the formation of a broad campaign network spanning municipal, academic and commercial sectors.

The campaign itself was featured in the House of Commons. Culture, Media and Sport Committee's 'Fan-led review of live and electronic music' (2026: 57). This Special Report identified from a national consultation survey, that "transport availability, cost, safety and accessibility shape the experience of going to live and electronic music events" and highlighted the LCR campaign as a case study of a local solution aimed at reducing barriers to access and better aligning transport with late night economies.

- The core success of the campaign was the **re-establishment of a night bus service** in the LCR, despite a post-pandemic reluctance from bus operators.
- To date there have been over **57,500 passenger journeys** on Liverpool's N1 pilot service.
- Despite being announced as a 12-month pilot, the bus has been operational now for **32 months**.
- Passengers numbers using the service every Sunday morning are approaching the suggested commercial breakeven point.
- Research findings point to overwhelming evidence to suggest passengers **feel safer** and find the service **significantly more affordable** than taxis/Ubers.
- Nighttime workers who use the bus report having **increased take home pay**, with the service also opening avenues for **new employment opportunities** especially with a cross-river route.
- Service users describe how the night bus has enabled them to **be more sociable**, with some saying the service has helped them **feel less isolated**.
- Applying a social value analysis to results of the passenger survey, RealWorth have demonstrated that **every £1 invested in the night bus, delivers a minimum of £4.93 in social value community benefits**, using social return on investment measurements.

"It has helped me be financially responsible as a student and **has helped me when I have been stranded alone** on a night out when I wouldn't be able to afford an Uber on my own – this is very important as a woman."

"Ubers are too expensive – a modern metropolitan city like Liverpool should have access to night buses."



# FUTURE SUGGESTIONS

## THE BUS SERVICES ACT AND THE FRANCHISING OPPORTUNITY

**The Bus Services Act 2025 provides a regulatory framework that, while not explicitly naming night buses, classifies services enabling access to employment and social activities as “socially necessary.”**

This designation requires local authorities to monitor these routes and empowers them to provide direct grants to operators, ensuring essential nocturnal transport is maintained even when not commercially profitable. The Act requires authorities to list these services and consider alternative arrangements if an operator proposes to cancel them.

In conjunction with these regulations, the franchising model to be adopted by the LCR represents a strategic shift from individual route profitability to “system-level viability.” This model allows combined authorities to prioritise community needs over commercial margins, facilitating a range of potential benefits:

- Authorities can design and pilot 24/7 services on essential corridors that would otherwise be cut under a de-regulated, profit-driven model.
- Franchising enables multi-agency partnerships and mandatory staff training to combat anti-social behaviour and gender-based violence, aligning with the Act’s safety requirements.
- It supports “modal integration,” where night buses are timed to meet other transport modes under a unified brand and fare structure, increasing reliability and network cohesion.
- By using mayoral precepts and Grants for Socially Necessary Services, authorities can subsidise the higher operational costs of anti-social hours, supporting both the workforce and the night-time economy.

Both the 2025 Act and the franchising model offer an opportunity for the LCR to transform late-night transport from a commercial risk into a vital public service. One that ensures those who work or socialise at night are provided with safe, affordable, and inclusive mobility.

There are positive precedents that the Liverpool City Region can draw on. Following Greater Manchester's switch to a franchise model, that region has moved beyond pilot services to the operation of 16 through-the-night routes across its Bee Network.

Given that the impetus for the campaign was initiated by distinct music venues and the LCR Music Board's consultation findings, it is important to consider how vital a role public transport plays in maintaining a healthy music ecosystem, especially given its status within the city region's cultural and economic profile.

"Music is at the heart of the Liverpool City Region's global identity."



**STEVE ROTHERAM,**  
MAYOR OF THE LIVERPOOL  
CITY REGION (ROTHERAM, 2026)

"Music is central to our city region...  
It's vital that we continue to support  
our local music industry"



**COUNCILLOR MIKE WHARTON,**  
LIVERPOOL CITY REGION  
COMBINED AUTHORITY PORTFOLIO  
HOLDER FOR CULTURE, TOURISM  
AND THE VISITOR ECONOMY  
(THE GUIDE LIVERPOOL, 2022)

This relationship between public transport policy and live music economies was made paramount in the recent House of Commons committee special report: 'Fan-led review of live and electronic music'. Drawing from data collected from music fan consultations and surveys across the UK, the report concludes with a 'Live and Electronic Music Fan-Led Charter' comprising of Seven Essentials, of which Transport is one. Their recommendations reflect those in this report:

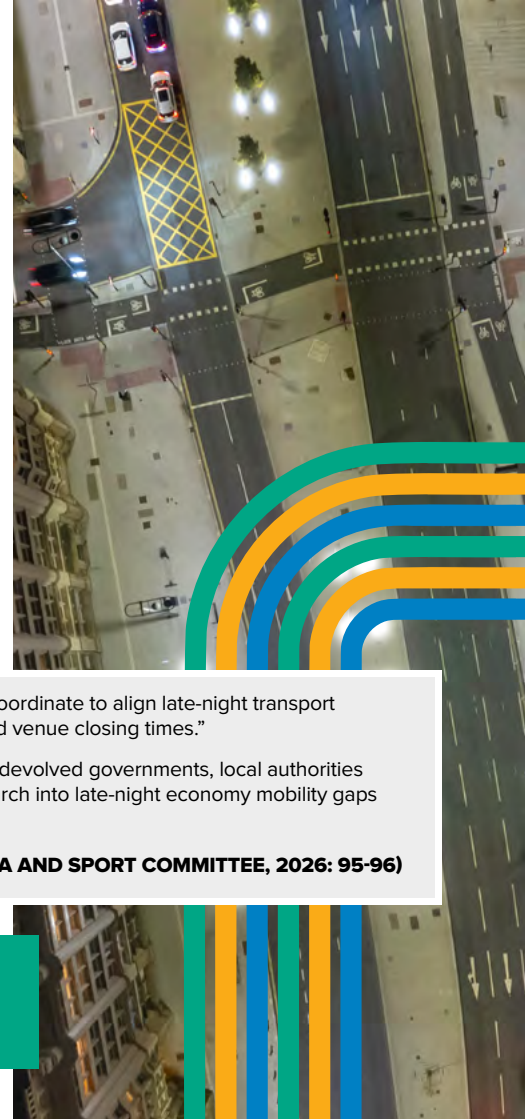
"Local authorities and transport operators should coordinate to align late-night transport schedules with live and electronic music event and venue closing times."

"The Department for Transport, in partnership with devolved governments, local authorities and transport operators, should commission research into late-night economy mobility gaps between cities, towns and rural communities."



**(HOUSE OF COMMONS. CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT COMMITTEE, 2026: 95-96)**

**To support these aspirations,  
we make the following proposals:**



# 1. INVEST IN SIGNIFICANT PROMOTION OF THE NIGHT BUS

## The night bus needs to move from being described as 'Liverpool's best kept secret'.

Whilst we recognise that there are a myriad of concerns competing for potential passenger attention, and advertising space is a revenue generator for multiple agencies in the transport ecosystem, current awareness of the night bus remains low. The findings from the Guild's survey found that 40% of students were not aware of a safe and affordable night bus, despite it being routed to the primary student accommodation zone of the city. This surely represents a promotional failure.

Sustained high visibility widespread advertising of the service across the entire network, as a public service provision, regardless of operator, is needed from Merseytravel. There is an argument that using a specific N route name inhibits promotion that could state "this bus runs all night" on bus stop timetables and onboard digital screens and posters.

"People just need to know it's there."



**CRAIG PENNINGTON,**  
CEO OF FUTURE YARD

"We have to build the network, develop [services] and build the patronage. That's one of the key aspirations of any transport plan is to build patronage, create sustainability... then the proposition of developing new services becomes less of a risk financially because there'll be an income that pays for those services."



**TONY MCDONOUGH,**  
BUS OPERATIONS MANAGER,  
LCRCA

"Local authorities and transport providers should work together with venues to display up-to-date and reliable transport information inside music venues and at festival information points and exits."



**(HOUSE OF COMMONS,  
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT  
COMMITTEE, 2026: 96)**



## 2. EXPERIMENT WITH FREQUENCY

Most night bus services within the UK have traditionally run on hourly timetables outside of London. This remains the case for most longer distance routes from town/city centres to outlying districts.

However, night buses in Bath operate every half-hour on routes passing student accommodation zones, and some of Greater Manchester's night buses run half-hour schedules on select days of the week (Transport for Greater Manchester, 2026).

Many survey respondents and select venues and promoters we interviewed highlight the 55 minute wait if a bus is missed as potentially unsafe, which invariably leads to a taxi journey or walking. Adding an extra bus per night so each journey from the city centre (to south Liverpool, or to Birkenhead) runs on half-hourly schedules, in conjunction with a significant promotion push, may result in a rise in patronage.

Within a franchise model it is anticipated that a body such as Merseytravel could analyse individual trip patronage data by boarding time and location and model demand flows to accommodate surge patterns at select times of the night.

## 3. EXPAND ROUTING OPTIONS

The most significant complaint about the N1 night bus articulated in our survey data remains the limitation of the current routes.

North Liverpool and towns deeper into the Wirral (and all other LCR districts) are not currently served. Whilst the city region progresses towards its aspiration of a broader 24/7 multi route network, introducing further night bus pilots serving other areas of the region would build patronage and public support. The model and methods employed in the N1 campaign could be harnessed to establish an evidence base for decision making and stakeholder identification.

"A night bus network needs to be just that, really. Our one service is great, but to really make it work it needs to be a network of services, to really give this the full impact it should have."



**TONY MCDONOUGH,**  
BUS OPERATIONS MANAGER, LCRCA



# 4. ALIGN NIGHT BUS PROVISION WITHIN AN INTEGRATED TRANSPORT PLAN

## The LCRCA Local Transport Plan has now been adopted..

Many of the points made in this report regarding safety, affordability, commuting options, and social inclusion are present in the Plan. Whilst there is no direct reference to night bus provision, it does point to a recognition of known gaps:

"Areas of poor connectivity by bus and where journey times are poor relative to the private car or rail options, if these exist, including poor connectivity in the evenings, at night and in the dark in response to changes in demand. Equally, there are areas that are over-bussed, or else where buses compete with each other and with parallel rail networks, rather than operating as a joined-up network."



(LCRCA, 2026: 17 ):

We suggest that explicit consideration of either 24/7 provision across select routes, or an expansion of night bus Nx services become integral to addressing this gap. Consideration of passenger uplift in the wider evening period flowing into the city on bus services *and* Merseyrail rail services could be used to inform potential demand within an integrated transport plan. Alignment of late night bus services with other transport options, surge demand (night club exits at 4am, hospital and airport shift patterns) would require further comprehensive research and subsequent promotion.

Maximising the advantages of franchising might also extend to bypassing current restrictions that inhibit preferential promotion of one particular commercial bus operator over another.

This could significantly expand the scope of advertising potential. Likewise the introduction of standard cross-network payment mechanisms would enable passengers to use 'tap on' payment and weekly network tickets across buses and local Merseytravel Metro train services into the city and the night bus home.

"Without an integrated [transport] offer, I think it's very limiting to what Liverpool looks like now and I think that's damaging for the future. The identity of the city centre and the outlying regions is changing. And it will continue to change if the barrier to access is increasingly higher. If you're just relying on people who can afford the expensive taxis which are employing surge pricing, then you're ruling out large parts of society."



**CRAIG PENNINGTON,**  
CEO OF FUTURE YARD

# 5. INTRODUCE AND PROMOTE MEASURES TO IMPROVE PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY

Whilst the vast majority of existing passengers reported feeling safe, negative attitudes may be inhibiting other potential users.

“People’s perception of safety on transport changes considerably between daylight hours and nighttime hours. I think we need to give people the confidence to use it. It’s around the fact that it’s punctual, reliable, that the area that you’re waiting in is safe. It’s well lit. I think they’re the things we need to promote.”



**TONY MCDONOUGH,**  
BUS OPERATIONS MANAGER,  
LCRCA

To enhance safety, this report recommends service operators integrate infrastructure and technological upgrades. Key measures include proactive lighting maintenance, rapid repairs, more visible CCTV/surveillance enhancements along routes, and increased staff visibility at interchanges, and potentially on the buses on peak routes to directly address safety perception, especially amongst female passengers.<sup>6</sup>

Technological priorities involve improving real-time tracking with other apps (e.g. Google Maps) to minimise wait times and promoting discreet reporting tools that allow passengers to alert drivers or control rooms immediately. Collectively, these initiatives would go some way to improve perceptions of safety and ensure a secure environment for late-night travel.

6. As per findings in previous reports (Plyushteva and Boussauw, 2020; Skellington et al 2023).



# FINAL WORDS

**Transport policy must look beyond ‘farebox revenues’ and financial performance as the sole measurements of a successful public transport network.**

The initial motivation and drive behind the Bring Back the Night Bus Campaign was to recognise nocturnal mobility as a matter of a public good, social justice and equity for those that work and socialise in the urban night.

“Liverpool city centre is increasingly a nighttime economy, and it needs people to fuel that, and it needs a public transport system to move those people backwards and forwards.”



**CHRIS TORPEY**, FUTURE YARD DIRECTOR

We look forward to witnessing an expansion of night bus services across the city region within the frameworks of the Bus Services Act and Franchising, which should ensure safe, and affordable nighttime transit for all.





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report has been authored by **Dr Richard Anderson**, a Research and Innovation Associate for MusicFutures, and the University of Liverpool's Institute of Popular Music; and **Professor Mathew Flynn**, Director of the Institute of Popular Music and Co-Director of MusicFutures at University of Liverpool, and a member of the LCR Music Board.

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Alongside Dr Anderson's research analysis, the report also features significant research design, analysis, and invaluable contributions from the following people:

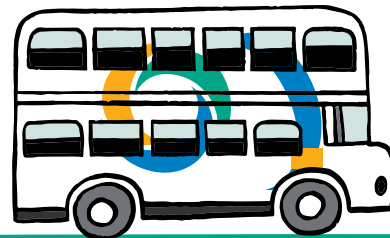
- Liverpool Venue Map data acquisition and survey distribution – **Grace Goodwin** and **Nina Himmelreich** (Postgraduate Researchers, UoL).
- Surveys design – **Ellie Fielding** (former CDC Programme and Operations Manager, now Interim Lead Officer Delivery, LCRCA), **Dr Michael Humann** (UoL Centre for Educational Development & Support,) and **James McGowan** (RealWorth).
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- Social Value analysis – **James McGowan** (RealWorth).
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- Conducting stakeholder interviews and Social Network Analysis – **Jacob Simmons** (Postgraduate Researcher, UoL).

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- **The Liverpool City Region Music Board**
- **John Lord** – Merseytravel
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- **Tony McDonagh** – Previously Bus Operations Manager at LCRCA
- **Kevin McManus** – Head of UNESCO City of Music at Culture Liverpool
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- **Stagecoach** – for reviving and operating the service!

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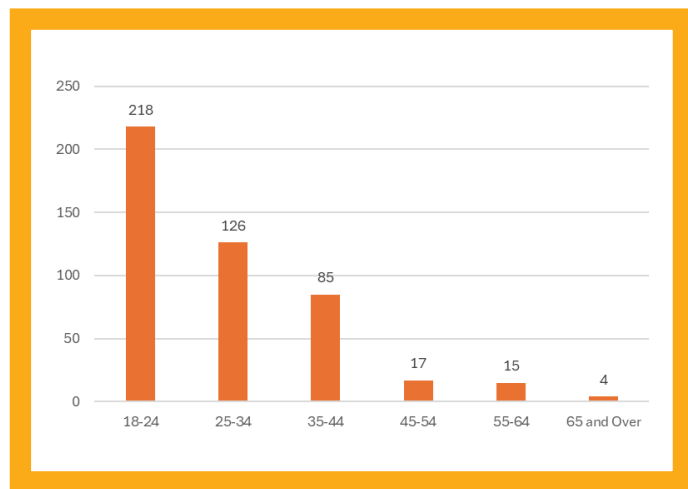
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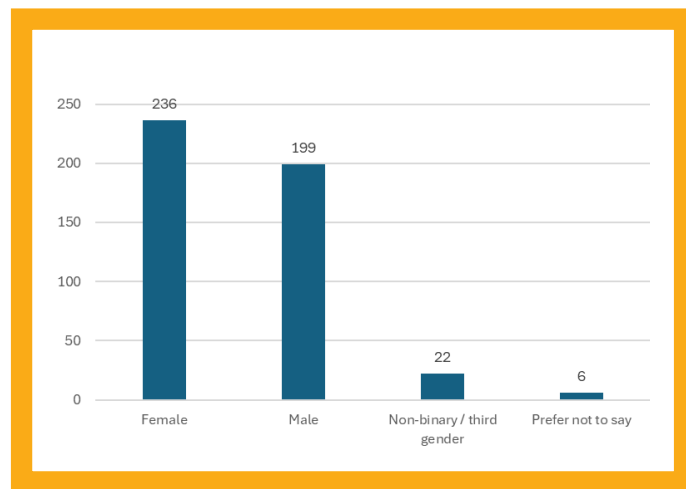
# APPENDIX 1: SURVEY #2

## DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN

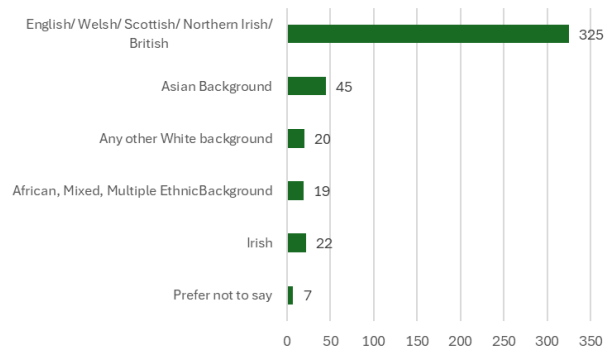
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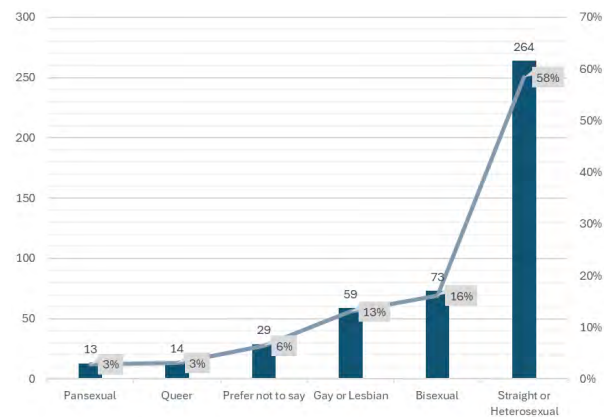
### Gender Identity



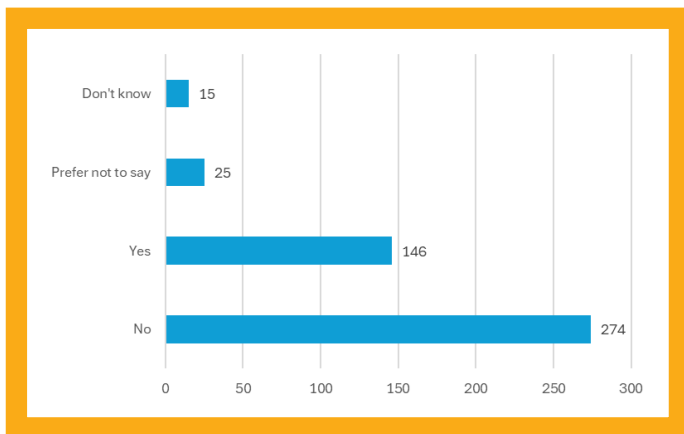
## Ethnicity



## Sexuality



## Physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more.





# BRINGING BACK LIVERPOOL'S Night Bus

