

# Debate on punctuality must be rooted in fact

A few minutes late may be OK, but never early: Passenger Focus set out to discover exactly what bus passengers think is acceptable performance from operators of local services

**L**aura was waiting for her bus in Manchester. It failed to turn up and there was no information source to quiz. So she used a rival's service and has not gone back. The operator's performance was clearly unacceptable.

Nonetheless, it is amazing how many debates take place in the transport sector without any reference to research, and bus passengers and punctuality is a case in point. The recent Senior Traffic Commissioner's consultation on revised statutory guidance on local bus services is not anchored on any research. We aimed to put that right.

Passenger Focus welcomes this consultation, which focuses on bus punctuality, the most important issue for bus passengers. We recognise that running punctual services on congested roads can be difficult. It is unlikely that a single document can transform the situation, but we are pleased that a start is being made.

Our response reflects our commitment to represent the interests of passengers and potential passengers. It draws on the substantial body of passenger research we have carried out since 2010.

It also draws on experience from the national Bus Punctuality Project on which we embarked in September 2011 and on qualitative research on bus punctuality specially commissioned to inform our response to this consultation and due to be published shortly.

Our response is structured around the following principles. Bus punctuality matters to passengers; timetables should be achievable; operations should be well managed; and someone independent should be monitoring performance and in a position to intervene. Standards should be clear and achievable; where there are problems, corrective action should be taken and passengers should be compensated; pas-

sengers should have a right to complain and a right to see how operators are performing.

We spoke to passengers: nine punctuality research focus groups and 32 in-depth interviews were conducted in Leeds, Manchester, Hertfordshire (St Albans and Stevenage) and South Devon (Exeter).

Our research shows that improving punctuality is bus passengers' top priority; their satisfaction with punctuality is lower than their overall satisfaction with their bus service.

Passengers want timetables to reflect traffic conditions and other variables. They see the timetable as a guide and accept waiting up to five minutes for the bus to turn up, but they do not expect buses to depart early. We support what the guidance says on these points.

**Until we have a more substantial body of evidence, we see no basis for changing the existing targets**

We would like to see more emphasis in the document on bus companies managing operations in real time. We agree that a sample of bus journeys should be regularly monitored; this sample should be weighted towards busier services since these affect more passengers.

All the evidence suggests that the commissioner's proposed standard that 100% of timetabled buses will depart no more than five minutes late is not achievable. The document could be strengthened by drawing a clearer distinction between standards and targets and by being more consistent about what it says about them.

Passengers distinguish between poor punctuality (their bus turning up late at the start of the journey) and delays (the bus arriving late at their stop). Passengers would like bus operators to take

any steps they can to help them manage their journey.

Passenger Focus recommends a number of measures to improve things.

A comprehensive, up-to-date study of the performance of buses should be embarked on immediately, covering a large sample of buses in a wide range of operating environments. The results should be published.

Punctuality standards should be revisited in 18 months. Realistic, route-specific targets informed by evidence of actual performance should then be set, as they are in London. Until we have a more substantial body of evidence about the performance being achieved outside London, we see no basis for changing the existing traffic commissioner targets.

Performance against these new targets should be published on a regular basis – the traffic commissioners should not have to rely on tip-offs from competitors and local authorities.

The traffic commissioners and VOSA should be given more resources to enable them to respond. A significant number of the participants in our research hoped or assumed that there must be some kind of regulatory body for buses, but not one had heard of the traffic commissioners.

Traffic commissioners should focus in the first instance on the worst performing services.

Passengers should have a right to complain to the operator, the local authority and the traffic commissioner about late-running services and should have a right to access to information about the performance of their bus services and to action taken by operators, local authorities and the regulator to improve it.

The debate will continue. However, it will only come to a successful conclusion if it is centred on what passengers want and think.

**Anthony Smith is chief executive of Passenger Focus.**

