Barriers to bus use in Milton Keynes

Background

In March 2010, Passenger Focus in partnership with Milton Keynes Council, carried out research to understand what stops people from using buses in Milton Keynes and what would encourage them to do so. With the population of Milton Keynes projected to grow by over 50,000 by 2026, the Council is keen to encourage bus use.

Methodology

Focus groups were carried out in Milton Keynes with non users and lapsed users of buses. Residents were recruited from the old towns (Wolverton and Bletchley estates), new developments with good bus provision (Grange Farm and Oxley Park estates), new developments with poor bus provision (Kingsmead and Tattenhoe estates) and rural areas. All participants were asked to make at least four bus journeys before they attended the focus groups.

Barriers to using buses in Milton Keynes

The following barriers, grouped into five broad categories, were identified from the research:

1 Journey time and service availability
Many felt that buses took indirect routes and stopped frequently which made journeys slow. However, when they tried out the bus, many were surprised at how much quicker their journey was, with fewer stops than they expected.

Services on some routes were thought to be too infrequent to use to get to work, or to return from a night out.
"I would certainly be prepared to consider taking the bus at the weekends for leisure journeys when time isn't an issue, but I couldn't rely on buses for my commute."
[Non user, rural]

2 Familiarity with using buses
As the research participants were not used to taking buses this made it hard for them to know where to start. Some found it difficult to plan their journey, to know which route to take, or to find a timetable.

"I've never used buses in Milton Keynes, so I wouldn't know where to start. It's not something I have ever thought about before." [Non user, Grange Farm/ Oxley Park]

3 On the bus
Many participants did not use buses because they felt concerned for their personal security, particularly if there are not many other passengers on the bus. They were also put off by anti-social behaviour from youths, and litter and graffiti on the bus. Teenagers in particular were worried about encountering strangers on buses; some mentioning that their parents would take them by car rather than letting them use the bus.
"I wouldn't feel safe if I was waiting at a bus stop on my own at night and I think that my parents are concerned about random people who might be on the bus."
[Non user, Kingsmead/Tattenhoe]

Some just preferred driving; others expressed concerns around overcrowding. However, many of those who tried out the bus before joining their focus group found them less busy or noisy than they had expected.

4 Bus stops
When trying out the bus before the focus group met, some participants had difficulty finding bus stops.
"I didn't know what to do because there are no bus stops in Grange Farm. I wanted to look at a timetable, so I didn't know how to find out when the buses run."
[Non user, Grange Farm/Oxley Park]

Poor lighting made respondents feel vulnerable if they were using buses late at night. Bus shelters with information (particularly those with real time information displays) were well received. However, poorly maintained shelters undermined these advantages.

5 Financial

Although bus travel is generally perceived as being cheaper than other modes, some assumed that travelling with a group of people would be more expensive than travelling by car. Participants noted that bus fares were often considerably lower in London, especially when using travelcards or Oyster cards.

"It would be more expensive for all of us to go out for the day by bus, especially if you want to travel early in the morning."
[Lapsed user, Grange Farm/Oxley Park]

Fares were also felt to be confusing. Many participants did not know what discounts were available or when they applied.

Addressing the barriers

• Participants would be more likely to use buses if they could be relied on to turn up on time, particularly when making time-critical journeys.

• Some said they would consider using buses instead of taking taxis if there were more buses after 8pm or if night buses were available.
"If there were night buses or even if they ran later than they do now I would consider using the bus to get home after a night out with friends."
[Lapsed user, central]

• Participants were realistic about buses needing to stop frequently, but some suggested also running express services in parallel.

• In the longer term, more could be done to raise awareness of bus services and promote their use.
"They should advertise the fact that it's cheap to get to Milton Keynes on the bus, especially compared to the cost of parking all day." [Lapsed user, central]

• Participants would welcome the introduction of newer, modern buses, but this would not be enough on its own to overcome the negative perceptions created by other barriers. [Milton Keynes Council point out that 40% of the bus fleet has been replaced in the last three years.]

Conclusions and recommendations

• Given that Milton Keynes is known as 'the city of the car', it is not surprising that most participants generally use their car to get around. The grid system of roads in Milton Keynes was felt to reinforce this, making car travel easier. However, the well-planned road network and lack of congestion in Milton Keynes also makes it easier to travel by bus and this point could be brought out in promotional literature.

• Many barriers were based on perception rather than direct experience, and some of these perceptions were challenged when participants tried out the bus before attending the focus groups. It should be relatively easy to address these issues. However, some people may need further convincing to use buses, and barriers such as the difficulty in finding bus stops and service information, as well as unreliability issues, will need to be overcome.

The research indicates the following suggestions should be adopted to begin to address barriers to bus travel in Milton Keynes:
• Promote bus services and benefits of bus travel. One way of doing this could be by giving away free bus tickets so people can try out the service. (A positive example of this is the 'Greener Journeys' initiative. This is a pilot covering Milton Keynes which highlights the environmental benefits of bus travel and is giving away free bus tickets.)

• Start by addressing the barriers people feel more strongly about, for example by making it easier to find bus stops and service information and tackling problems with reliability.

• Introducing a newer fleet of buses is not essential; however refitting and regular cleaning will help to overcome some of the concerns about dirty buses and graffiti.

This is a summary of the full *Barriers to bus use in Milton Keynes* report. The full report is available in the publications section of the Passenger Focus website.

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