

# Is National Express living up to its 'People' value?

An independent progress report

Tom Harris May 2018



**Our People Value – National Express’s commitment to developing the talents, rewarding the exceptional performance and respecting the rights of all our employees – is one of our core values. As Chief Executive, I recognise that engaging, developing and rewarding our staff is crucial to our future success.**

**It is because of our commitment in this area that I originally asked Tom Harris to review how we were delivering on this value. This is now Tom’s third report and I thank him for his time, effort and candour.**

**I am delighted that Tom believes we are taking our commitment seriously, highlights our investment in Master Driver and DriveCam, and that the employees he has met view our company so favourably.**

**But that said, Tom’s report also contains areas where we need to make further progress and we have already started to respond to the recommendations in the report.**

**We will continue to place a great emphasis on our People Value and I look forward to continuing our improvements in this area in the years ahead.**

**Dean Finch  
Group Chief Executive, National Express Group**

### **Introduction**

This is a report of the third review I have carried out of National Express activities in three locations: Spain, the UK and the US. My first such review was carried out in 2016 and involved visiting locations in the UK, Spain and the US to meet with managers, trade union representatives and employees at National Express’s (or its subsidiaries’) centres of employment.

The initiative for such a review was taken by National Express itself, which was keen to establish, via an independent, objective third party, whether its purported values – particularly its People Value (to “develop the talents, reward the exceptional performance and respect the rights of all our employees”) were being met across its international locations. I accepted the task on the condition that I would have unfettered access to any employee, the ability to ask any question and the freedom to include any criticism or recommendation I felt was justified. In fact, National Express itself insisted on the same conditions, in recognition of the importance that my report should be seen as entirely independent.

In 2016, I visited locations of the Spanish coach company, ALSA, in Madrid and Granada, where I was able to speak with drivers, administrative workers, managers and trade union representatives.

I also visited and spoke with employees at National Express’s railway company, c2c (a franchise that has since passed to another owner) and its bus operations in Birmingham. I then paid visits to five different Customer Service Centres (CSCs) of National Express’s school bus division, Durham School Services, speaking with drivers, managers, mechanics and trade union officials.

My report from that round of visits, “Is National Express living up to its People Value?”, was published in April 2016. Its conclusions were that “Overall, I believe National Express is a good company living up to and delivering its ambitious People Value agenda.” The report made a number of conclusions and recommendations for change, which varied from location to location.

The 2016 report was followed up with a second review which was carried out as a desktop exercise involving one-to-one phone conversations with individuals in each of the locations (Spain, the UK and the US) covered by the previous report. The review was also informed by valuable data (employee surveys, for example) provided by National Express. Although inevitably limited by the practical consequences of not being physically present in these locations, I believe the 2017 report was a valuable and objective resource for National Express leaders.

This third review requested by the company has returned to the 2016 format of on-the-ground visits and face-to-face interviews. In January 2018 I visited Madrid and León and met with ALSA personnel in both locations (as well as using its popular inter-city luxury coach service), followed by visits to National Express’s airport coach service base at Luton Airport and Acocks Green bus depot, Birmingham. The following month I visited five different CSCs in the State of Ohio. My planned visit to a sixth location in Connecticut, unfortunately, had to be cancelled due to the impact of severe weather on internal flights.

As with my previous programme of visits, my meetings were informal in nature, so as to encourage those present to be express their genuine views. Each interview was (with the express permission of the participants) recorded for transcription purposes, with the audio files subsequently deleted.

I would like to place on record my appreciation of senior National Express personnel whose support made it that much easier to gain access to every relevant area of the company and, therefore, to gain an unvarnished and honest picture of the environment and challenges in which its employees are operating every day. My thanks also go to the many individuals who volunteered to give up their free time to speak openly and honestly with me in their places of work. I believe the value of this report lies in the degree to which my access to National Express locations and its people was entirely uninhibited.



## Spain (21-23 January 2018)

### Madrid

ALSA is the largest provider of coach and bus services in Spain and since 2005 has been part of National Express. Spain's bus and coach services are largely regulated via state-allocated franchises (or concessions). Two years ago, during my first visit, the company was still dealing with the aftermath of the worldwide financial crash of 2008 and a national economy still recovering from the consequent economic downturn. Large-scale and disruptive strike action had only recently been resolved and managers and employees were working hard to repair relationships with passengers, government and each other.

ALSA managers have taken the initiative to inform all employees of the five values promoted by National Express: all drivers, for example, are issued with a card featuring them. This illustrates a degree of pride in the effectiveness and relevance the five values have with managers and – it is to be hoped – with other employees.

During my visit in 2018, it became clear that the shadow of that 2014 industrial dispute seems to have lifted entirely; workers and management expressed no desire to rake over the coals of that dispute and instead are committed to nurturing the positive industrial relations that have developed since then. Disputes – usually minor and localised – are identified at an early stage and resolved before getting to the stage of strike action. Managers and drivers seem to have taken ownership of that positive relationship and see it as integral to the continued success of ALSA.

The shadow of the 2008 financial crash, however, has not been so easily dispatched, and there is a desire among drivers for pre-crash wage levels to be restored and overtaken. The blame for lack of wages growth in the last decade was not, however, laid at the door of ALSA or management, but on the crash itself.

The Master Driver programme, which has become such an important part of National Express's activities in the UK, is also gaining ground in Spain, with every driver encouraged to take part, and with awards ceremonies planned. Master Driver is seen (as it is in the UK) as an entirely welcome and positive initiative, with drivers eager to demonstrate their abilities and skills through participation in the programme.

The greatest challenge facing ALSA – and significantly, this is seen as a priority as much by drivers as by management – is the retention of government concessions. In this area, the company has been successful, with the loss of only one modest contract in 2017, with the employees and drivers affected reallocated to other work within ALSA. There is unanimous support (which is understandably self-interested) for managers working to increase the company's business while devoting resources to keeping existing franchises. In this crucial area, there is a sense of a company in which workers at all levels, up to director, are working towards a common, unifying goal.



Following my first visit in 2016, one of the recommendations I made was in the area of intra-company communication and the importance of making sure workers had an avenue to raise issues of concern with their managers. During this visit, it was clear that things have indeed improved, with one worker boasting to me that he was able, if he chose, to make direct contact, through ALSA's email system, with his CEO and to raise questions with him. In fact, the value of this system was raised in response to a question about whether (and why) current employees would recommend working for ALSA to a friend or a relative.

The security and stability that ALSA provides for its workforce remains one of the top attractions for new and existing employees. While the national (Spanish) economy continues to grow and seems to be in a healthier state than two years ago, security of employment is still very much at the top of the list of priorities for workers.

Consequently, in answer to the question, "Would you recommend a job with ALSA to a friend or relative?", the unanimous (and unqualified) response was yes. In the internal employee survey regularly issued to workers, a similar question routinely attracts high scores.

An area of concern for managers is a direct consequence of the recovery of the Spanish economy: it is becoming more expensive to hire drivers from other sectors of the economy – particularly the construction industry, as wages in others sectors recover. This in turn led to a frequently voiced preference that new drivers should be recruited and trained by ALSA, whose training standards are seen by employees as among the (if not the) best in the country. This perception feeds back into the recurring theme of workers' pride in their employer. It was eagerly pointed out to me during my visit that that day, a national newspaper had listed ALSA in its Top 50 Spanish employers to work for.

A relatively low turnover appears to be testament to this fact, but one consequence is that when drivers do leave, it is generally because of retirement. It is in this area where deficiencies in Spain's labour market become clear, with ALSA having to work ever harder to find skilled drivers. It is also proving increasingly difficult to recruit drivers on a temporary basis for seasonal (summer) work.

Recruitment and training (like salaries and benefits) are outside the remit of this report, but I understand there is already an awareness among senior management that this is a supply side challenge that must be addressed. To that end, I understand that National Express directors have already taken action aimed at addressing these concerns, both nationally and at an international level. An initiative that involves support from central government as well as from the National Driving Training School Association was recently launched, and its outcomes should be monitored closely and, if necessary, the initiative expanded. At the international level, ALSA has become a participant in a task force led by the IRU, the world road transport organisation, whose aim is to develop a strategy to meet driver shortages, which are a reality throughout the industry wherever it operates.

There has been a slow but marked improvement, in the last 15 years or so, in the number of women drivers recruited by ALSA. Although women still only make up about 15% of the workforce, equal recruitment policies are in place and further advances expected.

### León

León is where ALSA's North West coach operations are based, providing long-distance services, mostly to Madrid. Significantly, the arrival of high-speed rail services has coincided with an increase in profits for ALSA's services, suggesting that increased competition for both rail and coach has positively grown the inter-city market in the North West.

ALSA operates five different government contracts from León, employing 650 drivers, plus sales and maintenance teams.

The company has faced enormous challenges in the last decade, from the financial crisis (2008) to the arrival of high-speed trains connecting León with Madrid (2010). ALSA has responded by improving customer care as well as the customer experience aboard its coaches. There is also a perception and pride in ALSA's reputation of being "well ahead" of its competitors in terms of safety standards and records.

Managers in León consider the People Value of National Express to be well represented by ALSA. There is a perception that the company not only values its employees, but values their ongoing promotion through the ranks of the company, with various examples cited of individuals being given the opportunity to rise through the ranks according to their abilities. Morale is high, largely because workers know that they have a career, not just a job, ahead of them if they wish to exploit the opportunities.

There was a consistent theme of the need to prioritise the recruitment and training of young people in order to fill the skills gap.

Work/family life balance has improved, at least in some departments, by the company's willingness to embrace new technology – for example, video conferencing as an alternative to face-to-face meetings. In this respect, the skills of younger employees are being used to introduce efficiencies, educating other workers on how to use such new technologies. The corollary of this new flexibility is that more and more workers are prepared – through loyalty to the company – to work outside their normal hours in order to help the company cope in emergency situations (eg, unexpectedly heavy snowfalls).

An awareness that managers' doors are "always open" for workers to discuss concerns or make complaints has helped drive up morale and create a sense of unity behind ALSA's work in the North West.

One trade union official gave ALSA what is arguably the highest compliment: "It is a very serious company."

In a report of this kind, I feel it is incumbent on me to make proposals for improvement based on information or complaints received from those with whom I have met. I have to report that as far as ALSA is concerned, the overwhelming response to my enquiries has been "If things are going well, why change them?" or "Keep doing what we do."

## Luton Airport coach depot (24 January 2018)

Despite challenges presented by the current ongoing building works and the geographical location of Luton Airport itself, there exists a strong team spirit among the staff of National Express, which seems shared by employees at driver, manager and customer care levels.

Unanimity about workers' willingness to advise a friend or a relative to apply for a job was only tempered by reservations about the location of the airport and the difficulty in travelling there. There was a general agreement that the company helps to encourage staff to develop their careers and provides support for various training courses. This was appreciated by staff who had taken up such opportunities, and who drew unfavourable contrasts with the working practices of former employers.

Drivers in particular were enthusiastic about National Express when compared with previous employers, and felt that there was less of a blame culture than what might be found elsewhere in the industry. Particularly appreciated was the company's commitment to workers' work/family life balance. The freedom to choose between shift patterns and between night and day work, according to your family commitments, was highlighted as one of the main reasons drivers in particular felt National Express was a considerate employer. There have nevertheless been disagreements and complaints when confusion and conflict arose over rosters and duties. The company responded positively to this problem by appointing a new manager who has markedly improved the situation and earned the respect and loyalty of staff.



**I can put in time with my family because the company guarantees when you're working and when you're not. That's great because when you know where you are and when your shifts are you don't have to worry about that. That helps with appointments for dentists and opticians.**

Current management was praised for its willingness to intervene to sort out any problems – again, participants found this a contrast with their experience of previous employers.



**I've seen the company mending their mistakes... When a mistake was found there was an effort to make things better and change things and not let that happen again. That is as positive as it gets. I think that's what sold me completely on National Express.**



Master Drivers receive a distinctive tie to recognise their achievement

It was considered an important aspect of the job at Luton that staff felt they had the support of the company when difficult situations – for example, with angry customers – arose.

The Master Driver scheme was highly regarded, although aside from the Driver Team Manager, it was estimated that only an additional one or two drivers had achieved this award. The details and benefits of Master Driver were not widely known to drivers, who indicated a desire to take part. It was felt that a new promotion for Master Driver should take place in Luton and in any other location where take-up could be improved.



**Master Driver was the biggest achievement of my life – I'm proud to wear the tie.**

While there is no doubt that Master Driver is a prestigious and valuable scheme that should be expanded across the company, there was also a suggestion that counter staff dealing with customers might feel left out of a scheme that is naturally targeted exclusively at drivers. It was suggested that a similar recognition scheme for excellence in customer service could be considered by National Express, and I believe such an initiative should be seriously considered.

Internal communication is a source of some disquiet. At Luton this is partly geographical, caused by the separate locations of management offices and the drivers' rest room. However, building work currently under way may present an opportunity to address that specific issue. Another source of unhappiness regarding communication is the piecemeal roll-out of employees' National Express email accounts. While the company has provided individual accounts for its workers, there seems to have been little follow-up to ensure that they are being frequently used.

There was also some frustration expressed with the employees' online gateway for individual pay queries, which seemed opaque and confusing. Similarly, the actual hard copy payslips could be better explained so that drivers know when to expect overtime payments and also are more aware of their core hours (a source of confusion caused by historical reasons).



**You're supposed to be able to work out how much you've earned this month, but it's difficult to get an explanation from managers. They'll pass the buck to Birmingham, and then they'll pass you back.**

A refresher course for all employees, outlining the benefits of National Express's online services, would be appreciated by and useful to employees.

Drivers expressed appreciation of the email bulletin that alerts them to ongoing or new diversions and hold-ups on their routes. Although there were some questions as to why drivers are not issued with satellite navigation units as standard, there was a general appreciation that such devices would not be appropriate to coaches in every case.

There was some concern expressed about the comfort of National Express-issued outdoor wear, which at least one staff member felt could be warmer and better designed to be water-tight.

A fundamental review of internal communications should be carried out, to include email, the online portal for pay queries, and more basic questions about how company initiatives and information – for example, about Master Driver – can be best conveyed to the workforce.

## Acocks Green bus garage, Birmingham (25 January 2018)

While there were mixed views as to whether general morale at Acocks Green had improved or deteriorated in recent years, there was general agreement among drivers and support staff (union and non-union) that National Express was an employer that workers would recommend to friends and family members. In fact, many of the members of the group to which I spoke had in fact recruited friends or been recruited themselves by other employees (who are now their colleagues). There was unanimous approval of a management style that recognised the challenges of family obligations: last-minute requests for time off or shift changes to help workers deal with personal crises were almost always agreed by managers, and this is an aspect of work at Acocks Green that is recognised as a major attraction of the job. More than one driver cited individual personal situations which they would not have been able to cope with without the welcome understanding and support of their immediate managers.



**This is the best place I could work for – I would recommend it to anyone.**

As in many (most) work places, there is a view that the unhappiest employees are also the loudest, and they can therefore be the ones most often listened to, even though they are not necessarily the most representative of the wider workforce: "The angry drivers will tell everyone how bad the place is, but those who are happy don't make a big issue of it."

One of the stresses of the job, associated with anti-social behaviour, is the prevalence of social media and its use to disseminate unpleasant or aggressive behaviour by some customers. This can have a long-term negative effect on morale, on drivers' personal esteem and on the wider public's impression about the safety and attractiveness of the job.

While the high level of turnover was initially suggested as a downward pressure on morale, upon drilling down into the issue, it emerged that the problem lies almost exclusively with some new recruits deciding, a few weeks into the job of driver, that this career was not for them after all. Participants blamed the individuals concerned for not understanding the nature of the job for which they were applying, not the company.

Indeed, having discussed this issue with representatives of other bus-operating companies, it would seem this is a challenge that faces all operators in the UK bus industry (appeals for new applicant drivers are among the most common advertisements on buses in many major cities throughout the UK). On the other side of that equation, however, is the continued service of drivers who have been with the company for decades and who have no intention of leaving. A Master Driver assessor identified five National Express drivers who had left the company in recent years to take other jobs, only to return when they found that "the grass wasn't as green as they had expected".

The tendency for new recruits to leave early in the period after their training might be addressed by a more honest explanation of the nature of the job, participants believed.

A perception that management – personnel and structures – are changed too often has also contributed to lower morale.

There is a high degree of solidarity and mutual support among drivers at Acocks Green, which manifests itself in a pride in the job they do. While happy to advise others to apply for a job at National Express, there was a realism about demands that would be placed on new recruits and the fact that not everyone is suited to the task: “Bus driving is a way of life, not a job. You’ve got long days, short days; if you’re used to working Monday to Friday, nine till five, you may struggle to fit in as a bus driver.”

One successful applicant who remained with the company described the job, after experience in similar companies elsewhere, as “a breath of fresh air”.

Trade union representatives are happy to applaud National Express for the degree to which it values its staff: “I would say National Express are very union-friendly, very employee-friendly. They do look after their employees. At the end of the day it is a business and it’s there to make money, but I think they do look after their employees [better than other companies do].”

The initiative of the Health Bus was universally and unanimously welcomed, especially by male workers. This is seen as a visual and physical sign of their employer’s concern for the long-term health of their work force.



A key impact on staff morale is the continuing grievance over Sunday working and the disparity between the contracts of drivers recruited before and after 2012. While workers understood the reasons for the disparity, it nevertheless continues to grate.

There was some (isolated and minimal) criticism of the five-year period during which drivers are paid incremental increases in salary along with their annual uprating. The impact of the new bonus scheme (payable at six and 12 months, in order to retain newly recruited drivers) has not yet been felt.

A more widespread and agreed complaint is the perceived lack of feedback to drivers who have either reported a fault with their vehicle or who have registered a “near miss” (a safety incident or risk not necessarily associated with vehicle collisions). This seems primarily to be a communication issue: complaints are addressed, but progress updates are too infrequently not passed back to the employees who first identified them. There is a risk that a lack of rapid feedback could in future lead to an increased reluctance by drivers to file reports in the first place; the corollary of this, of course, is that a more efficient feedback system could have a measurably positive impact, not only on staff morale, but on the reporting levels of complaints and problems.

Enthusiasm for the Master Driver programme has, if anything, increased over the last two years, with anecdotal evidence suggesting drivers are making ever greater efforts to qualify. One driver who had previously dismissed Master Driver as “a gimmick” found that his partner had qualified for the standard. As a consequence, the driver had changed his mind and improved his driving technique in order to qualify himself.

Similarly, there are no major complaints about the DriveCam system which, as was found in the 2016 report, drivers see as a benefit rather than a threat. Some suspicion remains, but drivers like to have the ability to trigger the system and have a time- and date-stamped video record of an incident.

While contracted hours of drivers is a topic well beyond the remit of my report, I wish to flag the issue of Sunday hours and the disparity between pre- and post-2012 driver hires at Acocks Green as an ongoing grievance.

More than one participant at the Acocks Green group welcomed the very fact that their opinions were being sought in this way and suggested “more meetings like this”.

A new system of giving feedback, or at least acknowledging the submission of reports of “near misses” and vehicle failures by drivers should be instituted as a priority.

There was a desire for senior National Express management to be more visible and undertake more visits to sites like Acocks Green, while at the same time an acceptance that drivers, out on the road for the vast majority of their day, would be unlikely to benefit from this. Perhaps the company could organise some form of engagement at which corporate level directors can be made visible and accessible to workers.

The company should be congratulated for the Health Bus initiative, which has been welcomed unanimously by employees. It should be given as high a profile as possible and staff encouraged to make use of its services. Promotion of this service beyond the company would be beneficial to the reputation of National Express on a national basis.

As a way of limiting the number of new driver recruits who leave shortly after training, efforts should be made to appraise them of the realities and difficulties of the job, alongside full explanation of the support they will be given. More opportunities for applicants to meet and socialise with longer-term employees might be considered as a way of preparing new drivers for the job.

## United States (4-6 February 2018)

I visited five different locations of Durham School Services (DSS), all in Ohio, all of which were, until relatively recently, owned by Petermann. They were Talawanda, Monroe, Goshen, Milford and Mariemont. At each location I was free to talk with drivers, mechanics and others in an informal setting (sometimes with drivers arriving and leaving for their shifts during the meeting). As on my previous visit to the US, I was given permission by the participants to record each meeting.

Although I consider the issue of remuneration and benefits to be outside the remit of this review, it would be wrong not to mention that these were, by far, the primary cause of unhappiness among the workers I spoke to. These are complex areas into which I intrude with reluctance, but there could be options available to the company that have little or no financial cost. For example, a minority of drivers would prefer their annual pay to be split evenly over 26 fortnightly payments so that during the summer, they would continue to be paid, even when they were not working. This would not be appropriate to all drivers, however, particularly those who claim unemployment benefit during the summer. If the bureaucratic costs were not too high, and where it can be done in line with legislation, the company might wish to consider an “opt-in” approach to 26 fortnightly, year-round pay cheques.

There is a perception – which, if untrue, should be addressed with the provision of accurate information – that the company “has a form that they could fill in that would exempt us from having to seek employment” during the summer school vacation period. Whether or not this is true, there would be a positive value in the company taking a more hands-on approach in helping drivers to navigate the complex area of summer work and benefit entitlement.

Health benefits are a source of concern to DSS employees, although it should be pointed out that in this respect DSS is no different from most companies in the US. As frequently noted, such concerns can act as a downward pressure on employee morale.

Most of the drivers working for DSS enjoy the job and have no intention of applying for other jobs. They like their work colleagues and enjoy the mutual support networks that exist in each depot. DSS is still seen (despite complaints) as a better employer than most of, if not all, its competitors, and workers take a deep pride in their roles in the company.

A job with DSS is seen as particularly suited to single mothers with children of school age, and provides a healthy work/family life balance for most of its workforce.

One senior manager pointed out that expectation management can be a significant weapon against high turnover, which is often caused by drivers choosing to opt for alternative jobs that follow full time patterns, “and we can’t fault them for that. We do have a lot of people who, once they attain the skill [and who] get their licence, will be lost to a trucking company or other job.” However, she sees the importance of creating a “mix [of] the pay and benefits with the work environment: if they’re happy here, then they might not move somewhere else for 50¢ [an hour extra].”



**For me it’s not a job, it’s like a big family.**

None of the employees to whom I spoke would be reluctant to recommend working for DSS to a friend or relative, albeit with caveats regarding the applicant’s expectations of the job: “I would say ‘Go for it.’ The only problem I have with the company is the pay scale,” said one participant, pointing to the lack of increased rewards tied to long service.

There were a number of examples where people in the groups I spoke to had been recommended to apply by other participants in the same meeting.

The previous report recommended changes to the system to ordering spare parts for buses; this was a source of deep unhappiness among drivers and mechanics at the depots I visited in 2016. I have to report that there has clearly been some progress in this area, but that in at least some of the DSS locations in Ohio, there is still room for further improvement. This is an issue that the staff and management I met feel passionately about and I look forward to the further process improvements making additional in-roads here.

In Ohio at least, there remains some unhappiness about the consequences of the takeover by DSS of Petermann seven years ago. One example is in the social side of the job, where “cook-outs” (barbecues) that used to be a regular feature of life at Petermann depots no longer happen. Such social events were “more important than you would think... You used to get Christmas gift cards, now you get nothing. It gave us that little bit of extra time to get to know each other at work.”

Some attention to this perceived grievance would take little effort or cost but could result in significant beneficial consequences to staff morale and, perhaps, long-term productivity.

Managers at a national (US) level in DSS recognise the importance of encouraging a collegiate atmosphere in local depots. Corina Nelson, Area Human Resources Director, emphasised to me the importance of an instruction she has issued to local general managers to organise at least one social event each year for drivers, other employees and their families. "That really starts to build that family atmosphere. My interpretation is that they take care of other people's kids every day, so we should do something for their kids."

The continued involvement and commitment of former Petermann owner, Mike Settle, is unanimously appreciated by existing DSS employees. Mike is (rightly) regarded as a dynamic and effective manager in whom the workforce has complete faith. Nevertheless, there is some feeling that morale is currently lower than a few years ago.

However, even among those who criticised DSS's pay and health cover, the company was highly regarded. The challenge for DSS/National Express is in finding new, affordable (non-financial) ways to make employees feel valued. One worker suggested that even providing tee-shirts featuring the company logo would be welcome, and worn with pride by workers. The "Petermann Pride" reward and recognition system that continues in a part of the company should be examined and considered as a template for wider use within DSS.

The company should be aware of the financial impact on drivers of school districts' "in service" days – when pupils are not expected to attend school and teachers are given training – since the lack of pay on such days can have a significant financial impact on a driver's pay packet in any one month.

The introduction of DriveCam in a phased manner across the whole fleet, together with CCTV, where already fitted, was unanimously welcomed among the groups I spoke to, providing them with protection against accusations from third parties involved in accidents with DSS buses, as well as a defence against the occasional bad behaviour of pupils and even parents.

The very fact of my presence, having travelled from the UK to seek workers' views, was noted by several participants as being a very positive and reassuring development: "It makes me feel better now that they've sent someone to talk to us."

There was a degree of unhappiness (not universal, but in certain depots) at management's recent decision to cut the amount of time for drivers to carry out their morning pre-trip vehicle inspections (down from 18 to 15 minutes).

A number of existing DSS managers were promoted to the posts after serving as drivers, a development that is warmly welcomed by those still serving as drivers, since it increases their confidence that their immediate bosses know about the challenges and pressures of the job. For those managers who have no background as a driver, I recommend that they regularly accompany drivers on their routes to gauge for themselves the impact of new regulations and rules.

In general, there was a pride in the standard of drivers employed by DSS, a standard that compares well in comparison with the company's main competitors.



**We're with the best company.**

While making no recommendations on the level and cost of health cover offered to DSS workers, I hope the company will take note of the Health Bus initiative that has proved so successful in National Express's bus services in the West Midlands. Naturally the political, legal and financial context in the US is radically different from that in the UK, but it appears that there is an invaluable (in terms of morale, not to mention reputation enhancement) gesture that could be made to DSS employees by considering a similar service in different parts of the business.

### Conclusion

It is extremely difficult to draw direct comparisons between a company's operations in the UK and Europe with the same operations in the US, so divergent have the respective regimes' working practices and cultures become over the decades. This helps to explain, at least in part, the different tones of criticism made of Durham School Services in the US during my review, with the very different comments gleaned from focus groups in Spain and the UK.

Nevertheless, while National Express's interests in the US require constant nurturing and attention to workers' complaints, what came across definitively was a sense among employees that the company they work for is significantly and measurably superior to many, if not all, the rival employers in the same service sector. Even in Ohio, the general disposition of drivers and other staff was broadly positive towards their employer and morale, although fluctuating, was generally high.

The group-wide programmes that National Express has put in place – Master Driver and DriveCam, for example – both demonstrate a commendable level of commitment and seriousness and also appear to be paying a real dividend in terms of driver training, safety and morale. With their continued roll-out and other improvements – for example, internal communication – I believe National Express will continue to demonstrate the important role its People Value already plays in ensuring it is a good company to work for.

It is clear that National Express takes seriously its commitment to valuing the people that make up the organisation in every part of the global company. Importantly, this is recognised by its employees in Spain, the UK and in the US.



### About the author

**Tom Harris is director of Third Avenue Communications, an independent consultancy specialising in political lobbying and strategy. A lifelong trade unionist and former workplace representative, Tom was a Labour MP until 2015 and a transport minister under the previous Labour Government. He is now working as a journalist and columnist.**

