

'Too strict'



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Passenger watchdog says 100% punctuality 'unachievable'

Responding to a consultation on bus punctuality launched by the Senior Traffic Commissioner Beverley Bell in August, Passenger Focus says the demand for 100% compliance fails to distinguish between poor performance and unavoidable delays.

Although the passenger watchdog admits that its research shows that improving punctuality is bus passengers'

top priority, it believes that the STC's expectations should reflect operating reality.

The STC launched her proposal for a 'five-minute' window of tolerance in the Draft Statutory Guidance and Directions on Local Bus Services (routeone, News, 28 August).

This proposal received a cool response from the bus industry, which was dismayed by removal of the 'one minute early' part of the 'window of tolerance' of punctuality, in place since 2002, while the punctuality target of 95% of buses to be on time (i.e. up to five minutes late) will be tightened to 100%.

Defending her proposals, the STC advocates "proactive route management." She expects



STC Beverley Bell: Expects 100% punctuality compliance in proposed new rules

schedules to be adjusted to meet operating conditions, implying the sacrifice of clock-face timetables with consequences for either frequency or peak vehicle requirement.

However, Passenger Focus

says: "All of the evidence suggests that the proposed 100% standard is not achievable.

"The (Statutory Guidance) 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 (represented by their bus turning up late at the start of their journey) and 'delays' (the bus arriving late at their destination)."

Having commissioned new passenger research to inform its response to the STC's consultation, Passenger Focus confirms that passengers want timetables to reflect traffic conditions and other variables. It says: "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."

In its response, Passenger Focus recommends:

- A comprehensive, up-to-date study of the performance of buses launched immediately, covering buses across a wide range of operating environments

- Punctuality standards should be revisited in 18 months. Realistic, route-specific targets, informed by evidence of actual performance, should then be set, as in London

- Performance against these new targets to be published regularly – 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

- The 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.

The consultation closed on 13 November.