



Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption

Research report
April 2013



Colin Foxall CBE

Foreword

Our research with bus passengers unsurprisingly shows that punctuality is their top priority for improvement¹, with our Bus Passenger Survey showing satisfaction with punctuality ranging from 57 to 83 per cent². That's why we have carried out this further research into bus passengers' experience of delays and service disruption, and how it affected people, including some consideration of how to alleviate the problems. The research develops the extensive understanding Passenger Focus has built up of rail passengers' needs and priorities when trains are disrupted.

The key findings of this new research are:

- Passengers understand that buses will inevitably be affected by traffic congestion, roadworks and accidents in the same way as other vehicles on the public highway – and they accept it, to a degree, as part and parcel of bus travel. Nevertheless, passengers feel that bus companies could do more to reduce delays by focusing on those elements perceived to be within their control.
- The consequences for passengers of bus delays are varied, including being late for work, late picking up children, or late for medical and other appointments. As well as practical issues, passengers talked about anxiety, stress and sometimes additional expense (for example, if a missed connection meant buying a new ticket for a different bus company or taking a taxi).
- Improvements in two principal areas would help bus passengers when delays and disruption occur: better information and a more customer-focused attitude from bus drivers
 - Better information – the research gives a strong sense that bus passengers feel powerless when faced with delays. There is, many feel, no means of finding out what is going on – as one passenger put it: “It’s mental torture sometimes at bus stops working out whether to stay or whether to go.” Providing information that empowers passengers to make an informed decision in these circumstances will make a significant difference, and there is a clear preference for real-time departure displays at bus stops.
 - Driver attitude – the research shows a significant gap between passengers' experiences and their desire that during delays and disruption drivers behave as the bus company's customer service

representative; providing information, demonstrating empathy and expressing regret. Closing this gap by fostering a strong customer service ethos among driving staff is vital, at the same time as exploring how to reduce the burden on drivers by communicating directly with passengers already on board.

Passenger Focus makes a number of recommendations in the light of this research, including that the Government should have an objective to put in place the infrastructure to allow real-time bus departures information to be provided throughout the country.

We will now work with the bus industry, transport authorities and the Government to ensure that the issues highlighted in this research are addressed. In separate work, we will report later this year on measures that could help improve punctuality of bus services in the first place.

Colin Foxall CBE
Chairman
Passenger Focus

¹Bus passenger priorities for improvement, Passenger Focus, March 2010
<http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/publications/bus-passenger-priorities-for-improvement>

²Bus Passenger Survey, Passenger Focus, March 2013
<http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/publications/bus-passenger-survey-full-report-march-2013>

Recommendations

Information and communications

Bus passengers told us they need accurate, timely and relevant information to tackle the powerlessness currently felt, allowing them to relax in the knowledge that their bus is just around the corner – or to make an informed decision about what they do if it is not. The research also shows that passengers already on a bus want the bus company to communicate with them when delays and disruption occur, whether via the driver or other means.

“Passengers who have encountered systems which count down to zero and a bus never appears, or where the predicted arrival time ‘jumps around’, are reluctant to trust the information in future.”

Passenger Focus recommends the following

- That it becomes a specific Government objective to establish the ‘back of house’ infrastructure that will allow real-time bus departures information to be provided in all parts of the country. By infrastructure, we mean a system of tracking the location of every bus in real time, from which data predicting the arrival time at subsequent bus stops is generated. It exists already in some areas of the country, but by no means everywhere, and is rarely fully comprehensive even where it exists. Why should it be a postcode lottery whether you can find out if your bus is coming?
- With this critical ‘enabler’ in place, that there should be a long-term programme to install displays giving real-time departures information at as many individual bus stops as possible. This should include predicted arrival times and have the facility to display text, such as the reason for a delay or a warning that roadworks will disrupt the route at a future date. We accept that a real-time display at every stop is not realistic, but encourage a vision that few frequently-served, frequently-used stops are without one. Passengers should not have to stare up the road wondering if their bus is coming.
- Using the data already generated (see first recommendation), that the opportunities through smartphone and tablet applications (apps) to provide real-time departures information in passengers’ pockets *before* they get to the bus stop should be exploited to the full. Effective marketing of existing apps to help passengers understand their value in the context of bus travel would be a good starting point. Apps should allow bus companies to alert





passengers to disruption, current and future, with a high degree of tailoring or personalisation. The ability to 'push' information that is specific to an individual's journey is key: bus passengers may not come looking for information and are wary of being bombarded with irrelevant details about problems 'on the other side of town'. In the main, apps should be regarded as a supplement to real-time information at bus stops rather than a substitute for it, but could have an important role where a physical display cannot be justified at a stop.

- That bus companies, transport authorities and Government consider how communication with passengers already on board a bus can be dramatically improved. Could a television-style visual display become standard in new buses? They could provide information about current delays, temporary route changes/expected delays because of roadworks and notification about permanent changes to the timetable (see earlier Passenger Focus research)³. They could show where the bus is on a map, airline-style, to help passengers get off at the correct stop. Importantly, the information could be tailored specifically to the needs of passengers on that bus. Could public address become standard on new buses? It could be used by the driver to make live announcements or trigger pre-recorded ones, or potentially for staff back at the control centre to make live announcements direct to passengers on a particular bus. For example, to explain what is happening if a bus is stuck in unusually heavy traffic or is about to be diverted off its normal route.

Driver attitude

This research highlights that many passengers see bus drivers as customer service staff who also drive the bus, whereas their experience is of drivers who regard customer service as secondary to their operational function. Clearly there are bus drivers who perform both well, but passengers' views about this are sufficiently strong that Passenger Focus recommends:

- That the bus industry takes further steps to develop a customer service ethos among drivers, recruiting for the right attitude and with regular training to help drivers think as if in the shoes of the passenger. A key point is that bus drivers often appear to assume passengers have greater knowledge of what is going on during disruption than is the case. The industry should also make sure that disability awareness training adequately covers the additional needs of particular groups of passengers when buses are delayed or disrupted.

Miscellaneous

- That operators of real-time information systems should strive for a very high level of accuracy: passengers who have encountered systems which count down to zero and a bus never appears, or where the predicted arrival time 'jumps around', are reluctant to trust the information in future. Instances of buses that run, but are 'blind' to the real-time system, will have a similar affect.
- That bus companies consider the role of social media, in particular Twitter, as one part of passenger communications during service disruption. While some passengers in our research could not envisage 'following' a bus company, the idea was enthusiastically received by a minority whose principal concern was to have the ability to personalise it to receive only those tweets directly relevant to their journey.
- That efforts should be made to help passengers understand with greater confidence which information is a real-time prediction, and which is a scheduled departure time. Some passengers in the research had worked it out, but others remained confused.
- That bus companies review their arrangements when bus stops are temporarily closed, with a view to achieving greater awareness among passengers, achieving greater visual impact at the closed stop and ensuring passengers are clear about where they should wait instead.

³Bus Service Changes, Passenger Focus, May 2010
<http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/publications/bus-service-changes>

Passenger Focus

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Research report

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providing intelligence

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1. Management Summary

1.1 Background and methodology

Passenger Focus wished to understand the experiences of bus passengers when delays and service disruptions occur, in particular the impact on them and their needs, especially in terms of information provision.

Focus group discussions were held in November and December 2012 with bus passengers in Leeds, Manchester, Exeter, Brighton, Birmingham and Sudbury (Suffolk). The groups covered a range of passenger demographics, frequencies of use, route types and journey purposes. One-to-one depth interviews were also conducted with elderly passengers (aged 80+) and with some disabled passengers. A number of bus drivers were also interviewed to gain a different perspective and contextualise passengers' requirements.

1.2 Key findings

In passengers' view, the factors which constitute delay or disruption include 'anticipated' problems, such as planned roadworks, and to some degree normal peak traffic congestion, and unplanned problems caused by bad weather, accidents, emergency roadworks and mechanical problems with the bus.

In addition, passengers cite problems such as buses stopping *en route* for driver breaks or shift changes, as well as delays resulting from buses leaving early, driving past stops without picking up passengers, slow ticket payment processes and what passengers see as poorly-designed timetables causing 'bunching' in services. Wheelchair users also talked of bus drivers either refusing, or not knowing how, to operate ramps.

Passengers recognise that some – but not all – of these issues are unavoidable given that buses share road space with other vehicles. As such, many will build a degree of contingency into their journey time to allow for potential delays. While many passengers understand that bus travel may inherently involve a degree of delay and disruption, that does not mean that they are happy to simply accept it. In many cases, delays have a negative impact on passengers and many have few alternatives, particularly commuters who are often frustrated at the frequency of delays, and younger passengers who may be put off using buses in the future.

Passengers feel that more could be done to avoid delays and disruption on buses, and to manage the impact on passengers when they occur. There are three key elements to this: the provision of information, the interaction passengers have with bus drivers and practical measures suggested by both passengers and drivers.

Information provision:

- information greatly influences the impact delays and disruption have on passengers, empowering them to make practical decisions about their journey and reducing stress
- however, current provision of information is felt to be unsatisfactory – this is the case when delays and disruption occur, but also more generally when using a bus
- some passengers recognise that there may be challenges in providing information, especially to infrequent users and when disruption is unexpected. However, they feel that more could be done to communicate with passengers
- the information that passengers require varies depending on the nature of the problem, but at the simplest level they wish to know:
 - about any disruption that will occur or is occurring – it should not be assumed that this is obvious to passengers, even if it is obvious to drivers
 - what the change is – e.g. a suspension of service, a diversion or a longer journey time (these apply to both planned and unplanned disruptions)
 - the scale of the disruption – to enable passengers to assess alternatives such as walking to a different stop, using a different service, or travelling at a different time
 - alternative bus stops or routes
 - the impact on journey time. Even if it is an estimate, passengers would rather have that than no information at all
 - the anticipated duration of the problem – again an estimate can be acceptable
 - the cause of the change, and how to find out more information about it.
- passengers are unlikely to actively seek information for themselves, meaning that ways need to be found to communicate proactively
- discussions with passengers highlighted the following:
 - electronic real-time display boards are passengers' preferred method; they are inclusive, generally trusted, and highly relevant to an individual's immediate journey
 - information on board buses is a good way to reach passengers, especially where it is possible to do this electronically
 - information via apps or mobile internet can be very useful for some. However, because not everybody has a smartphone, sources relying on their use should be complementary to other channels rather than instead of them.

Interaction with bus drivers:

- in passengers' view, drivers are the 'face' of the service and should help passengers by providing information
- however, this is generally felt to be done poorly and is an example of what passengers feel is a general lack of customer service within the bus industry
- drivers argue that they do not always have information themselves and that it can be difficult to communicate when concentrating on the road. However, passengers feel that operators should be able to pass information to drivers and should look for other ways to communicate directly with passengers to relieve the pressure on drivers (for example, through public address announcements or electronic visual messages on the bus)

- this research indicates that passengers need better information from drivers and other sources; that drivers need to focus more on customer service generally; and that drivers need better support and tools to enable them to provide information to passengers.

Measures identified by passengers and drivers to avoid and better manage disruption:

- better collaboration between operators, local authorities and other stakeholders when planning road closures and blockages for scheduled work and events
- incorporation of 'rush hour contingency' into timetables so timings are more realistic at busy times, and increased peak frequency to provide sufficient capacity to meet demand
- traffic management measures such as priority bus lanes and congestion charging zones
- better management of driver shifts, to avoid breaks during journeys for shift changes
- provision of relief vehicles in more locations, enabling faster backup for mechanical failures
- developments in smart ticketing, to speed up the boarding process
- more spacing out of stops in busy town centre areas to allow buses to stop more easily, and to reduce the number of passengers who are 'missed' because drivers cannot see them
- provision of more shelters at stops, to improve comfort when waiting for a delayed bus
- introduction of dedicated customer service staff working in town centre locations and sometimes on board buses.

2. Background

Passenger Focus has previously undertaken extensive research into the experiences and needs of rail passengers during periods of both planned and unplanned disruption, and has used this information to work with the rail industry representing passengers' views and needs.

Passenger Focus also wished to understand the experiences of bus passengers when delays and service disruptions occur. It wished to research the impact that disruption has on those affected, and the needs of passengers when they are disrupted, particularly in terms of information provision. Passenger Focus therefore commissioned independent market research agency BDRC Continental to conduct a study into bus delays and disruption.

Qualitative research took place in November and December 2012 among bus passengers:

- focus group discussions were held with bus passengers in Leeds, Manchester, Exeter, Brighton, Birmingham and Sudbury (Suffolk), covering a range of passenger demographics, frequencies, route types and journey purposes
- depth interviews were conducted with passengers aged 80 or over, in order to cover the full range of age groups using concessionary passes. Four interviews were conducted in total, involving six passengers in Manchester and Leeds; two of these were one-to-one discussions with individuals, and two were discussions with pairs of friends
- one-to-one depth interviews were also conducted with passengers who had a range of disabilities. These included:
 - four interviews with passengers who have disabilities which affect their use of information and communication (hearing and visual impairments, and forms of learning disability)
 - four interviews with passengers who have disabilities affecting their mobility; two of these passengers used wheelchairs and two did not.

In addition, a number of bus drivers were interviewed, in order to include the perspective of front-line staff and gather any further ideas about how the handling of delays might be improved. These interviews took place with drivers working for companies in Leeds, Manchester, Sudbury and Ipswich.

A full breakdown of the sample interviewed for the project is provided in Appendix A.

This report describes the findings from this research.

3. Research findings: the current passenger experience of delays and disruption

3.1 Overview of passengers' experiences of delays/disruption

Passengers interviewed in this study described a wide variety of experience of bus travel: some could find very little fault with their local service, while others experienced minor but fairly regular delays, and others suffered a consistent lack of reliability.

This wide variety of experience has been echoed in other, quantitative, research conducted by Passenger Focus at national level. For instance, the Spring 2012 Bus Passenger Survey (BPS) showed that 91 per cent of passengers in Nottingham and the Tyne & Wear areas were satisfied with their bus journey, while only 79 per cent were satisfied in Stoke-on-Trent.

The types of problems which passengers say they experience are also diverse. The research participants cited examples of delays and service changes which the industry might expect to be considered as 'disruption'. These included:

- **anticipated disruption**
Road closures/blockages or route changes/diversions due to:
 - planned roadworks
 - large local events.
- **unplanned disruption**
Delays or diversions due to:
 - bad weather
 - traffic congestion
 - breakdowns and mechanical faults
 - traffic accidents
 - unexpected problems like burst water mains.

The most common experiences of delays or disruption were due to traffic congestion (especially in peak times) and planned roadworks.

In addition, passengers cited other factors which they saw as causing problems and delays to bus services. These tended to be related to the bus company, the driver, or to other passengers. They are listed here in order of the approximate frequency with which research participants mentioned them:

- **buses just stop for a while during the journey**
Sometimes this is known or assumed to be due to an obligatory break for the driver, or a need to change drivers, but not always. It is often not clear to passengers what is happening or why, and even if the reason is understood (or guessed) it is not always felt to be reasonable

“I’ve been on a bus before, and the guy just pulled over and had a brew, and it really wound me up. I thought, ‘what you doing?!’”

Manchester – leisure

- **buses set off too early**, before their scheduled time
- **buses miss some or all of the waiting passengers**
Research participants gave examples of this happening at busy stops where a driver may not have seen all of the passengers waiting for their particular vehicle, as well as instances of buses being driven straight past bus stops without stopping, even when passengers were waiting and this was obvious to the driver. The problem of passengers being missed was felt to be quite common for those in wheelchairs; these respondents had experience of being both mistakenly missed and deliberately ignored, as well as being told there was no room
- **passengers taking a long time to board or pay**
This was sometimes due to the volume of passengers boarding simultaneously and sometimes due to the need to find change for payment
- **human error**
Drivers taking a wrong turning
- some research participants felt that **timetables are sometimes designed badly**, so that services are bunched together at some points and then spread apart; in particular this may be the case when more than one operator serves a particular area
- **passengers with certain disabilities also described specific issues** they have experienced which cause delays or other problems on bus journeys for them personally.

Both of the research participants who used a wheelchair described instances where drivers had not known how to operate the wheelchair ramps, or had claimed that there was no working ramp.

“I’ve had drivers saying their ramps don’t work so won’t let me on. This must be a lie as well as surely all buses should be fitted with working equipment....I’ve even had the driver tell me that their bus is not able to carry people in wheelchairs which I know is untrue. A lot of the time it’s them being lazy.”

Exeter – passenger using a wheelchair

It can also be difficult to travel on a bus in a wheelchair when other people take up the space provided with children’s buggies or shopping trolleys. This is felt to be unfair since these bulky items can sometimes be made smaller.

“They stop and shout that they can’t let me on as there are too many buggies on board.....buggies can fold down, my chair and me can’t fold down.”

Exeter – passenger using a wheelchair

Passengers with mobility problems had experienced drivers who showed a lack of sympathy because they were unable to run for a bus like other passengers.

The extent to which delays/disruptions are perceived to be a problem

Interestingly, during the discussions in focus groups and depth interviews, many passengers initially felt that they rarely or infrequently experienced delays or disruption, and were not immediately able to describe specific instances. However, as discussions developed, passengers did talk about specific problems which had affected them during bus journeys (as described in 3.1) – but often they had not initially registered these as delays or disruption.

This reveals two important points:

- passengers understand that the nature of a bus service means that delays and disruption are sometimes unavoidable and are an inherent part of this mode of travel; therefore many have some degree of understanding of delays
- partly because of this, passengers often have relatively low expectations of bus services, particularly compared with trains (and where relevant, trams).

“I didn’t so much have a bad experience, as the bus was just late.”

Birmingham – student

“I feel very well serviced in this area, apart from the usual roadworks and road traffic.”

Birmingham – commuter and concessionary pass holder

“[You’ve] got to allow a bit of time for the buses – it’s not exactly like the train.”

Sudbury – concessionary pass holder

Because of their relatively low expectation that buses will be punctual, many passengers will build in contingency time on the assumption that they will be affected by delays or disruption of some kind (regardless of whether they think of it in this way) during their journey.

“I try to leave myself enough time if I’ve got an appointment... in case a bus misses. I don’t blame anybody, you just have to... leave a bit earlier... you just use your common sense.”

Leeds – concessionary pass holder, 80+

“I try to plan a journey so that I have another one [bus] after the one I’m going to get...a safety margin.”

Sudbury – concessionary pass holder

“If it was something important I wouldn’t use the bus, but it’s fine for going to town.”

Leeds – leisure

While the discussions with passengers did show evidence that many understand that there will be a degree of delay or disruption to bus services, this does not mean that they are happy to accept it. Many passengers feel that more could be done to minimise the impact and the research highlighted three main reasons for this:

- delays and disruption do affect passengers negatively, even if they are perceived to be a 'normal' or inherent part of this mode of transport
- many passengers have few alternatives
- all passengers are different and are affected in different ways; certain passenger groups are less accepting of disruption than others.

These are described in more detail below.

The negative impact of delays and disruption

There are a number of ways in which bus delays and disruption affect passengers negatively, including:

- **financial implications**

A delay can simply represent poor service and therefore poor value for money. There can be direct financial implications, such as the need to pay for another ticket if the original ticket is not valid on a later or alternative service (because, for example, the alternative is operated by a different company). Some participants also explained that lateness to work or a Jobcentre, for example, can result in a financial penalty.

“There’s always anxiety if the last bus is late...you get the last bus or it’s a £30 taxi.”

Sudbury – concessionary pass holder

- **lateness**

Some participants gave examples of delayed bus journeys resulting in important appointments being missed, such as medical appointments (this was particularly the case for the elderly passengers interviewed, some of whom made frequent trips to the doctor, and some of the disabled passengers who needed to travel to a hospital fairly regularly), or lateness to work, which at best reflects badly on the individual. Others talked about being late to meet friends/relatives, which ranges from inconvenient to very stressful:

“You know, I only go to see my daughter once a month, so [if delayed on a bus journey] you’re thinking, this is half an hour less to spend with her.”

Manchester – concessionary pass holder, 80+

“I ended up picking up my daughter late from school the other day because the bus was really late because of roadworks. That was really stressful just thinking about my daughter being left there.”

Leeds – commuter

- **problems on subsequent buses or later in journey**

Some passengers risk missing connections to a later service if one bus is delayed, creating a knock-on effect throughout their journey.

Some passengers also talked about the problems of crowding on later buses if an earlier one is cancelled for any reason. This can cause delays itself, as a larger volume of people attempt to board a bus simultaneously (and some may not be able to get on and so will be further delayed), and can cause discomfort and difficulty when on board, particularly for elderly passengers or those with mobility difficulties:

“I get a bit worried about not getting a seat as I’ve hurt my hip and knee before when the bus takes off and I get knocked about.”

Exeter – passenger with mobility, sight and hearing impairments

- **anxiety and discomfort at the stop**

Of course, if a bus is delayed, waiting passengers will often be standing in the open, which is unpleasant if the weather is cold or wet, and is worse when there is no shelter at the bus stop at all.

As covered in section 3.1 of this report, unless passengers have information about when the next bus will arrive, waiting at the stop can cause anxiety, as well as frustration if the passenger could take alternative action but has no information to help decide whether this would be a better option than continuing to wait for the bus:

“It’s mental torture sometimes at bus stops working out whether to stay or whether to go.”

Leeds – commuter

- **difficulty caused in day-to-day life if journeys become impossible by bus**

“We need milk, we need extra food; we need to get to the bank to pay bills – what am I supposed to do?”

Sudbury – visually impaired passenger

- **avoidance of travel**

Passengers who were not obliged to make a journey would sometimes decide not to do so at all if their bus was late or could not make its normal journey, or would travel at different times.

In particular, the disabled passengers who took part in the research talked about avoiding travel at certain times of day when they expected overcrowding to make their journeys difficult or unpleasant.

The availability of alternatives to bus services

For the majority of bus passengers who took part in this research, alternatives were rarely easily available when bus services are disrupted.

- Many of the passengers who took part in the research did not have easy access to a car (particularly the students and younger people), and even for those who did, this was often felt to be a last resort due to the cost or availability of parking. A small proportion also lacked the confidence to drive, for example in busy city centres (this was the case for some of the older participants), and so they preferred to take the bus.
- Some of the research participants had the option of calling on a friend or relative for a lift, but this was undesirable due to the inconvenience it would cause to the other person, and the sense of reduced independence (this was particularly the case for the more elderly passengers). Additionally, of course, it is often not possible if the other person is working or unable to help for any reason.
- In Manchester, some passengers could use the tram for some journeys and in the Birmingham area some could possibly travel by train; again these would be considered as a last resort since access to the tram stops and train stations themselves was often inconvenient for these bus users.
- Those without any of these options would consider travelling by taxi if they were obliged to make the journey, but the high cost of this compared with bus travel (and for some, the feeling of unnecessary extravagance) was very off-putting.

The research also highlighted some specific problems in finding alternatives to bus travel for certain passengers with disabilities. While the following are specific to particular individuals and other disabled people will have different problems, these brief case studies demonstrate the reasons that finding alternatives can be impractical.

- **Ray, who uses a wheelchair**
Ray is able to drive, but perceives that disabled parking spaces have been reduced in his area, making this a risky option if he cannot find a space to park near to his destination. He also needs someone to help him in and out of the car when he drives, and so in his case, he is more independent on the bus than in the car.
- **Mick, who has a visual impairment**
Mick used to drive for a living, but his sight problem means that he can no longer do this, and now does not work at all. Not earning a wage means that he is sensitive to the price of transport, and the only alternative to bus would be taxi which he would find too expensive.
- **Luke, who has dyscalculia**
Luke's condition means he struggles to make sense of and remember information (particularly when it involves numbers) and he needs to form habits in order to feel comfortable travelling independently. He uses buses in a defined area so has managed to form habits in this way for the regular travel he needs to do; however using an alternative mode would mean changing from his normal routines and would be extremely difficult and stressful. He may require help from a friend or relative.

Different levels of tolerance among different groups

Whilst some passengers have a degree of acceptance that disruption is simply a part of bus travel, others have very little tolerance at all. This is largely linked to journey purpose and attitude, including exposure to other forms of transport and aspirations for the future.

In particular, the research participants who used buses to commute to work tended to be less accepting – partly due to the impact each instance of delay has, and partly because they experience delays more frequently. It is also likely that these passengers are less ‘forgiving’ because they perceive themselves not to be making these journeys out of choice, and are therefore less likely than others to be in the frame of mind to accept problems.

“I think it’s terrible that you can’t rely on buses. I have to leave early to get to work on time and just have a coffee if I get in early. It would be nice to get the later bus which would get me to work on time but I can’t take the risk and my boss wouldn’t be happy if I kept blaming the bus.”

Brighton – commuter

The younger (student-age) focus groups were also more negative about bus travel in general, and more angry about delays and disruption when they occur. This seemed to be linked to a poorer perception of bus drivers than in other groups (although across all groups of passengers the opinion of drivers was quite negative, as is described in section 3.2.1). Probably related to this, they also demonstrated a lower level of engagement with the driver and the bus operation in general than for other groups, and in some cases there was also a desire to travel more by train or car in the future rather than by bus.

“If I lived near a train station I’d never get the bus.”

Birmingham – student

People with exposure to rail travel also felt less forgiving towards problems on buses because, although they have seen disruption affecting trains, they have seen a more structured approach to the handling of delays for rail services than with buses.

“[During recent flooding] the train station was more organised...and they have people giving out information and people there to help you.”

Exeter – commuting to college

“They have [real-time information boards] at every train station, so I can’t see why they can’t have them at bus stations.”

Birmingham – student

“I think by and large it’s almost ‘second class citizen’ if you’re on the bus.”

Birmingham – commuter and concessionary pass holder

4. Findings: improving passengers' experiences

Passengers' descriptions of problems they had encountered on bus journeys, and the way these were handled, indicated three key elements for improving the experience of passengers when delays and disruptions happen on bus services:

- the provision of information – to empower and reassure passengers
- the attitude of and interaction with drivers – to ease the situation for all (including the driver)
- practical measures – to mitigate the impact of disruption or help to prevent it in the first place.

Each of these is covered in detail in the following sections.

4.1 The provision of information about delays and disruption

The existence or lack of information greatly influences some of the ways in which bus problems impact passengers. If passengers know what is happening with their service, they are empowered to make practical decisions and can choose to travel by bus as planned, or to find alternatives or change their arrangements. If they do not have this information they cannot make a decision, which affects them both in practice (they will be physically delayed) and emotionally (helplessness leads to frustration, anxiety and sometimes fear or anger); ultimately they will feel less satisfied with the service.

“If I got on the bus and they said we’ve got a diversion when we get to so-and-so, I would get off at the last stop before that point, and if I had an appointment that I had to be at, I would call up and change it.”

Sudbury – concessionary pass holder

“I think you just need to know what’s happening up front so you can make your decision as to what you’re going to do.”

Birmingham – commuter

“You don’t know what to do you see, if you’re standing there and it hasn’t come... you’re thinking ‘Oh my goodness, have I missed it, have I missed it?’... you don’t know what to do.”

Birmingham – commuter

The research also suggests that when problems occur, passengers would appreciate some kind of interaction and communication, even if it does not provide them with actual facts; this is because interaction reassures passengers that they are not simply being left in the dark, but that even if facts are not known, someone cares about them.

“It gives you the impression that somebody out there knows what’s going on.”

Birmingham – commuter

4.1.1 Current information provision

Although communication can make a big difference, the discussions with passengers indicated that, from their perspective, there is a void of information surrounding delays and disruption to bus travel. The perceived volume and quality of information did vary a little by area, but even in the areas where it was regarded as better overall, it was still viewed as unsatisfactory.

Many felt that there is no information at all, or that there was no way of finding out information.

“With buses there are no mechanisms to find out what’s going on – whether it’s cancelled or really delayed. You do find yourself just stood there waiting.”

Leeds – commuter

“Can you imagine [bus operator name] being helpful and telling you about delays? I can’t!”

Exeter – sixth form student

“You can’t always officially find out what’s going on. There is no way of finding out.”

Leeds – commuter

When information is known, it often comes via word of mouth, observation or educated guesswork, rather than from bus companies or other ‘official’ channels.

“I sort of become aware of traffic problems so know to time my bus differently as I know I will be late.”

Brighton – leisure

“You just get your information from whoever’s stood there at the bus stop.”

Manchester – commuter

“Someone in the village will know what’s going on and tell you. If you go to the bus stop someone will be able to tell you the times.”

Exeter – leisure

Furthermore, some research participants felt that general service information (that is, with or without disruption) about bus travel can be sparse and unreliable, and this compounds scepticism about the provision of information in relation to delays or disruption.

“National Rail has live departures which is really useful – why can’t the buses do the same?”

Leeds – commuter

“I was pleasantly surprised to find out that it went straight to Bury and took half an hour which is half the time...that was most unexpected [passenger discovered that a new route had been provided, which she was not told about].”

Sudbury – hearing-impaired passenger

“You can’t rely on bus stop timetables as [they] get vandalised, [are] too small to read and can’t read them at night as they’re not lit up.”

Brighton – leisure

“The only thing [bus company] tell you about is the cost of tickets and days out.”

Exeter – leisure

Interestingly, in the same way that passengers appear to have low expectations of bus services in general, the discussions indicated that they have low expectations about the provision of information related to bus travel. This is partly due to previous experience and conditioning, but also partly because passengers understand that the nature of bus travel can sometimes make it very difficult for bus companies to communicate with passengers. For example news of a road accident in a remote area might take time to become known by the company itself.

There is also some awareness among passengers of the different parties that might be involved in the problem including the bus companies, the local authority, the Highways Agency, engineering/building contractors and in some cases the police. Passengers recognise that communication often has to take place between different parties in order to inform the public, and that this can be challenging.

All of this means that passengers have fairly low expectations of information about delays and disruption. Despite this, as highlighted earlier, information does make a difference to passengers and the research indicates it is worth making the effort to provide. While passengers recognise some of the challenges in providing information, they still often feel that this is little excuse for not doing so they feel that different parties involved should work harder to integrate effectively, and each take more responsibility for communication. Interviews with drivers indicated the ease with which a party can reject responsibility for information not getting through when there are other organisations involved in providing information. When passengers see or perceive it was feasible for information to have been provided, they find it unacceptable if it was not passed on to them.

“Really I think it should be quite simple to give people information like this.”

Birmingham – commuter

4.1.2 What passengers need to know

Passengers recognise that different types of information will be available depending on the type of disruption or its cause. They also require different kinds of information in different situations. The following emerged in discussions with passengers as the pieces of information which would make a positive difference in various situations.

For disruption which is known about in advance (such as road closures resulting in diversions, due to planned roadworks or large local events), the main things passengers need to know are:

- brief details about any changes to the route (which roads, stops or whole route numbers are out of use)
- alternative stops or route numbers
- anticipated duration (dates and times)
- the approximate impact on journey time; even if this is not known exactly, passengers would like to have an estimate, so they have at least some understanding of whether it will add another ten minutes or a whole hour to their journey. If the additional time given is only an estimate, as long as they know this is the case, passengers can accept it because they understand that road transport can be unpredictable.

If there is space and time to communicate it, some would also like to be told up front about the reason for the disruption. Many passengers are also keen to see a telephone number and a website so that they have the opportunity to find out more information if they want it.

If bus stops are changed or temporarily out of use, and if this is known about in advance, passengers wish to know:

- **that the bus stop is not in use**
Several passengers recounted examples of bus stop closures for which there was no (noticeable) notification on the bus stop itself, and so they found out from other passengers, or when the bus did not stop there
- **where the temporary bus stop is**
Again, there were several examples of a temporary bus stop being provided but not indicated. Information needs to include its distance from the original stop, and a map/signage if it is not clearly visible from the original, for example if it is around a corner
- **the anticipated duration of the temporary closure.**

As for other types of anticipated disruption, some passengers are interested in the reason for the disruption, and would like to have the opportunity to find out more about it via a helpline number or website.

For delays and disruption which are not known about in advance, such as unexpected congestion, weather-related problems, or mechanical problems with the bus, passengers need to know:

- **what the problem is, or what is happening**
For congestion, passengers do wish to know the reason for this, because it may influence their decisions about what to do as a result. For problems caused by weather, this may be obvious, but should not always be assumed; for mechanical problems, passengers do not need know the full details, but they do wish to be told that there is a mechanical fault so they do not assume there is some other kind of problem
- **an estimated impact on journey time**
Again this may be an estimate, or it may genuinely not be known at all, but passengers can largely accept this if they are told
- **an idea of the scale of the problem (if it is weather or traffic-related)**
For example if flooding or congestion is affecting a whole area rather than one part of a street, this will influence the decisions passengers make as a result
- **the alternatives**
For instance, a diversion the driver will take to avoid a flooded area or congestion around a road accident, or details of an alternative bus to relieve a faulty vehicle.

When a delay or stoppage is required for a driver changeover, again the key things which passengers need to know are what is happening, what difference it is likely to make to journey times and details of any alternatives if they exist, such as another bus going in the same direction which passengers could switch to.

Importantly, it should not be assumed that it is obvious what the problem is when delays and disruption occur. The research showed that it is sometimes wrongly assumed that passengers know what is happening.

“They can see that something’s happened there, it’s not just a queue of traffic, they’ve probably seen that there’s been an accident.”

Bus driver

But this isn’t always the case. Passengers very frequently said that they did not know what was happening; many would make educated guesses, but there is also evidence that they can guess wrongly – for example a passenger in Birmingham described a situation he experienced, and the following day he overheard it being mentioned several times by different passengers, with different speculated reasons each time.

Even if it does appear to be obvious what the problem is, passengers still wish to be communicated with, for reasons of reassurance and simply because it demonstrates customer service and courtesy.

“Being communicated with during disruption] makes the passenger feel that actually, yes, you are important... It’s customer service, it’s politeness; it puts everybody in a better mood.”

Birmingham – commuter

4.1.3 How passengers wish to be communicated with

There are a variety of ways in which passengers currently receive information about bus services, and in which they would like to receive information. These were discussed by passengers who took part in this research, and their views and usage of different information channels are detailed in this section, along with their views on how some channels might be used more effectively. The information channels are covered here in order of the approximate overall preference for each among passengers, taking into account both the appeal and credibility of the different channels, and their level of 'reach' among different passenger groups.

In summary:

- electronic real-time display boards were felt to be the most useful way of communicating with all types of passengers and this was passengers' overall preferred method
- providing information inside buses is also felt to be a good way to reach passengers, especially where this can be done electronically
- in general, passengers are not strongly engaged with bus travel (less so than for rail travel, for instance), and so in general they are unlikely to seek information about delays or disruption actively for themselves (even at the point when they are being affected). This means that ways need to be found to reach passengers, rather than expect them to come looking
- information via apps and mobile internet are expected and will be very useful for some; however since not all passengers use or have access to these technologies, they cannot be the only source of information provided for passengers
- the use of social media to provide information about bus travel appears currently to be very niche, although it has real appeal for some and may grow.

One other very important way of receiving information is via bus drivers, and this is covered separately in section 3.2.

Electronic real-time display boards at stops

Alongside a desire for improved engagement from drivers, electronic real-time information at bus stops was consistently the most popular way of receiving information about bus services for all groups of passengers.

Some of the participants had experienced this type of information previously: those in Leeds and Brighton had often seen and used it at stops, and generally found it to be very useful and reliable. Others, in areas where real-time information is not currently provided, were often aware of it, either from encounters in other areas of the country or from rail travel, and it was frequently mentioned or asked for spontaneously (some even felt that it was unfair that this facility is provided in some areas of the country and not others).

Generally, it was understood by passengers that this information is 'live', although a small number believed that it was an electronic presentation of the scheduled timetable, or that it was provided by the driver as he/she passed through stops along the route and therefore potentially inaccurate or subjective. Understanding was more

widespread in areas with real-time information, but there remains scope to help passengers understand with confidence what is a scheduled time and what is a real-time prediction.

A minority of passengers recounted bad experiences of real-time display boards, such as the information changing or a bus being predicted but not arriving.

“It has happened lots of times that the count-down is saying 10 mins down to 5 mins and then 1 and then it starts from 10 mins again, and you then wonder what is going on.”

Leeds – commuter

When this happens, passengers lose confidence entirely and struggle to trust the information in future. However, problems like this had been experienced by a minority and for most, this type of information is usually found (or perceived) to be reliable and useful. Knowing that the information is live (and not affected by potential human error) also seemed to increase passengers’ confidence in it.

The main advantages of real-time display boards at bus stops are:

- passengers have information which is directly relevant to them at the time they need it, meaning that they are empowered to make decisions and alternative arrangements quickly and with confidence
- the constantly-updating nature of the information is in itself reassuring, it confirms that ‘something is happening out there’, and that there is some control and organisation
- the information is accessible to the vast majority of passengers – no requirement for telephone or internet access
- notably, real-time information boards were also appreciated by the respondents with short term memory loss dyslexia and dyscalculia, since the constant updates provided reminders and confirmations of the situation.

Many passengers also suggested that real-time display boards could be used for communicating short messages, in addition to the basic facts about the destination and expected time of arrival for each route number. In fact some assumed that this was possible or that it is already done.

However, passengers often recognised that it may not be feasible to install these display boards at all stops, but they would see it as a good investment to install them as widely as possible.

Screens and other electronic information on board buses

Some passengers had encountered CCTV-type screens on board buses – in London for example – but this was quite rare. Some others had come across electronic boards displaying information about the next stop, and suggested that these boards could also be used to relay other information.

Both of these were suggested frequently by passengers in the group discussions and depth interviews, and the concept of electronic messages on board was popular for a number of reasons:

- passengers are likely to absorb the information, because they are likely to both see and actually read it (unlike at bus stops, for instance, where passengers accepted they do not always notice information or get close enough/have time to read it)
- up-to-date and even 'breaking' news can be relayed (passengers generally seemed to have greater confidence in electronic information than printed information, in terms of being up to date)
- information could be made directly relevant to the passengers using that route
- the information is consistent for all passengers on the bus (unlike when it comes from drivers, for instance, when it may be influenced by the driver's own interpretation or the terminology he/she may use)
- there is reduced requirement for the driver to give out information; passengers recognised that drivers are often limited in providing information because they need to concentrate on the road, and because relaying information can take time and cause delays in itself. Many passengers were also quite cynical about drivers, and suspect that the driver might not wish to give the same information repeatedly during a journey.

For the same reasons, pre-recorded audio messages and potentially live announcements from 'base' were also felt to be a useful way of communicating with passengers.

Passengers felt that these types of information could be used to tell people about diversions or other changes affecting that service at the time (even if information had also been disseminated in advance elsewhere), about unexpected problems as the information became available (such as informing passengers that unexpected traffic congestion was due to an accident), and to warn regular users of disruption that will affect them in future (e.g. a road resurfacing scheme).

Printed/static information on board buses

Similarly to the above, posters on board buses are useful to passengers because they are a 'captive audience' and are therefore likely to see and digest the information, and because this can reduce the need for information from the driver.

Posters are mainly useful as a means of communicating to regular passengers about disruption which could affect them in the future. When posters have been provided, passengers have usually found them to be useful, however several talked about posters showing information which is relevant to the network or area as a whole, rather than being specific to certain routes – passengers are keen for information to be relevant to them.

A small number of passengers talked about leaflets and free newspapers being given out on board buses, and felt that these were a useful way to communicate; however

there was also recognition that these create litter, and that they are often picked up but discarded, and so generally this was not a preferred option.

Local news

Many of the participants in this research would either read local newspapers or listen to a local radio station.

Those listening to local radio tended to do so regularly (most days), and did take local travel news into account when making or planning bus journeys; this allows them to hear about both expected and unexpected disruptions. A small number also used local TV news in the same way, although this tends to cover a wider region and so can be of less immediate relevance.

Local newspapers tended to be read slightly less regularly (e.g. weekly). News relating to local transport was usually encountered as a story about planned improvements to a road or area, rather than specifically about the impact it would have on road users (although this was implied and of course sometimes does constitute the focus of the story). As such, while passengers might listen to the radio with some intention to listen out for information relating to a journey, few would actively go to a newspaper with the intention of coming across information about a specific journey. However, some did suggest that inserts in free local newspapers would be an effective way to tell local people about forthcoming disruption.

For both local newspapers and local radio news, passengers find that travel news tends to relate to a road or area rather than to specific bus routes. While most research participants were happy to hear about roads/areas and work out for themselves if it would affect their bus route, some would find it helpful to hear specifically which bus routes are affected.

Smartphone applications

Only a small number of the research participants were aware of smartphone apps for bus travel, and only one or two had actually used one. Their conversations also indicated that this kind of technology is currently not intuitively linked with bus travel. This contrasts with other modes of transport; several participants used apps for rail travel (for information including live service information and occasionally ticket purchase) and for car travel (for example, the AA or Highways Agency apps for updates on traffic congestion or other road problems).

When the concept of using smartphone apps for bus travel was introduced to passengers, their usual initial assumption was that apps might be used for information about routes (where they go and the stops) and timetables. They were less likely to think about using apps for information about disruption, although a small number assumed that they could be used for real-time, live information like that found on electronic display boards. Very few passengers were either aware, or made the assumption, that this was available already. A few people were asked to download specific bus information apps in advance of the focus groups to see what they thought of them, and even these people generally saw the apps as being used for route and

timetable information, ahead of information about disruption (despite being prompted for this).

On being shown examples of how apps might be used for delay or disruption information, many research participants reacted positively. In particular they liked the idea of looking at real-time information for a specific route or stop (as mentioned above, this was suggested spontaneously by some), and the potential for alerts about current delays and problems (rather than requiring passengers to actively seek this information). Importantly, they would like to be able to filter such alerts for relevance to specific routes or areas, and so that they are alerted at particular times (e.g. once a day when preparing to leave home for work). They were also interested in being able to see brief information about future planned disruption within an app, especially when this was presented concisely and pictorially – see Figure 1 below which is an example of presenting information in a way which appealed to the passengers in the group discussions.

Figure 1: Example of smartphone app providing bus disruption information.



Again, while passengers were positive about this, many envisaged needing an alert to prompt them to look at this section of an app in the first place.

Overall, among those who had a smartphone and could therefore make use of apps, many were positive and might consider using one. However a small number were very enthusiastic, especially about using them for real-time information.

A key issue which passengers raised about apps was that they require a smartphone and therefore would exclude some (at least currently). Apps were felt by the oldest (80+) respondents in this research to be completely irrelevant to them, and also by some of those aged 60+ (but not all). Perhaps surprisingly, some of the youngest participants (including some sixth form students and some of the 18-25s) did not have smartphones due to cost, and so would not be able to use most apps. Smartphone apps are therefore a very useful source of information, but their current reach means

that they should supplement information provided elsewhere rather than be the sole means.

Printed/static information at stops

Passengers feel that information about changes to routes/timetables which are known about should be provided on posters at bus stops, and they feel there is no excuse for not doing this. Their perception of whether posters are provided currently is mixed; some feel that information at their bus stop is satisfactory, while others say that they see no information at all. This may be partly because there really is no information, and partly due to passengers not looking at the information provided – which they acknowledge.

When information is provided at bus stops, the quality is also felt to vary. This is the case for general information such as timetables, as well as for information relating to disruption and delays. Many research participants reported that information is difficult to read due to displays being dirty or damaged, and many are also sceptical about how current the information is, especially outside of town centres.

“The [timetable at the stop] outside Bury hospital said ‘updated 2005!’”

Sudbury – younger leisure

The perceived poor quality of information at many stops, coupled with the fact that many passengers will use the same stop frequently and therefore do not ‘register’ information given there because they are not in the habit of looking at it, means that such information can often be overlooked. This means that it needs to be provided as early as possible in order to maximise the chances that it will be seen, and it must be made highly visible. In addition, information should ideally be provided through other channels as well.

More specifically, passengers also report inconsistency in relation to information about temporary bus stops. Although there are good examples, participants in this research talked about experiences such as:

- a bus stop which was out of action, but there was nothing to indicate this to passengers until a bus drove past and it was too late
- a temporary bus stop which was hard to find because there was no signage to direct passengers
- bus drivers going past a temporary stop, and passengers concluding that drivers were not aware of the change
- a stop returning to use, but the signage to indicate that it was out of use being left in place for some time afterwards, meaning that passengers waited elsewhere along the road (this example was given by a driver).

Telephone numbers at stops to call or text for information

Many passengers in this research had seen phone numbers at bus stops, and some had used these – particularly the text service for information about the next buses to arrive at a stop. However, among those who had not used these services, the expectation was that a telephone helpline would be used retrospectively for complaints rather than for information while waiting for a bus. The nature of the text service in providing information specific to that stop was not well understood, nor were passengers clear whether they would be texted scheduled times or real-time predictions.

Once they understood how these services might be used as a source of information about delays while waiting at a bus stop, passengers generally had a reasonably good expectation that they could be useful. Those who had used them previously also held this opinion. However, there were some examples of passengers calling a helpline and having to wait in a queue, of the operator not having a great deal of information themselves, and of the text service taking so long to reply that the passenger had caught a bus and reached their destination before receiving the text. These experiences caused loss of confidence and were a deterrent to future use.

While in theory both a helpline number and a text service were felt to be potentially useful, many passengers did have concerns.

- Some objected, on principle, to having to pay for the service.

“I don’t see why I should have to spend my money... I wouldn’t dream of phoning the bus company.”

Birmingham – commuter

- This type of information requires passengers themselves to take action to find information, rather than being given it. Bus passengers are not highly engaged with bus travel (far less than rail passengers), and many would be unlikely to take this step, meaning that this information source will always need to be a supplement to other methods.
- Helplines and text services require a mobile phone. The majority of participants in this research did own a mobile phone, with the exception of two of the 80+ year old passengers, but there was still some concern (from other passengers on their behalf) that some would not be able to access this type of information.
- Not all were aware that telephone numbers are given at bus stops, and so greater prominence could be beneficial:

“It’s a very small line [of text] on the bus stop, if you weren’t looking for it you wouldn’t find it.”

Sudbury – younger leisure

Websites

Many passengers said that they would go online to find out information about bus times or routes, for example if they had moved to a new area or had to go to a different destination within their local area. They would go to the websites of the bus company or the local authority/PTE for this. However, virtually none of the research participants would consider looking up information about planned disruption – although most assume that this would be available. Passengers might be happy to receive alerts about disruption, but they are unlikely to actively look for it themselves.

“The Metro website is good for planned roadworks but you have to remember to look and find out.”

Leeds – commuter

“I only tend to... look at the Metro when I’ve had a bad experience and it reminds me to look and be a bit more prepared.”

Leeds – commuter

This use of websites for bus travel contrasts with rail and car travel. Some bus passengers in this research talked about checking online for service information when making a train journey; this was often because the train journey was of more consequence (usually a longer journey, out of the local area, and more expensive), and because there is a greater expectation that such information would be provided. Similarly, some talked about going online to check for road disruption, usually via the Highways Agency or the AA.

Due to the way that websites are currently used for bus travel, it is likely to be beneficial to signpost passengers to them in order to maximise their use. Indeed, passengers welcomed the idea of quoting a relevant website address within other, briefer types of communication (such as on posters on board buses), so that they could look up more detail online if they wished to.

Again, there is a degree of exclusivity about online information – while passengers feel it is right that information is given here, ideally it should also be given elsewhere to ensure access to information is as wide as possible.

Finally, the experience of one participant in this study highlights the importance of ensuring that online information is kept up to date.

“I’ve been stood and waiting for a bus ... and there had been an accident and they’d stopped the buses ... but because it was before nine o’ clock, nobody could update their website to say that there had been a crash, so I stood there... for 45 minutes.... [I found out what had happened] when I got to work, and then I phoned the bus station and I was mad because... that’s the only bus I can get...and I couldn’t get to work. In the end I had to phone my mum to come and get me and take me to work... I had a Blackberry at the time and I was trying to look online [while at the stop] to see if anything had happened.”

Manchester – commuter

Social media

The passengers in this research gave mixed reactions to the idea of using social media as source of information about bus travel, and none of them had ever done so previously. Their views ranged from those who considered that it might be a useful tool, to those who went as far as to find the idea laughable – this was because they consider social media to be about socialising and/or entertainment only, and could not conceive ‘following’ or being linked to a bus company in this way. As such, social media is likely to appeal to a niche (although it is potentially one which will grow).

For passengers who were interested, the following considerations were important for providing information in this way:

- passengers’ principal concern was that a bus company’s social media output would include information about all of its routes; it will be important to be able to filter out irrelevant information and receive updates about specific routes or areas only
- passengers were more open to using Twitter in this way than sites like Facebook. This is because Facebook and similar sites tended to be viewed more as a medium for interacting with friends and family, while Twitter was felt to be more suitable for updates and information. Twitter was also seen as more likely to allow individuals to filter out information that they are less interested in
- brief notifications via Twitter were seen as a good way to alert passengers to look out for specific future disruption that might affect them, or to look up more detail on a website if they wished to
- two-way conversations between passengers and a bus company can be reassuring because they show that the bus company responds to its customers; however such conversations can further clutter an individual’s Twitter screen, and raised some concerns about whether the company will be able to resource this effectively (and how this is paid for)
- as for other information channels, social media information will be relatively exclusive due to the need for online access, and particularly mobile internet access. Bus companies should be careful not to make assumptions about who is likely to be attracted by information through social media – noting, in particular, that some younger bus passengers are likely to view it in the context of entertainment and social interaction, rather than for other purposes.

4.2 The interaction with drivers

4.2.1 The passenger perspective

As might be expected, from a passenger perspective bus drivers are the ‘face’ of both the bus company and of the bus service in general. As such, the majority of passengers feel that drivers are obvious candidates for providing information about delays and disruption, because:

- they are accessible to all passengers, and are always present
- it is perceived that drivers will be well informed via direct communication with the control room
- in theory drivers have up-to-date, relevant information (e.g. in contrast to a week-old poster) and are therefore potentially the most useful and reliable source.

Indeed, passengers feel that bus drivers should provide information about delays and disruption.

However, the current experience of drivers as the main ‘touch-point’ for passengers is often poor. While there are occasional positive examples, these tend to be an exception.

“[This particular bus driver] is such a gentleman – he really stands out a mile... he’s so polite, he treats everybody the same...very helpful, he gets out of his seat to help ladies with their trolleys.”

Sudbury – concessionary pass holder

Moreover, research participants’ occasional positive experiences of drivers were more often related to general service, than their helpfulness in providing information about delays. In terms of providing information, passengers commonly have a negative impression of drivers.

“[The driver was] utterly, utterly indifferent, and it was chaos and people were panicking and they were frightened that they weren’t going to get home... he couldn’t have been less helpful if he’d have hit me over the head with a fence post.”

Sudbury – concessionary pass holder

“For most people the only interaction they have with the bus company is through the drivers so they should make a lot more effort than they do.”

Brighton – leisure

“I work in customer services and would never get away with how the bus drivers speak or grunt at people. They are stuck behind the times with customer service.”

Exeter – leisure

More specifically, this research highlighted that passengers frequently feel that drivers do not relay information to passengers even when it is available. This happens either because drivers appear to make little effort to find out what is happening when there is a delay, or because drivers know what is happening but do not pass this on to passengers. The following are a few examples of many similar comments from passengers who took part in the study:

“Bus drivers give you no info, you can hear them being given info via the radio but they don’t feed it back.”

Leeds – commuter

“Bus drivers should relay the information [they receive over radios] – that’s useful, courtesy and customer service.”

Leeds – commuter

“The bus drivers have a radio, so why can’t they [central control via radio] give them [drivers] information on the radio, and then pass it on to passengers?”

Sudbury – concessionary pass holder

“I think the driver should have radioed in, and then said to us all ‘there’s been an accident’. I mean, we all knew it, but it would have been nice for him to have said.”

Manchester – leisure

Passengers are very willing to accept that drivers themselves are rarely at fault for delays, and they recognise that drivers sometimes do not have all the information that passengers want, or that it can be difficult in practice to relay this information. However, the passengers in this research expressed three main points:

- **drivers should have access to information, and/or it should be possible to get information directly to the people on board the bus**

When passengers feel that drivers or the bus company are withholding information, this contributes to a feeling of ‘us and them’, and means that passengers start to direct blame towards the driver despite knowing that a disruption is not caused by him or her and is a wider problem.

- **bus companies should find other ways to communicate with passengers when it is impractical for drivers to do so**

Passengers can understand that it is sometimes difficult for drivers to pass information on. They recognise that if a driver was to explain a situation to each passenger as they boarded this would take time and cause further delays. They also recognise that (unless there is a public address system) the alternative would be for drivers to get out of their seat to address the passengers once they are on the bus, which requires the driver to stop and is particularly difficult on double decker buses. However, because of these impracticalities they also feel that it is important for bus operators to provide other methods for communicating information:

- public address – many buses have CCTV, so this seems feasible to passengers

- pre-recorded, particularly for common occurrences, or potentially live messages from 'base'
- electronic displays on board, or prominent posters.

“The bus driver obviously doesn’t want 50 people nagging at him that he’s late, so he’s not going to have a nice day at work is he? So if there was an announcement to tell us all why it’s late, it might make his life a little bit easier as well.”

Birmingham – student

- **drivers should treat passengers as customers**

Because it is sometimes difficult for drivers to know what is happening when there are delays, passengers can accept that drivers may not be able to give them facts. However, they still demand polite, friendly and reassuring interaction from drivers, and this does appear to be often lacking.

“Whether they do know [what’s happening] or not, the thing that gets me more is the reaction... At the end of the day, you are a customer, you know, I don’t get on that bus for free... fair enough [the driver] might not have an explanation, but when I’m at work and people shout at me I still have to give good customer service.”

Manchester – commuter

“Politeness in all situations means a lot to people. You accept a lot if people say, ‘I’m really sorry but this is happening.’”

Sudbury – concessionary pass holder

“It wouldn’t cost anything to say ‘sorry we’re a bit late’... that would make the difference between going to work in a bad mood or going to work OK.”

Manchester – commuter

“They need to provide customer service. We are paying for a service which seems to get forgotten.”

Brighton – leisure

Again, many passengers also observe that if drivers’ attitude was more positive, passengers themselves would also interact with drivers more constructively rather than directing frustration towards them, meaning that the situation would also be improved for drivers.

4.2.2 The driver perspective on delays and disruption

The drivers who took part in this research recognised most of the same types of disruption as passengers, including problems such as congestion, road blockages/closures/diversions, bad weather, accidents, mechanical problems with their vehicles, and badly behaved passengers. Drivers often genuinely sympathise with passengers when there are these types of delays and problems with their journeys, even if their sympathy is not recognised by passengers. However, drivers did not tend to think of pauses *en route* for driver changeovers, or buses not stopping to pick up waiting passengers, as disruption in the same way as passengers do. Therefore drivers may need to be made more fully aware of what constitutes disruption from the passenger viewpoint.

While there is some agreement between passengers and drivers about what constitutes disruption, this research suggests there is a mismatch in the perception of how disruption and delays are handled. Most of the time, drivers feel that they and their bus company are doing their best to overcome problems when they happen, and they often assume that passengers are aware of those efforts.

“You can see the posters up at the stop so [the passengers] know the bus will divert.”

Bus driver

“[For example] there’s been an accident....you can get in touch with [your base] and say am I ok if I go up here, and they’ll... say yes ok... and away you go – you’re putting an effort in, which you know [the passengers] can see you doing so they appreciate that.”

Bus driver

“[The passengers] can see that something’s happened there, it’s not just a queue of traffic, they’ve probably seen that there’s been an accident.”

Bus driver

However, as highlighted earlier in this report, passengers often have a very different experience:

“There was a major accident and the road was closed, and the driver didn’t tell us anything. It was other people on the bus... saying ‘oh there’s been an accident down the road’... [and] you could hear the radio going but he wouldn’t tell us anything.”

Manchester – leisure passenger

This suggests that drivers (and bus companies more widely), may need to consider the passenger perspective more carefully. Section 4.2.3 looks more generally at drivers’ interaction with passengers and their role as the main passenger touchpoint.

In addition to drivers and operators perhaps needing to be more conscious of passengers’ information needs, drivers highlighted other obstacles to communicating with passengers.

- When there are disruptions which are known about in advance:
 - drivers say that because multiple organisations can be involved, communication can be difficult and this needs to improve
 - there are instances of information being given at late notice, when it could have been provided earlier; this applies both to local authorities and engineering contractors providing information to bus companies, and to bus companies providing information to their drivers.

“I know, for one, this weekend..., I know I’ve seen something [which will happen] on [XXXX] Road, but there’s nothing up on the board yet.”

Bus driver

- When problems happen unexpectedly, and drivers need information from their base or control centre while on the move:
 - equipment on board buses is not always provided or is inadequate for this purpose

“I think a radio link would be quite handy actually...so the office could contact you and say look there’s been accident; you need to make a diversion.”

Bus driver

“It could be better if all the radios worked...So the only contact you’ve got then is phone, [and for that] you’ve got to stop at the side of the road and make a call.”

Bus driver

- from drivers’ perspective, control centres themselves are often under-resourced.

“There’s one person on the radio who’s controlling at least 108 buses... so if something major does happen.... there’s one guy to deal with it all.”

Bus driver

Drivers are also sometimes afraid to give out information if the situation is likely to change and render the information incorrect later on, reflecting badly on them. While this may be a valid concern, passengers in this research suggested that they understand the nature of road travel and how this can affect the ability of bus companies and drivers to impart completely accurate information. Passengers felt that, as long as they are aware that information is based on best current knowledge, some information is better than none. Again this demonstrates that drivers and bus companies could consider the passenger perspective more than they do when responding to delays and disruption.

4.2.3 The driver perspective on customer service

Drivers are strongly aware of their position as the 'face' of the service, and conversations with drivers as part of this research suggested that they usually accept this. However, when it comes to providing information, drivers say that this is not always easy or ideal, and it is often seen as an addition to their core function.

“When the conductor or host whatever you call it was around, far better service was given to the customer. Unfortunately now the driver is the host, the safety supervisor, the conductor, the driver, and quite often when things go wrong in the journey the driver is very limited in what he or she can do.”

Bus driver

“I’m sort of reluctant really ‘cause the driver does a lot of different things. At the end of the day you’ve got a 10-tonne double decker and your load is not boxes, it’s live people, so you’ve got to drive with that in mind all the time. There are people [who] stand up and wander around, go upstairs, swap seats and it’s all going on while you’re driving that bus, and you can’t help but look. So I think another job on the driver’s not ideal.”

Bus driver

It may be that bus companies could improve passenger experiences by fostering a stronger customer service ethic among drivers and their organisations generally, encouraging drivers to see information provision and customer interaction as an important part of their role (not an extra), and also supporting them in this via provision of other information on board. Interestingly, some of the drivers who participated in this research did talk about specific training modules on customer service, but their descriptions of this suggested more focus on customer safety and logistics than interaction and empathy with customers.

It is also interesting to see that, in the same way that passengers often have an 'us and them' attitude towards bus drivers, the drivers have a similar attitude towards passengers. This report has already highlighted that passengers' experiences of interacting with drivers are varied, and that negative experiences are common - or at least more memorable. The same is true for drivers' experiences of passengers.

“You name it, we’ll come across it: The polite, the kind, the courteous, the ignorant, the arrogant, the drunk, the drugged. You name it, we have to deal with it.”

Bus driver

“99.9 per cent of my passengers just want to go from A to B and back again; the problem is that 0.1 per cent who can really really upset you.”

Bus driver

Drivers feel that some passengers can be unreasonable, unfairly blaming the driver for problems, and forgetting that the driver is human and can be made to feel offended and under-valued:

“When buses are stuck in traffic... the bus that turns up has done their best to get to that stop...He’s the one who gets it in the neck, but he’s the only one whose fault it couldn’t be because he’s the one that’s turned up!”

Bus driver

“Whilst bus drivers are seen as grumpy old men and women... I think it’s more [because of] our blank expression sometimes because that one person may have a pop... but that bus driver’s probably had about 300 pops by the time he gets to the afternoon shift.”

Bus driver

Of course, the passenger reaction to all of these comments would be that drivers operate in a customer-facing role and so should be trained or encouraged to demonstrate a positive attitude regardless.

The research did further highlight that there is a need for drivers to work from a stronger customer service mind-set; some did admit to occasions when they (or colleagues) simply do not do this, or stop doing it.

“There’s some drivers here that will just get off [their bus] and just go... because they want to go home or on their meal break, so they don’t care.”

Bus driver

“We’ve all done that.... You think ‘why am I bothering?’ I’ve tried to get you home, and there’s nothing, so tonight you’ve all had a go at me, so tonight you’re going to get home at my pace.”

Bus driver

“The driver’s got to want to do that piece of work... if they’re only in that job just for... a wage at the end of the week, not [because] they enjoy doing it... but [because] they have to – those people will never give out information.”

Bus driver

Overall there does appear to be a sense of 'us versus them' between passengers and drivers. When delays and disruption occur, both groups sometimes believe that the other knows more about the situation than they really do, leading to lack of communication on drivers' part and frustration on passengers' part. In addition, passengers see many drivers as having a poor attitude towards customer service and drivers often perceive passengers to be unreasonable in their expectations. It would therefore appear that:

- passengers need:
 - better information from the driver and other sources
 - better understanding of what drivers can and cannot tell them – which can come (politely) from the driver him/herself.
- drivers need:
 - greater understanding of and consideration for what passengers actually know (it is often less than they assume)
 - greater cultural focus on customer service within bus companies
 - better support from 'base', to provide information to passengers in other ways in order to enable a better perception of drivers' customer service.

4.3 Practical measures to aid management of delays and disruption

In addition to ensuring that passengers are provided with information when delays and disruption occur on bus services, both passengers and drivers also highlighted a number of other, practical, ways in which delays and disruption might be managed more effectively.

Some of the measures they suggested are relevant to specific types of delay or disruption:

- for planned roadworks or local events which cause road closures or blocks
 - Both passengers and drivers perceive there to be a need for better collaboration between local authorities and bus companies, to plan works in a way which will cause minimal disruption. For example, drivers and passengers would like to see works staggered rather than taking place simultaneously along a whole road, and diversions around roadworks rather than attempting to pass through them (the preference for this will depend upon the situation of course).
 - When there are temporary traffic lights, some passengers and drivers feel these could be phased better in order to allow sufficient (but not too much) time for traffic to pass before allowing the traffic from the opposite direction to flow.
- for congestion
 - Several passengers and drivers suggested that timetables should include a 'rush-hour contingency' so that timings are more realistic during peak hours.
 - Some passengers would also like to see greater frequency during peak hours, to deal with the greater volume of people which sometimes results in full buses and passengers left behind.

- Drivers in all areas advocated bus priority lanes, and described how these had made a positive difference where introduced.
- Some passengers and drivers also suggested reconsideration of congestion charging in some areas to reduce traffic.
- when there are mechanical faults with buses
 - Both passengers and drivers would like to see relief vehicles provided more quickly, with contingency vehicles kept on standby in more locations to aid this.
 - Some passengers feel that mechanical faults are unacceptable since vehicles should be maintained properly (while it might be naïve to think nothing will ever break down, this is a genuine perception which bus companies need to be aware of).
- when drivers need to halt the bus part-way through a journey to swap shifts
 - Passengers find it unacceptable if relief drivers are not there on time to take over.
 - Some passengers object to the idea that drivers will be sent out on a journey that they cannot complete within their shift time, or before they are legally required to take a break.
- when passengers are slow to board
 - Passengers are usually enthusiastic about new ticketing options like smartcards which would speed up the transaction process.
 - Many passengers feel that more buses should be provided at certain times to avoid 'mass-boarding' which can slow journeys down; in particular these passengers felt there was a need for more dedicated school buses in order not to slow down other passengers who need to travel at peak school times.
- When buses drive past passengers waiting at stops
 - Where this is because stops are very busy and drivers genuinely do not see the people waiting, passengers suggest that stops in busy town centres need to be spaced out more so that there is greater clarity about which passengers are waiting for which buses.
 - Where this is because drivers simply ignore passengers, more care and attention is needed from the drivers.

There were also some more general suggestions made:

- passengers would benefit from more and better shelters being provided at bus stops wherever possible, in order to improve the experience of waiting in the cold or wet when this happens
- some passengers complained that some drivers are unable to speak English sufficiently well to help customers effectively even if they want to
- several drivers were keen to see the introduction of more dedicated customer service staff, or perhaps more inspectors who could also fulfil this role; they suggested these personnel would be valuable on streets in busy town centres where several bus stops were close together, as well as sometimes on board buses.

“There is a lack of street-level communication for passengers...I honestly believe that investment [is necessary] not only in the infrastructure, but investment in the business in terms of customer service agents.”

Bus driver

“We have... two Manchester inspectors, that’s it, to cover the whole of Manchester... I believe you can’t have two people covering that amount of area.”

Bus driver

Appendices

A. Summary of sample structure

(i) Focus groups

Manchester

Group 1	Group 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of high frequency routes (every 10 mins or less)<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 50 per cent Stagecoach; routes 111, 192 & 347- 50 per cent FirstGroup; routes 17/18, 135 & 163• Commuting to work (at least 3 times per week)• Aged 25-35	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of medium frequency routes (every 30 mins)<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 50 per cent Stagecoach; routes 7, 109 & 255- 50 per cent FirstGroup; routes 12, 53 & 64• Travelling to/from shops• Aged 36-55

Leeds

Group 3	Group 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of high frequency routes (every 10 mins or less)<ul style="list-style-type: none">- FirstGroup; routes 2 & 6• Travelling to/from shops• Aged 18-25 (excluding those in full time education)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of medium frequency routes (every 30-60 mins)<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Arriva; routes 117, 167/168, 189, 209, 229• Commuting to work (at least 3 times per week)• Journeys of 30 mins or more• Aged 36-55

Sudbury

<p>Group 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of any operator, including a mix of those travelling on town services (essentially Sudbury-Great Cornard) and those travelling further afield (Colchester, Ipswich, Bury)• Travelling for any 'leisure' reason (i.e. travelling to shops OR concerts, theatre, sporting events, other general socializing etc.)• At least 50 per cent of group to make journeys of 30 mins or more• Aged 36-55	<p>Group 6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of any operator, including a mix of those travelling on town services (essentially Sudbury-Great Cornard) and those travelling further afield (Colchester, Ipswich, Bury)• Travelling for any 'leisure' reason (not commuting)• At least 50 per cent of group to make journeys of 30 mins or more• Aged 60+, and holding senior citizens' concessionary bus pass
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Exeter

<p>Group 7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of Stagecoach services <u>within</u> the town<ul style="list-style-type: none">- <i>A mixture of the different high – medium frequency, city-centre services</i>• Sixth form students travelling to from school or college• Aged 16-18	<p>Group 8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Passengers using one of several operators travelling from neighbouring areas into Exeter<ul style="list-style-type: none">- <i>A mixture of services run by different operators including Turners, First Dorset & South Somerset, Dartline, Country Bus</i>• Travelling for leisure – concerts, theatre, sporting events, other general socialising• Journeys of 30 mins or more• Aged 36-55
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Birmingham

Group 9	Group 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of Travel West Midlands (National Express) services<ul style="list-style-type: none">- <i>Mixture of high and lower frequency routes:</i>- <i>High frequency routes; 6, 7, 82 & 101</i>- <i>Lower frequency routes; 69, 73, 112, 141 & 146</i>• Students – travelling for reasons including leisure and commuting to education/part time work• Aged 18-22	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of Travel West Midlands (National Express) services<ul style="list-style-type: none">- <i>Mixture of high and lower frequency routes:</i>- <i>High frequency routes; 6, 7, 82 & 101</i>- <i>Lower frequency routes; 69, 73, 112, 141 & 146</i>• Frequent travelers including commuting to work• Aged 60+, and holding senior citizens' concessionary bus pass

Brighton

Group 11	Group 12
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of Brighton & Hove (Go Ahead) services<ul style="list-style-type: none">- <i>Mixture of high and lower frequency routes:</i>- <i>High frequency routes; 1, 5, 7 & 25</i>- <i>Lower frequency routes; 14, 29 & 81A</i>• Travelling to/from shops• Aged 18-25 <i>(excluding those in full time education)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Users of Brighton & Hove (Go Ahead) services<ul style="list-style-type: none">- <i>Mixture of high and lower frequency routes:</i>- <i>High frequency routes; 1, 5, 7 & 25</i>- <i>Lower frequency routes; 14, 29 & 81A</i>• Travelling for leisure – concerts, theatre, sporting events, other general socializing• Aged 25-35

(ii) Depth interviews with passengers

- Passengers with sensory impairments which affect use of information/communication
 - One passenger with short term memory loss dyslexia (Brighton, male, late 20's)
 - One passenger with dyscalculia (Brighton, male, early 20's)
 - One passenger with a hearing impairment (Sudbury, female, 70's)
 - One passenger with a visual and hearing impairment (Sudbury, male, late 60's)

- Passengers with mobility impairments
 - Two passengers using wheelchairs
 - One in Birmingham, male, 30's; this respondent also has a speech impediment
 - One in Exeter, male, 50's; this respondent is also blind in one eye
 - Two passengers with mobility problems but not using wheelchairs
 - One in Exeter, female, 40's; this respondent also has poor eye sight and is partially deaf
 - One in Birmingham, male, 30's; this respondent also has a visual impairment

- Passengers aged 80+
 - Two depth interviews with individuals, in Manchester and Leeds
 - Two pair-depth interviews with pairs of friends, in Manchester and Leeds

(iii) Depth interviews with bus drivers

- One pair of drivers working for First Group in Leeds
- One pair of drivers working for First Group in Manchester
- One pair of drivers working for Ipswich Buses in Ipswich (a company owned by, but stand alone from, Ipswich Borough Council)
- One small group of drivers (five) working for Chambers in Sudbury area (independent for 140 years until taken over by Go Ahead Group during 2012)

B. Discussion guide – passengers

(1 hr 45mins)

1. Introduction (5mins)

- Introduction and thank respondents for taking part
- Brief background to Passenger Focus
- Explain purpose of research:
 - to find out about passengers' experiences of delays or other problems with journeys on buses, and how bus companies can best deal with these problems to help passengers
- Confidentiality issues/reassurances
- Permission to record

- BRIEF: Respondents work in pairs to introduce each other:
 - Brief personal details
 - Typical bus journeys made in the area
 - Extent to which rely on buses for these journeys, or have other options
 - Experience of delays or disruption on these journeys – notable good or bad points

2. Overview: Experiences of bus delays or disruption (15 mins)

- Briefly, give me some examples of your most recent bus journeys
 - Did they run to time?
 - For any which didn't – what happened?
- What other experiences have people in the group had, of delays or disruption to bus services? (Reference pre-task if wished)
(Observe for what constitutes 'a disruption' for participants; note types of delay/disruption on flip chart)
 - What exactly happened? *What different kinds of delay/disruption have been experienced?*
 - How often does it happen?
 - What is going through your mind when waiting for a bus in a situation like this and it is late? How did/do you feel?
 - Prompt if not come up: do you ever watch for your bus going in the other direction to help you tell whether the route is running? What exactly do you watch for? How exactly do you use that knowledge?
 - If relevant: how long did you wait?
 - How long before to you start to feel anxious...to panicked (if relevant) in this kind of situation?
 - How long before you decide to do something?
 - What exactly did you do as a result?
 - Prompt if necessary:
 - How easy/difficult was that?
 - What was the impact on you/your day?
 - How did/does this affect your use of buses (on that route or generally) in the future?
- What did the bus company do?
(observe for differences in front line staff e.g. drivers, and 'head office')
(observe for differences in what the bus company did, versus information/communication)
 - When exactly did they do this / say this, etc?
 - What did you think about that? Was it good/bad? Why?
 - What could the bus company have done (better), what should they do next time if something similar happens again?
- How did you find out about these problems?
 - When
 - Via what channels
 - Briefly (as will be covered more later): what did you think about that? Was it good/bad? Why?
- Prompt if not come up above: has anyone experienced a delay or a problem while actually on a bus?
 - What happened?
 - How did you feel?
 - What did you / the bus company do about it?
 - Is this different to a delay or a problem while waiting?

3. Further detail on types of disruption (10 mins)

- *Reference flip chart:* We've talked about these types of disruption. What other types of disruption are there, in terms of....?
Observe for whether these things are thought of as disruption, whether passengers are aware/interested, whether these are common, to what extent they impact on passengers and whether there are differences in attitude towards different types and causes of disruption
 - How passengers are affected (e.g. prompt on some of the following if don't arise):
 - late/cancelled
 - missed certain stops
 - problems affecting just one route / a small part of a route like a single road
 - problems affecting a whole route, or more than one route)
 - Very briefly if not come up – check on whether passengers view the following as 'disruption'
 - (regular/annual) changes to timetables over Christmas/bank holidays
 - 'bunching' of buses ("you wait for ages and then 3 come at once...")
 - heavy traffic
 - poor weather (any differences between e.g. snow, ice, rain, wind?)
 - damaged roads
 - roadworks
 - local events causing road closures
 - accidents
 - bus breakdown
 - damaged bus stop preventing it being used
 - driver strikes or driver shortage due to illness, etc.
- What do you think about this cause/effect... and this one.... Etc. Why? (*i.e. gauging whether attitudes are different to any of the above, extent to which different causes are tolerable*)
- Does it matter what the cause is? Do you want to know? Why?

4. Information – **when** passengers find out (10 mins)

- *Pick an example of someone's experience to kick off:*
- You said that you found out about this xxxx
 - (*e.g. when at the bus stop for the outward journey, at bus stop for return, on the bus itself, the day before, the week before, etc*)
 - Tell me more about what it was like finding out at that point – good/bad?
 - Could you have found out at another point to make it better for you? When, why?
 - What do others in the group think about this?
 - What kinds of people would benefit from finding out about this type of problem at this point, and who wouldn't?
 - What situation would that work in? What type of problem/delay would that work for? And what type of problem/delay would that not work for? Does it differ?

- What about when you find out about a problem xxxx (*repeat for 2-3 other examples, ensure spread of different types / causes*)
- Prompt specifically if not come up: do/would you ever check in advance yourself? (Do you ever think, “if my bus isn’t running tomorrow/next week, what would I do instead?”)
 - For what reasons/what prompts you to do so? OR – why not?
 - How far in advance? Does that differ for different occasions?
 - Briefly, what do you think about the information available in advance? Good/bad points?

5. Information – channels (25 mins)

- *Go back again to some of the passengers’ examples of disruption they have experienced:*
- You said you found out [e.g. when you got to the bus stop]; but how or where did you find out?
(*e.g. purely from the fact the bus didn’t come, from the driver of another service, from another passenger, by phoning up a number given at the stop, using an app, etc*)
- Tell me more about what it was like finding out in that way – good/bad?
 - Could you have found out in a different way, from a different place to make it better for you? Where, why?
 - What do others in the group think about this?
- What about where/how you find out about this problem xxxx (*repeat for 2-3 other examples*)
- What other ways could there be to find out about delays or problems to bus services?
 - Refer to pre-task if helpful – where did you look to find out about your bus service for this week?
 - What about if you were at the stop, out in town, at work, at home?
- *List channels suggested on flip chart and probe with the following for each*
 - Do/have/would you use each channel
 - Why/why not
 - What have been the experiences – good, bad, useful, not useful?
 - Accuracy and trustworthiness (perceived versus experience)
 - Useful vs not useful in which situations
 - Useful vs not useful for who
 - What do you think about the format, could it be improved? (e.g. show examples of use of maps vs textual information)
- Prompt on some of the following if not come up spontaneously and use stimulus to help illustrate the types of info, and spark discussion of their usefulness (probe with same questions as above for each which passengers have familiarity with):
 - Drivers and other staff
 - In your experience, are drivers aware of what is going on – on their route, on other buses on other routes?
 - Should they be? How much should drivers know – the extent of a problem, the cause?
 - Should drivers provide advice on alternative options for passengers?

- Do passengers trust drivers to know this information?
- Phone up bus company (including helpline number at stop vs number you might have looked up at home in advance)
- Electronic real-time at stops
 - Check: what do passengers think this info is – do they know it is real-time?
- Timetables – printed leaflets, online, posters at stops
 - BRIEF: You said earlier that you can understand that buses don't always run exactly to the times stated in the timetable (*NB this is likely*)
 - So should timetables themselves allow for that? How? E.g. what if the timetable said times were approximate rather than these exact times? What if it simply said 'every hour', 'every 10 minutes', etc?
 - What would be the impact of that on you? Why?
 - Check: does timetable trustworthiness / ease of use differ by online vs printed, etc
- Texts/emails/posters at stops, alerting you to planned disruption
- Info in the newspapers/local radio/TV news
- Info on websites (which websites? bus company / local authority / Traveline, etc?)
- Social media, e.g. Twitter/Facebook
 - Probe specifically on any differences in attitude towards different social media sites
 - Are they 'social'? Or mainly a one-way feed of information?
- Smartphone apps
 - For websites, social media and apps: are passengers aware that information can/could be live and real-time? What are the experiences of this?
 - For apps:
 - Ask those using apps in pre-task to share experiences
 - All: what do you think about these apps? Good/bad points, and any improvements?
 - What about more information, like an alert to say, e.g. there has just been an accident and route 4 is disrupted?
 - Helpful/not helpful? What would you need to know?
 - How would it work? E.g. geo-location? Pre-set preferences which you've fed into the app?
 - Any trust issues? How could that be improved?
 - Is it better coming from a bus company's own app, a local authority, someone else?
 - What would motivate you to sign up to an alert service / follow on Twitter/Facebook / download an app?and what would put you off?
 - For apps/social media/text/email alerts: should these be provided to everyone as standard, or should you have to sign up? What about subscribing with a fee?

- Specifically for all these 'electronic' channels: what about people who don't have access to these things?
- How would you use these different ways of finding out information?
 - Would you use more than one for a specific occasion? How would they work together? (e.g. receiving text/Twitter alert that delays were happening, then going to website for more detail)
 - Would you use one for one type of information and another for different type of information?

5a. Further detail on real-time info

(note this is likely to fit naturally within the above, rather than as a separate section)

- Earlier you talked about feeling 'in the dark' when waiting for a bus and it is late *(we're likely to be able to reference actual situations here to introduce 'real-time', and use participants' own language re how they felt at the time)*
- What would have been different in that situation if you could tell how far away the bus was/how many minutes late it was?
 - How would you have felt differently?
 - What would you have done?
- Is it possible to let passengers know this kind of information while waiting at the stop?
- How? (Prompt if needed: electronic info at stop; SMS; apps; website from your phone)?
- What do you think about these different ways of getting information about the bus right now?
 - Useful/not useful – why? Which ways of getting real-time info are useful and which less so – why?
 - Trustworthy?
 - Accessible?
 - Did you know about it?
 - For 'real-time' at stops – is it necessary at all stops?
 - *Observe for language used in describing 'real-time info'*
- Any thoughts about the cost of providing 'real-time'?
 - Should money be invested in 'real-time info' at stops, or on apps/websites, or other sources e.g. SMS service? Why?
 - Prompt: it is very expensive to provide 'real-time' at stops, so in practice it could be years before we see it at all stops. What do you think about this? Does this change what you've said about where to invest in the shorter term?

6. Exercise: (25 mins)

*This will be used to pull together the threads from the above discussions, but focus will be on using this as context to discuss the **content** of information passengers need*

- Use sets of cards with:
 - manifestations of disruption (e.g. late, cancelled, diverted route, amended timetable)
 - scope of disruption (e.g. time periods over which this affects passengers, length of delay, whole routes, whole networks)
 - causes of these problems (e.g. snow, driver problems, roadworks, accidents)
NB, of course the above will be printed on cards in passenger friendly language
- Create scenario using these options, e.g. if your bus was **diverted** due to a **planned road closure for roadworks**, for a **week**, meaning the bus has to **cut out certain stops including yours** to keep to time....
 - What would you do?
 - What exactly would you need to know?
 - Reasons for the disruptions? How much detail?
 - When disruption will be over?
 - Extent to which the disruption impacts, e.g. would you want to know which other buses/towns/days it affects, or just your route, today at this time?
 - Solutions, e.g. would you want to be given suggestions for alternative routes by tram, train, cycle?
 - For each of these – why? What benefit would that have? Any potential problems with giving that type or that amount of information, for passengers, and for the bus companies?
 - What about the tone of information (particularly if respondents have mentioned Twitter or other ‘alerts’): apologetic vs factual?
 - How/where would you find out this information? Does it differ for the exact pieces of information you’d be interested in?
 - When would you need to know this information?
 - If this (information) wasn’t possible, then what? (e.g. if you didn’t have a smartphone, if there was no electronic real-time info at that stop, if the bus company didn’t know the reason for the delay)
 - Could the bus company handle this any differently? E.g. could they still try to get to every stop along a route even if this created very long journeys? What other options are there and which are the best?
 - Who would benefit, who would suffer?
 - What would you need to know if this was the case?
 - When, and via what channel?
 - Moderator alter the scenario, e.g. what if this happened due to a road accident, so the same thing happened but the bus company didn’t know about it in advance?
 - New scenario and repeat the above with focus on ‘what exactly would you need to know in this situation’
(Cover at least two completely different scenarios, 3 if time. Cover at least one ‘planned’ and one ‘unplanned’ per group)

7. After delays/disruption (5 mins)

- Any experiences of a bus company doing or saying something after a delay or disruption is over? E.g. changing a route permanently, changing the way information is provided, explaining the reasons for a past problem
 - What exactly did they do?
 - Good/bad points about this & why
 - What else could they have done better, what should they do if this happens again? What would you do if you were the bus company / local authority?
- Prompt if necessary: what about apologies? E.g. thoughts on FirstGroup's apology online (use stimulus)?

8. IF TIME: Punctuality information

- Is your bus route usually on time, or not?
- Are there problems on particular days/times?
(These questions will repeat what we started with in section 2, but need to introduce concept of performance record; also acts to help draw group to a conclusion)
- Do you know anything about the 'official' punctuality record of your route? Or the whole network?
- Explain if needed; use rail examples if helpful. E.g. in the rail industry, train companies publish the proportion of their trains which have been on time, for the last month, or year, etc, and passengers can have access to this information. The bus industry also does this
- How might it be useful, for passengers to know the punctuality record of a bus route, a network, etc?
- Why / why not?

Summary (5 mins)

- If you were to make your usual bus journey tomorrow, and the bus didn't turn up,
 - What would you do?
 - What, and how, would the bus company need to do or say?
- If the bus company knew now that the bus wouldn't be able to turn up at your stop tomorrow,
 - What would you do?
 - What, and how, would the bus company need to do or say?
- If time, any questions from observers if present
- Invite any other final comments from group
- Thank and close

C. Discussion guide – bus drivers

(One hour)

Introduction

- Introduction and thank respondents for taking part
- Explain purpose of research:
 - Passenger Focus wants to find out about how delays and disruption affect bus passengers. We also want to include the perspective of bus drivers, because you deal with passengers every day
 - Very brief background to passenger focus if necessary
- Confidentiality issues/reassurances
- Permission to record

Respondent context

- Explain purpose of this section of the interview, ie to get a brief, overall idea of the interviewees' roles
- Please describe your job role and responsibilities briefly – a typical day/shift
 - *Observe for extent to which drivers describe themselves as someone who literally drives the buses, or someone who helps and meets/greets passengers*
 - What, in your opinion are the key areas of your role?
 - And which are the subsidiary tasks?
 - Route(s) covered
 - Length of time working on these routes/for this company/as a bus driver
 - Approx working hours
 - Describe the routes and the passengers
 - Urban/suburban, etc?
 - Type of passenger, at different times of day (e.g. typical demographics and journey purpose, for certain times of day, certain parts of the route)
Start to observe for attitudes towards passengers/different types of passengers

Delays & disruption – drivers

- Tell me about any delays or disruption that have taken place on bus services in the last week (expand to last month if needed)
 - *Observe for mentions of own route / other routes for same operator / wider area*
 - *Observe for what drivers constitute as disruption (check for differences to passengers)*
- Prompt if needed:
 - Was that on your route? What about elsewhere on [OPERATOR]'s network? And elsewhere in this area?
- Take one example of an instance of delay/disruption:
 - How does that impact on you as a driver?
 - What do you have to do / know?
 - What are you told by [OPERATOR]? Is that sufficient? What else do you need to know, and how do you find out?
- Repeat for other examples

Delays & disruption – passengers

- Again, take one example that respondents have mentioned:
 - How did/does that impact on passengers?
 - How do they react?
 - What did/do they do in that situation?
 - What do they need to know?
 - What do they say to/ask you?
 - What is their attitude towards you?
- Repeat for other examples as above
- Prompt if any salient examples of disruption (in passengers' view) have not been mentioned:
 - In passengers' view, things like xxx count as 'disruption' (*e.g. amended timetables during bank holidays, diverted route due to un-useable stop/road, delay due to an accident, etc*)
 - What do you think about that?
 - Repeat questions above re how passengers act towards drivers, what they need to know, etc.

Further detail on passenger interaction

- How do you see your role in terms of interacting with passengers when all these types of disruption or delay happen?
 - Are you able to fulfil that role? Why/why not?
 - What could be done to help you do that better?
 - Would you like this role to be different (could be more or less interaction with passengers)? Why, how?
- What do you think passengers expect / how do they see your role in these situations?
 - What do you think about that?
 - Are you able to fulfil that role? Why/why not?
 - What could be done to help you do that better?
 - Training – what exactly
 - More info from company – what? In what format/channel?
 - Education of passengers?
- We've been speaking to passengers as part of this project, and they've said that they want drivers to xxx
 - *(This will come out of the focus groups but might include for example: knowing why a previous bus didn't come, why another route number isn't running, if another route is running or not/if there are problems elsewhere, how services will be affected next week when the town centre is closed for a Christmas street market, etc.)*
 - What do you think about that? Why?
 - If a passenger wanted to know xxx, what would you say? How would you know that? What could help you deal with that better?
 - Is it possible for you as a driver to help with xxxx question/problem? Why/why not? What could help make it possible?
 - If relevant: what could be done so that passengers can get this help from somewhere else, and rely less/expect less from drivers?
- How often do you get asked questions/face problems like this?
- What kinds of people ask (e.g. is it always older people/younger people, just tourists, etc?)

Observe again for attitudes towards different types of passengers – e.g. younger people sometimes say that bus drivers are rude to them; is this echoed by drivers themselves?

 - If any different attitudes to passenger types arise: why do you say/think that?
- What other kinds of questions do people ask/what other things do passengers need/expect your help with?

Summary

- Overall, how could the experience of passengers be improved when there are delays or disruption?
- What role do staff/drivers have in that?
- Any other comments?
- Thank and close



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