



# Bus punctuality and timetables

Summary of passenger research  
January 2014

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## Introduction

Part of Passenger Focus' work is to represent the needs and views of bus passengers in England, outside of London. When some new statutory guidance on punctuality was being put together, we commissioned some research to help us understand what people thought of bus punctuality and timetable information – and what they wanted in future. Punctuality is important to bus passengers and we know from our Bus Passenger Survey (BPS) that it is one of the key reasons that people say they are dissatisfied with their overall journey. In 2013, the BPS showed that 18 per cent of passengers were dissatisfied with bus punctuality.

## What did we find?

### Some things are consistent across all types of passenger

Passengers largely agreed on what appropriate standards for measuring punctuality should be:

- perceptions of punctuality are largely determined by their experience of lateness at the stop where they got on the bus ('departure stop')
- delays in arrival at the destination are considered differently – as passengers are already in transit, anxiety and frustration tend to be lower
- cancellations, while frustrating, are also not generally considered in terms of punctuality unless they happen a lot.

### There are some important variations

The type of bus service used affects passengers' feelings regarding punctuality.

Those using services which operate to a **fixed timetable**, with each bus scheduled to arrive at a particular time (e.g. 9.46am), deliberately go to the bus stop early to make sure they do not miss their bus. They measure whether the bus is early or late against the timetable, and have more of an





expectation that this information will be accurate.

Passengers using ‘turn-up-and-go’ services (for example, every 10 minutes, rather than at precise times), go to the bus stop expecting a bus to come in the next few minutes rather than at a set time. These passengers tend to have less of an idea of when buses are running late.

Our BPS supports this – 78 per cent of passengers who know when their bus is meant to arrive because their buses run frequently are satisfied with punctuality, compared to 60 per cent for passengers who didn’t know when their bus was meant to arrive.

***“I’m lucky here, if one goes by another one comes by in five minutes...”***

Frequent passenger, Manchester

Some other factors that make passengers more sensitive to lateness are:

- the service is less frequent (that is, at intervals of more than 10-15 minutes)
- the journey is time-critical, for example:
  - to reach work or college (BPS data also confirms this; bus passengers who are commuting are far more dissatisfied with punctuality than non-commuting passengers –

23 per cent versus 14 per cent)

- hospital appointments
- job interviews
- connections with other transport.
- no other transport option is available to the passenger
- the journey is long
- the journey is new
- the passenger has a disability that makes bus travel harder or particularly stressful.

***“It can be quite traumatic or stressful, I’m always flagging down lorries or the bus will just pass me.”***

Frequent passenger, visual impairment, urban Hertfordshire

## **Passengers are generally tolerant about lateness – within reason**

Passengers in the research said that they do not expect ‘perfection’ in terms of punctuality and will accept some flexibility, through windows of tolerance.

They also take some responsibility for managing their own journey, and take measures such as turning up with time to spare or catching earlier buses for very time-critical journeys.

***“Because it’s that time in the morning you think ‘well, there’s a lot of other people on the road’. To be honest I’m sympathetic because I don’t see how any bus timetable at that time of the day can ever be right.”***

Frequent passenger, Manchester



However, passengers' tolerance is not unlimited. They expect their goodwill to be rewarded, in terms of good service from bus operators and drivers. This involves trying hard to be punctual, improving where there are issues and providing good communication to help passengers with their bus travel.

## What do bus passengers want on the timetable?

Not all passengers use timetables all the time; examples given of when they might be consulted were for journeys they make irregularly, for journeys that might already be familiar but at a new time or completely new journeys on unfamiliar routes or in unfamiliar areas.

Passengers largely agreed that timetables should provide a relatively high degree of detail that gives the most amount of information an individual might require.

While this includes a number of things such as breadth of information



or using a colour contrast to make timetables easy to read, the most important area of detail to include is accuracy of departure and journey times during both peak and non-peak times.

Passengers are happy to see more complex schedules to get information that is more accurate. They prefer this to a simple, easy-to-remember timetable which does not reflect traffic patterns and is less accurate.

***“It’s obvious that the buses are going to be late during rush hour. So, they have to take that into account and do the timetable based on that.”***

Infrequent passenger, Leeds

If timetables are not accurate, at best passenger travel experience is frustrating, with more waiting and longer journey times than anticipated. At worst, it is highly stressful (for example, for passengers with disabilities that make travelling difficult) or resulting in significant negative impact for the passenger (for example, missing other travel connections or lateness resulting in loss or penalty).

This challenges some conventional thinking on timetabling and may warrant some further exploration.

## How late is ‘late’?

Although passengers say they want accuracy, they have clear windows of tolerance or flexibility around bus schedules as they acknowledge that traffic and passenger conditions are

not fully controllable.

These windows are largely in line with current industry guidelines but there is some variation in terms of standards for leaving early.

Passengers generally consider it acceptable for buses to arrive at their stop of departure up to five minutes after the scheduled time, whether the service is frequent or scheduled (and irrespective of interval).

We can also see this in the BPS data. Five minutes waiting time is the threshold after which satisfaction with punctuality decreases markedly. When passengers have to wait six to nine minutes for their bus, satisfaction falls considerably (87 per cent of passengers are satisfied with a wait time of five minutes, compared to 77 per cent when waiting between six and nine minutes). A similar drop in satisfaction can be seen for those passengers waiting 10 minutes.

For more frequent services, particularly ‘turn-up-and-go’ services, passengers consider it acceptable for buses to depart from a stop early. This is because the impact on the passenger is relatively limited should they miss the bus and there is a potential gain to them if they are able to catch a bus which arrives early.

By contrast, for buses operating at less frequent intervals (particularly those operating to a fixed timetable and over 20 minutes apart), passengers feel it is unacceptable for buses to leave stops early. This is because the

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impact on the passenger of missing the bus is felt to be more significant than waiting at stops whilst on the journey (since for the latter, the bus is still running as per the schedule).

***“If they’ve left before their time I get very cross. It’s happened to me, they left two minutes early... I was on time but he flew right past us and wouldn’t stop ... I know two minutes is nothing but when you have to wait for another hour or whatever it’s very frustrating”***

Frequent passenger, visual impairment, Hertfordshire

Passengers tend to tolerate more delay in getting to their arrival stop – they see it as a delay to the journey rather than a late bus.

Regardless of which type of service they are using, when they are on a bus and in transit, passengers say they are tolerant because they can typically see the cause of the problem. They understand, however, that this could mean a significant impact on anyone catching the bus further along the bus route.

### Keep passengers informed – and keep them on-side

Passengers’ experience of bus travel is improved significantly when they receive information about scheduling updates and delays which assists with their journey planning, management and understanding of why problems have happened at a particular time<sup>1</sup>.

Channels for such information include:

- live information panels at bus stops and potentially on buses; BPS data also shows satisfaction with punctuality increases
- if there is a digital display at the stop showing when the next bus will arrive
- live information through digital sources such as apps and website
- information about delays available through drivers.

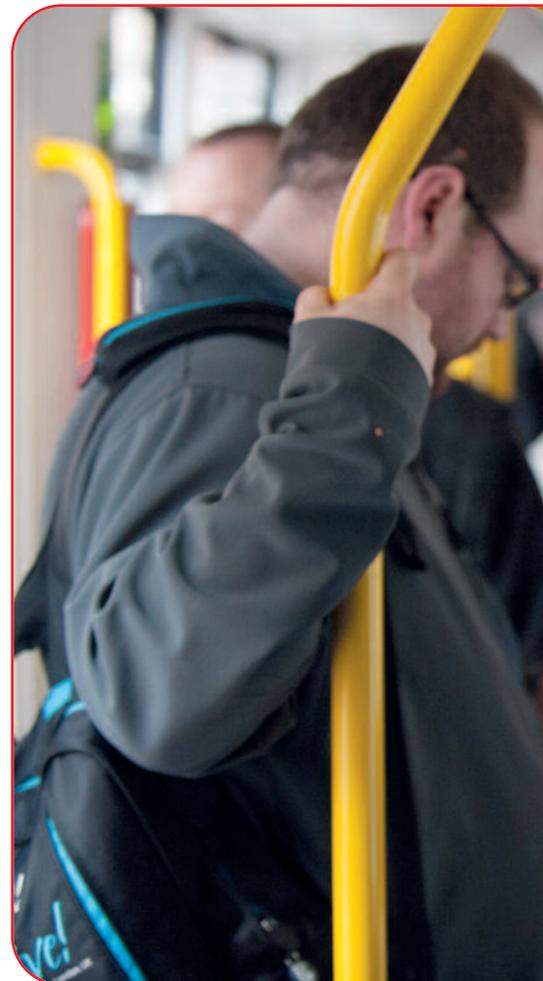
### Role of the Traffic Commissioner

No passengers within this research study were aware that Traffic Commissioners exist and have responsibilities that benefit bus users. Some assumed that a regulator was likely to be in place (but were unsure of the details) and others thought that bus operators are left to their own devices.

This has an impact on passengers’ willingness to complain. Many felt that the effort of complaining simply was not worth it, either because they felt the problem was not of great enough significance or because they expected their efforts would be in vain, with no worthwhile response from the bus operator.

***“It would depend on what happened, your average late bus I wouldn’t complain; it would have to be more serious things. I doubt there’d be any outcome anyway, they’ll just make excuses.”***

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire



During the research, participants were introduced to some basic information about Traffic Commissioners. This changed some perceptions about the bus industry and bus operations locally.

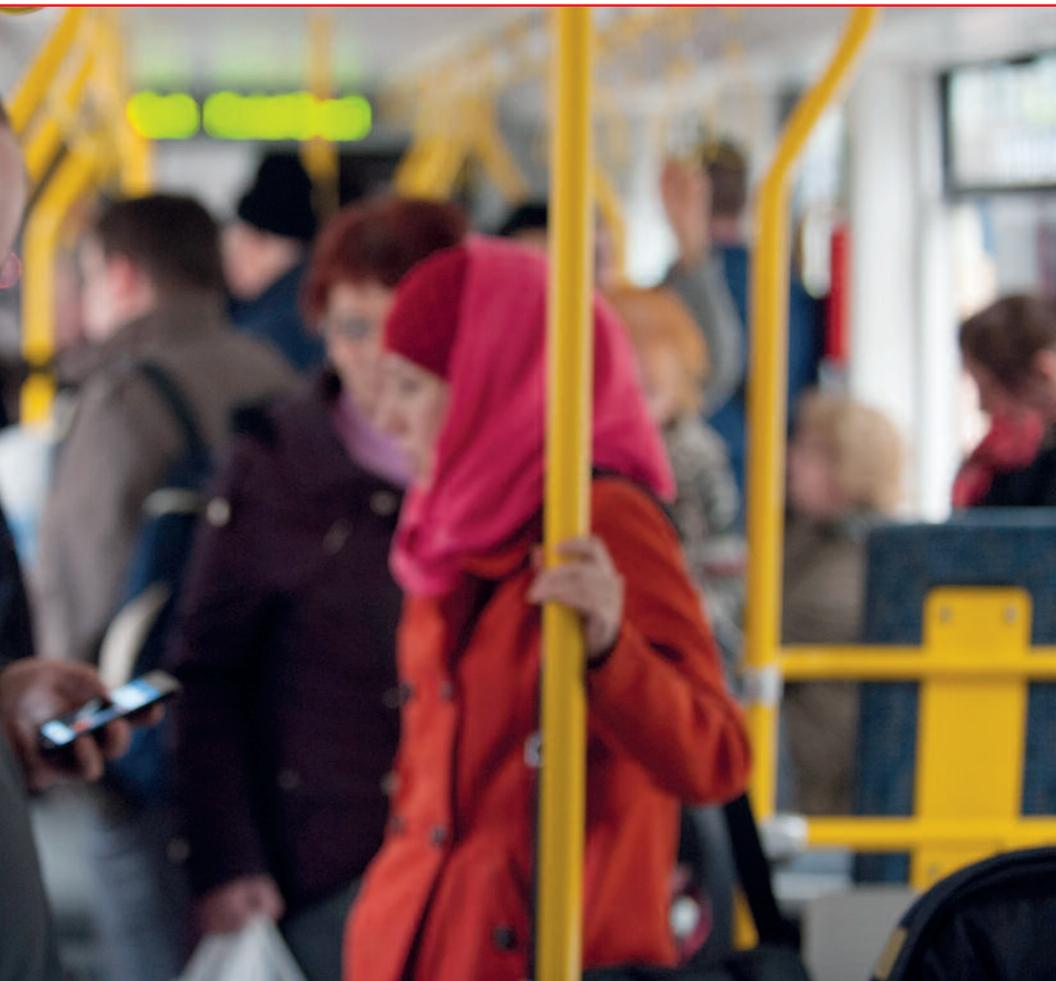
Passengers felt reassured that regulation and authority was in place, and that their needs were being looked out for – for example, in terms of meeting service promises (schedules) and safety.

***“The Traffic Commissioner should act on complaints but the purpose of them should be to continually try to ensure the best service for the public, so you’ve got someone fighting your corner without having to ask.”***

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on bus passengers’ needs for information can be found in the Passenger Focus research report Bus passengers’ experience of delays and disruption, April 2013



## Information on punctuality

Passengers in this study had limited interest in looking at information themselves on the punctuality of their bus service.

There was some mild interest in simple, headline information, such as percentage of buses arriving on time, reaching passengers passively at points when they care about bus performance. This might be, for example, when they are waiting at a bus stop or when they are travelling on a bus.

***“I wouldn’t be particularly interested but with a spare five minutes at the bus stop, I’d have a little look.”***

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

They felt that it was important to collect detailed information to monitor and manage bus operator performance. However, this would be for regulators and operators to use, alongside some very interested general public, rather than the majority of bus passengers.

## Setting the goal

Passengers in this research felt that bus operators should aim to run all of their buses on time. They do not expect this to be achieved but they feel that this aim is likely to be necessary for operators to achieve what they feel is a good standard of delivery, around 80 per cent punctuality.

***“Set a target of continuous improvement which would help them strive to improve all journeys.”***

Infrequent passenger, rural Devon

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Passenger Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council

## Methodology

We carried out focus group discussions and individual 'depth' interviews with bus passengers in Hertfordshire, Devon, Manchester and Leeds. We spoke to a range of passengers making frequent and infrequent trips and using the bus for different journey purposes. Eight depth interviews were undertaken with passengers with a disability.