



How late is late? **What bus passengers** **think about punctuality** **and timetables**

January 2014

Foreword



Colin Foxall CBE

We already know, from our Bus Passenger Survey, that getting buses to turn up on time is the key to improving bus passengers' overall satisfaction. In September 2013 we held a seminar in Manchester to share the findings from our bus punctuality work with operators and local authorities across the country over the previous 18 months.

Listening to the discussions at that event it was clear that there was a need for a definitive passenger view to inform the setting of timetables and the management of services. We commissioned further, detailed, research in time to inform our response to the Senior Traffic Commissioner's consultation on industry guidance.

We found that:

- Most passengers are quite forgiving about buses turning up late, feeling that there is little bus drivers can do to avoid the traffic. They see timetables as a 'guide' rather than a promise, spontaneously mentioning that giving them five minutes' leeway feels about right.
- Passengers do not expect all buses to be on time and are prepared to 'forgive' occasional lateness so long as they perceive bus operators to be doing their best and not running buses that regularly turn up late, or ever leave early.
- It's interesting that this research seems to show passengers would prefer timetable information with more detail even where it is harder to remember. This challenges some conventional thinking on timetabling and may warrant some further exploration.

They expect it to reflect predictable changes in traffic conditions and accept that buses will sometimes have to wait at stops in order to stick to the schedule. But they do not want timetables to be 'padded' with extra time to ensure no buses are ever late, since this would result in most buses having to hang around, lengthening journey times unnecessarily.

- Passengers seem to 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).

They are generally more tolerant, and less anxious, once on the bus. They would like bus operators to take any steps they can to help them manage their journey; our report *Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption* (April 2013) provides more detailed evidence on this point.

- Most passengers feel there is no point complaining to the operator either because they do not generally regard it as important enough to complain or because, when they have done so, they have not received a reply. None had heard of the Traffic Commissioners, but there was significant interest when they learned that such a body existed and handled complaints.

- Passengers feel that punctuality data, independently audited, should be published and made available to regulatory bodies even if most passengers have little appetite in searching it out. Some suggested that there might be a public relations benefit to operators from publicising that "more than 9 out of 10 of our services are on time" on the back of buses.

We will shortly be publishing the final report on our national bus punctuality project, focusing on when, where and why buses in our case study areas have been delayed, what action operators and authorities there have taken, and drawing out the overall lessons for the bus industry and local government. We then plan to take this research directly to local authorities and bus operators across the country, as a way of bringing to life our research on what makes a good service for passengers.



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Define research & insight



Bus Punctuality

Research Report

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Introduction

1. Management summary

1.1 Project context

Passenger Focus required qualitative research to inform its response to a consultation on new statutory guidance for bus punctuality in local services. The overall aim of the research was to understand passengers' needs in relation to punctuality and timetable information.

We consulted a broad range of bus passengers using a combination of depth interviews and group discussions. Passengers were asked to consider their own journey experiences, their understanding of punctuality, and their needs from timetables (in terms of both scheduling and published information).

1.2 Key findings

Important variations between bus passengers

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

They are also assessing punctuality in a consistent way:

- 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. This is not a top-of-mind consideration in relation to 'bus punctuality' and, as passengers are already in transit, anxiety and frustration tend to be lower
- cancellations, while a source of frustration, are also not generally considered in terms of punctuality unless frequently experienced.

Despite these overall consistencies, however, there are some important differences within the passenger population to consider.

Firstly, the type of bus service used affects their focus on and sensitivity to 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 also measure early or late departure against the time they expect the bus to turn up.

As result, these passengers have a greater focus on and awareness of whether their bus is late or early and higher expectations from published timetables in terms of their accuracy.

By contrast, passengers using services which operate on a turn-up-and-go basis (that is, advertised as departing at a particular frequency, such as every 10 minutes, rather than at precise times), have different expectations and behaviours.

They go to the bus stop with an expectation that there will be a bus in the next few minutes rather than deliberately arriving in advance of a specific one. As a result, these passengers have a less specific idea about when the bus is late.

There are also a set of factors relating to the journey which can further increase sensitivity to punctuality where:

- the service is less frequent (that is, operating at intervals of more than 10 minutes¹)
- the journey is time-critical – for example, to reach work or college, hospital appointments, job interviews or 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.

In each case, the passengers are doing more things to help them to manage delays to their service, such as using published timetable information or leaving earlier than they would normally. Therefore, overall frustration, anxiety and dissatisfaction can be higher when punctuality issues arise.

Overall perceptions of punctuality as an issue amongst bus passengers

Overall, passengers across this research, representing a wide range of journey types and services, showed a positive disposition towards bus travel. Much goodwill appears to exist towards operators, buses and drivers and passengers do not expect 'perfection' in terms of punctuality.

They are happy to accept some flexibility, through windows of tolerance, and to take some responsibility for managing their journey through precautionary measures such as turning up at their departure stop with time to spare or catching earlier buses for very time-critical journeys.

However, although passengers' have a level of tolerance, it is not unlimited. They expect reciprocation for their goodwill in terms of good service from bus operators and drivers. Good service involves trying hard to be punctual, improving where there are issues, and providing good communication to help passengers with their bus travel.

¹ This extends to 15 minutes for some passengers.

Bus passenger needs from published timetable information

Timetable information that works for passengers is key to good service and good communication .

Not all passengers use timetables all the time; however, when they are consulted it is because they have an information need to solve that will enable them to use the bus effectively. This may be for journeys they make regularly or irregularly, for journeys that might already be familiar but at a new time, or a new journey on an unfamiliar route or in an unfamiliar area.

In light of this, passengers largely agree that timetables should provide a relatively high degree of detail that gives the most amount of information an individual might require.

While this includes breadth of information and good labelling of timetables, the most important area of detail to include is accuracy of departure and journey times during both peak and non-peak periods. Passengers are happy to receive a more complex description of the schedule 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.

Indeed, to use the bus effectively, passengers need to be able to plan their journey with a reasonable degree of accuracy. In this way they can understand whether a particular journey is feasible by bus and how long they should allow (which takes into account both the scheduled time on the timetable and additional time for margins of error around punctuality). It is therefore essential that timetables are as accurate as possible to the scheduling of services throughout the day.

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 results in significant negative impact for the passenger (for example, missing other travel connections or lateness resulting in loss or penalty).

As a result of these needs, simple, clockface timetables which lack variation in detail by peak (and therefore accuracy to scheduling) do not meet all passenger needs well.

Bus passengers' views on appropriate standards for punctuality

Although passengers are seeking '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 departure stop up to five minutes after the scheduled time, whether the service is frequent or scheduled (and irrespective of interval).

For more frequent services (whether these are turn-up-and-go services running at intervals of 10 minutes or less, or scheduled services running at relatively high frequency, e.g. 12-15 minutes), 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 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).

Allowances also exist for punctuality at the stop where the passenger gets off the bus ('arrival stop'). However, this is considered more in terms of 'delay to journey' rather than punctuality. Regardless of which type of service they are using, when they are on a bus and in transit, passengers say they are willing to accommodate a longer delay as they can typically see the cause of the problem. They understand, however, that this would mean a significant punctuality issue for anyone catching the bus further down the bus route.

As mentioned above, it is important to passengers that bus companies reciprocate passengers' tolerance and willingness to be flexible. This is partly achieved by setting and publishing timetables to meet passengers' needs and putting measures in place to ensure that timetable rules are managed through the journey, for example, waiting at stops for less frequent services to ensure it is to time.

However, 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.

Channels for such information include:

- live information panels at bus stops and potentially on buses
- live information through digital sources such as apps and website
- information about delays available through drivers.

Bus passengers' views on the role of Traffic Commissioners and information in relation to punctuality

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.

Low awareness of a regulating body and Traffic Commissioners is currently impacting on willingness to complain where the desire exists. In general, passengers felt the only route for registering a complaint was directly to the bus operator.

However, they also had low confidence that a complaint would yield any sort of return, from an apology or acknowledgement of responsibility through to compensation. In light of this, passengers said that they were less likely to complain about problems as the effort didn't seem worthwhile.

Raising awareness in the research of Traffic Commissioners and their role had a positive effect. When passengers understand that bus operators are working to guidelines and being regulated in the extent to which they meet these, passenger confidence about the amount of effort being made by both operators and the industry as a whole increases. This helps encourage both satisfaction with bus services and tolerance regarding punctuality.

Passengers also felt that they would be more likely to complain about issues they felt were really significant. This might be related to punctuality (for example, where the running of buses is consistently at odds with published timetables) or other service issues.

Passengers in this study had limited interest in accessing information themselves about the punctuality of their bus service. However, they felt that information that is easy to access and easy to read can help give them a basic measure of how their bus service is performing overall and whether their rule of thumb (about how many buses they can expect to be on time to the published schedule) is right.

Such information would be offered to them when they are a captive audience, such as on the bus or waiting at bus stops, and include headline information only, such as percentage, or number of buses out of 10, arriving on time..

Passengers understood that more rigorous and detailed information would be important to collect to monitor and manage bus operator performance. However, they felt that this would be for regulators and operators to use, alongside some very interested members of the general public, rather than the majority of bus passengers.

Finally, in terms of goals for punctuality, 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 per cent punctuality.

2. Background and research objectives

Passenger Focus required qualitative research to inform its response to a consultation on *Statutory document number 14: local bus services*.

The overall aim of the research was to understand passengers' needs in relation to punctuality and timetable information by understanding the following two key areas:

- what information do they seek and use (with regards to overall schedule/timetable and punctuality or variation) and how does this fit with journey types or patterns?
- what is the most useful format in which to receive and use both types of information, and why?

We held group and individual discussions with current bus passengers, looking at:

The context in which timetabling information is used

- How do different passengers (for example, those with varying frequency of use and journey type) use bus timetables for their journeys and on different kinds of services (such as turn-up-and-go frequent services and infrequent services)?
- How do passengers experience accuracy of timetables and bus service punctuality on their journeys, including:
 - to what extent do they rely on the information provided in timetables?
 - how time-critical are their journeys?
 - what are their views on whether buses are sticking to timetables?

Preferences for timetable information

- How do passengers trade off the benefits of the following alternative approaches:
 - a timetable which has tighter timings between stops (so doesn't allow for peak-time traffic congestion) which means buses can sometimes be late
 - a timetable which allows more time between stops and buses are almost always on time, but as a result there is more waiting at stops to avoid leaving early?
- Do passengers prefer simpler clock-face (regular interval) timetables with buses sometimes departing early or late, or more complex ones which attempt to reflect the complexity of traffic conditions which can vary by time of day, day of the week, time of year (for example during bank holidays or school holidays)?

Demand and preferences for information on bus punctuality

- How do passengers anticipate using this information?
- What content/form of this information would be most useful to passengers; for example, route specific, peak time only or all day, averages or numbers of late services?
- How do passengers respond to different examples of punctuality data formats?

There is a copy of the topic guide in Appendix 1. Data and insights arising from these discussions were analysed by different types of passenger and journey.

3. Research methodology

The research included nine discussion groups (each with three or four participants, for one and half hours) and 32 individual 'depth' interviews (each with one participant for one hour).

Within the above the following range of bus passengers was represented:

- frequent passengers (travelling by bus at least once or twice a week) and infrequent passengers (travelling by bus less often, but had made a journey by bus within the past month)
- users of more and less frequent services (from services arriving at less than 10 minute intervals through to services arriving at 60 minute intervals or longer)
- users of different routes and operators within fieldwork locations (Hertfordshire, Devon, Manchester and Leeds)
- fare-payers and those with concessionary travel
- a wide range of demographics – men and women, aged from 18 to over 75, from the full spectrum of socio-economic groupings and from urban and rural areas
- different journey profiles, including:
 - commuting and leisure
 - use of bus services to connect with other train or bus services
 - time-critical journeys (for example, to hospital appointments or work) and non-time-critical journeys
 - travelling as individuals or with others (including children)
 - shorter and longer journeys.
- eight of the depth interviews took place with passengers who have impairments (mobility, hearing or sight).

All participants were asked to complete a 'pre-task' in advance of their discussion group or interview. This involved writing down brief details of recent bus journeys and looking at three example timetables, each of which had a different format.

Approximately half of participants were asked some additional questions in a short, follow-up telephone interview between one and two weeks after their discussion group or interview.

Detailed Findings

4. Variation of opinion amongst bus passengers

4.1 Overview

Across the research, passenger views about requirements for published timetables and the extent to which bus operators adhere to these schedules were largely consistent.

Passengers tended to reach the same conclusions about:

- what is acceptable in terms of windows of tolerance for buses turning up late or leaving early
- how much information should be provided in timetables for passenger use
- what information about the punctuality record of different operators should be made available, and how.

Despite these consistencies, however, there are some differences between passenger types to consider.

4.2 Passenger differences

Firstly, the type of bus service used affects their focus on and sensitivity to punctuality.

Those using services which operate to a fixed timetable, with each bus scheduled to arrive at a particular time (e.g. 9.46am), are deliberately going to the bus stop early to make sure they do not miss their bus.

They are also measuring early or late departure against the time they expect the bus to turn up. As result, these passengers have a greater focus on and awareness of whether their bus is late or early and higher expectations from published timetables in terms of their accuracy.

By contrast, passengers using services which operate on a turn-up-and-go basis (that is, advertised as departing at a particular frequency, such as every 10 minutes, rather than at precise times), have different expectations and behaviours. They go to the bus stop with an expectation that there will be a bus in the next few minutes rather than deliberately arriving in advance of a specific one. As a result, these passengers have a less specific idea about when the bus is late.

Secondly, punctuality issues affect those who are using more-frequent services (every 10 minutes or more often) differently to those who are using less-frequent services (every 11 minutes or less often).

Passengers using less-frequent services (especially if their service is more than 20 minutes apart) are affected most when punctuality problems are experienced. The

impact of an early or late bus can be more significant and more anxiety is experienced at the stop prior to the arrival of a late bus.

Dissatisfaction and frustration created by punctuality issues therefore tends to be higher for users of less-frequent services.

By contrast, passengers using more-frequent services (turn-up-and-go services running at 10 minute intervals or less, and fixed-timetable services which run more frequently than 15 minutes apart) feel less affected overall when buses do not turn up within the expected time.

"I'm lucky here, if one goes by another one comes by in five minutes..."

Frequent passenger, Manchester

"They're pretty good, quite frequent, every 15 minutes so it doesn't matter too much if you miss one."

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

Some additional passenger or journey circumstances increase the negative impact of punctuality problems, such as:

- time-critical journeys (for example to get to work, an appointment or to make a travel connection)
- a long journey
- no other transport options being available to a passenger
- a disability that make 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

Experiencing problems frequently or alongside cancellation issues (which can create other problems like passenger congestion and lack of available seats) can also increase dissatisfaction, irrespective of the service frequency.

Lastly, passengers' mindset about punctuality changes once they are on the bus. There is more sensitivity to lateness when passengers are waiting at their bus stop for the bus to arrive than once they have started their journey (see Section 7 for more detail).

5. Passengers' needs from bus timetable information

5.1 Context

The timetables of all bus services must be registered with the regulator, the Traffic Commissioner. The operator is then required to run the registered services. These timetables are communicated to passengers so they know what time they should expect buses to turn up and how long their journeys should take.

This report details passengers' requirements for timetable communication first, since this is the starting point for their consideration of the punctuality of the bus service they use. They make an assessment of whether or not their bus is late based on the variation in its time of arrival from the published information they use.

5.2 Timetable accuracy

When bus passengers use published timetables they are looking for a high level of accuracy of the information provided in relation to the actual running of the bus

The circumstances in which passengers in this research used published timetables varied enormously.

Regular bus passengers, especially those using turn-up-and-go services or more-frequent scheduled services less than 10 minutes apart, tended not to refer to published timetables day to day. Rather, they relied on experience, and sometimes information passed on by others in relation to changes, to understand what time their buses ran.

However, these passengers would use timetables for new journeys (for example, undertaken at new times of day or to new destinations). They were also more likely to check timetables periodically for less frequent services they used, given the impact of missing the bus was potentially significant.

Bus passengers who used the bus less regularly were more likely to use a published timetable for their journeys. As might be expected, they tended to be less familiar with bus services. They were sometimes inclined to check information to be sure that it had not changed since their last use. In other cases, the journey itself might be a 'one-off' and need investigating as a new journey.

"Every couple of weeks I check my bus timetable online to be sure nothing changed ... I look at the West Yorkshire website the night before."

Infrequent passenger, Leeds

"I kind of know the bus from the village goes at 10 past and 10 to but I tend to check a timetable beforehand, usually online."

Infrequent passenger, rural Devon

Irrespective of the circumstance or journey type, bus passengers using published timetables had a consistent need for accuracy in the information provided.

“It’s important that the timetabled bus is on time; you have to be able to rely on it and know when you’re going to get there.”

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

“They should make sure timetables are realistic – no point having them if they’re not realistic. Punctuality is the main thing.”

Frequent passenger, urban Devon

“What’s the point in having a timetable if they don’t run according to it?”

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

All passengers were looking for the timetable to indicate what time they should expect the bus to turn up at their stop. This was critical information since it would enable them to plan their travel and take responsibility for arriving at the stop in good time and not miss the bus.

For those using published timetables for new journeys, the information provided was often used to gauge the overall feasibility of making a journey by bus. Passengers were not only looking for time of departure but also for journey length and an understanding of what time they would arrive at their destination.

“I want to know what time to expect the bus and what time I’ll get there.”

Frequent passenger, rural Devon]

“If you want to go somewhere that you haven’t been to by bus before you need good information.”

Frequent passenger, Leeds

With these needs in mind, information that does not have a high degree of accuracy is failing to meet passenger needs. In order to use this mode of transport effectively, passengers need to be able to trust and use the information provided for both planning and action.

“If people are working flexible hours the information really needs to be precise at all times.”

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

That said, as detailed in Section 7, passengers do allow for a margin of error around the time of arrival that is published. They understand that it is impossible for a bus to run exactly to schedule given the nature of travel on the roads. Therefore, for the published timetable to be accurate, it needs to present times of departure and arrival that can be adhered to by the bus company within the margin of error that passengers allow.

5.3 Timetable format preferences

To help achieve accuracy, passengers prefer more complex published information that reflects differences by time of day to 'over-simplified' clockface timetables

Given the circumstances in which published timetables are used and the need for accurate and trustworthy information, passengers in this research expressed a preference for published timetables which:

- show the variations that can be expected at different times of day, in terms of overall interval for frequent services or time of departure and arrival for scheduled services
- contain good-practice formatting and labelling to help with understanding.

Participants were asked to give their views on a number of examples of timetables, representing different levels of detail and presentation.

The most simple clockface examples were often resisted, especially by less regular bus passengers but also more regular passengers wanting to plan new journeys, as not offering sufficiently accurate information to allow them to plan their journey.

Bus travelling experience leads passengers to believe that journey times will vary by time of day (being longer at peak times and shorter at off-peak times). A minimal timetable therefore leaves them expecting that the information is unlikely to be accurate at one of those times.

They are also left with questions and low confidence about what time they should turn up, how long they will have to wait and overall journey length, which makes planning less satisfactory or even frustrating.

"[Simple clockface] is easy and quick to read but it's a bit too simplistic, I wouldn't have as much faith in this. [More complex option] is a really good one – simple version at off-peak times and then to-the-minute scheduling during the peak hours."

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

"With that one I'd be thinking have I got that right?"

Infrequent passenger, Hertfordshire

Participants felt that the better examples were those which reflected different times of departure and journey length between peak and off-peak times. Of the options shown, they preferred departure times within the peaks to be bespoke and link to each individual bus as this allowed for variation (and therefore better planning) within the peak.

"The timetable with more detail would be more suitable for all situations and work better in a busier area or in peak times."

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

“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

Times of departure given for the off-peak period, however, could be rounded up to clockface times, as this related to the time of day when clockface times were likely to be more accurate and reliable.

Diagram 1 below is an illustration of the type of detail that participants would ideally like to see included in published timetables.

Diagram 1 – ‘Ideal’ timetable format²

SERVICE NUMBER 100 runs Monday - Friday
Valid From 1st January 2013 until 31st December 2013

	Peak Time Services						Off Peak Run Services Every 20 Minutes at these times past the hour			Peak Time Services									Off Peak Run Services Every 20 Minutes at these times past the hour			Last Bus
Tescos	0700	0720	0740	0800	0820	0840	00	20	40	1600	1620	1640	1700	1720	1740	1800	1820	1840	00	20	40	2340
Bell PH	0703	0723	0744	0804	0824	0844	03	23	43	1604	1624	1644	1704	1724	1744	1804	1824	1844	03	23	43	2343
Library	0705	0725	0747	0807	0827	0847	05	25	45	1607	1627	1647	1707	1727	1747	1807	1827	1847	05	25	45	2345
Post Office	0710	0730	0754	0814	0834	0854	10	30	50	1614	1634	1654	1714	1734	1754	1814	1834	1854	10	30	50	2350
Bus Station	0715	0735	0801	0821	0841	0901	15	35	55	1621	1641	1701	1721	1741	1801	1821	1841	1901	15	35	55	2355

Estimated Journey Times: 21 minutes during peak hour traffic, 15 minutes at all other times

The diagram above also highlights elements of good practice that passengers identified for displaying timetable information, such as:

- use of colour contrast to aid reading
- use of labels and subtitles to ensure information is interpreted correctly (for example, peak time versus off-peak services and an explanation of the clockface element)
- all text on the horizontal plane, rather than any vertical labels which the passenger has to read sideways journey
- times as estimates rather than absolutes relevant information such as service number and validity dates (in terms of both days of the week and calendar expiry).

Some other timetable examples explored by participants highlighted information that they found confusing and unhelpful. For example, some passengers struggled to read timetables that referred to more than one bus number. A distinction between school days and non-school days on a timetable was also unhelpful as passengers

² Note: This example is for illustrative purposes only and was generated by the research team through the analysis and comparison of responses in the different sessions. It therefore represents the themes that emerged as common and important to passengers but the information contained therein is not intended to reflect suggested or expected running times.

felt they could not be certain (unless familiar with term times) which days are being referred to.

5.3 Accessibility of timetables

Needs from timetables are consistent irrespective of where they are accessed

Passengers in this sample were accessing timetables through a range of channels – online at websites (via personal computers and smartphones), apps in some instances, printed timetables and bus stop displays.

“I look up the timetable on the internet the night before taking the bus, so I can work out what time I need to get up the next morning! For my return journey I’ll look it up on my phone.”

Infrequent passenger, rural Devon

Although they tended to have a preferred channel of access, passengers’ timetable needs were driven more by information need than by the channel itself. Therefore no variation in timetable detail was expected by channel. Passengers said, however, that they would appreciate developments in usability for digital channels.

There was also some frustration at not being able to access timetable information at places where it is expected.

“Sometimes there isn’t even a timetable at the bus stop which is annoying because you don’t even know if the bus is running late or not.”

Frequent passenger, Manchester

Passengers with experience of being able to access live travel information, through display boards at bus stops or apps, also spoke of how valuable this information was to them and how, to an extent, this extends the tolerances around timetable accuracy further (see Section 8 for further detail).

6. Passengers' needs from timetable setting (scheduling registered with the Traffic Commissioner)

6.1 Overall preferences in scheduling approach

Preferences for 'tighter' or 'looser' timings in the schedule depend on frequency of service and overall journey purpose

Passengers were asked to consider the relative merits of a tighter timetable or a looser timetable with the definitions of both as follows:

- tighter
Tight timings between stops. This doesn't, for example, allow for peak time traffic congestion which means that at these times of the day, services can be running late according to the timetable.
- looser
Allows more time between stops so buses are almost always on time, even at peak hours, according to the timetable. However, this means that at non-peak times buses are more likely to have to wait at stops because they will be 'ahead' of the timetable, and will not be allowed to leave early from stops.

In line with preferences for a more complex published timetable detailed earlier, passenger preferences for timetable setting varied by frequency of service, time of day and purpose of journey.

Passengers understood that each approach would lead to different benefits or drawbacks depending on the service used. As such, scheduling for any individual route would ideally take this into account. Their overall preferences are therefore for neither but rather a schedule that allows for most accuracy and least impact of punctuality depending on the particular service.

For example, for frequent services (where buses are expected to arrive every 10 minutes or less³), tighter timings were felt to be acceptable as the impact of running early or late to the published schedule was felt to be relatively low.

Passengers felt, however, that timings should be scheduled differently between peak and off-peak periods to allow for as much accuracy as possible in setting expectations of arrival time.

"Schedules should be different during main commuting times, say 8 – 9 and 5 – 6."

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

For services that are less frequent than this, a tighter timetable also tended to be preferred on the basis that passengers would rather buses were late than run the risk of buses being early and missing them.

³ This definition extends to 15 minutes for some passengers

However, passengers using these services (and others on their behalf) felt that, in the event of arriving early, it was critical that buses waited at stops in order not to depart early. They also felt that it was inappropriate for the bus to leave any time ahead of the published time. In light of this, the idea that the bus is able to leave up to a minute prior to the scheduled time was often disagreed with.

Indeed, those who had missed a bus with an interval or wait of more than 20 minutes to the next departure, as a result of that bus leaving their stop ahead of the published schedule, found this experience infuriating.

“It’s even more annoying when you’re on your way to the bus stop to catch a bus that’s due in five minutes and it goes past you! It’s worse than it being late – they should wait so that they’re not early. At least if it’s late you’re still going to get there more or less on time but if it’s early and you miss it you have to wait 25 minutes for the next one.”

Frequent passenger, urban Devon

“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

Beyond this frustration at having missed the bus despite being ‘on time’, the impact on passengers of buses leaving ahead of schedule tended to be substantial. With a long time to wait until the next bus they faced the prospect of being late at their destination which could carry serious consequences depending on the journey purpose.

“I can’t afford to miss it because I’ll be late for work ... It is every hour so I’ll be an hour late for work.”

Infrequent passenger, Hertfordshire

“If the bus is going to leave earlier than timetabled time it would need to say that, you would need to tell people that could happen.”

Infrequent passenger, rural Devon

To minimise their lateness, they may also need recourse to another mode of transport if this is available to them. This was likely to incur a cost if involving a car (such as parking or a taxi fare) which increased dissatisfaction and frustration further.

In light of this and on consideration, passengers felt it would be acceptable for buses to wait at stops to ensure that they did not run ahead of schedule. However, should

this happen too frequently, then it was felt that the schedule should be revised to be more accurate to actual running times.

They felt that this policy should also be explained to help mitigate frustration for those waiting on the bus.

“It’s better for the bus to wait, otherwise people who arrive on time would miss it.”

Frequent passenger, Leeds

“I think people would trade off the longer journey time for the certainty [over when they would arrive]. I sometimes have to wait for the Park and Ride bus to leave and I just accept it, it’s just part of travel.”

Infrequent passenger, rural Devon

“You don’t mind waiting on the bus because although it’s not moving, you’re in the dry, you’re sitting down and you know it’s going to move off at the time you expect it to.”

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

Time criticality of the journey can also impact on preferences, with those undertaking more time-critical journeys looking for a looser timetable with waiting at stops that allows for what they expect to be the highest degree of accuracy to their planned journey.

“It’s really important that they’re on time because I make so many connections, if one’s late it can disrupt my whole journey.”

Frequent passenger, hearing impairment, Manchester

The key drivers behind preferences relate to accuracy of information provided and ability to use it to travel effectively by bus. Passengers understand that accuracy can only be delivered in the published information if the schedule set by the operator is realistic.

7. How passengers define 'lateness' and assess punctuality of bus services

7.1 Bus passengers' overall expectations

Overall, there is a relatively high degree of tolerance around lateness with passengers having 'rules of thumb' for punctuality and established behaviours to help them manage journey times effectively

As mentioned earlier, the accuracy of published information to running of buses is important to passengers. However, they do not expect buses to arrive exactly at the time stated on the published timetable.

"Timetables are almost a guide. They're never bang-on right."

Frequent passenger, Leeds

"We're realistic ... there will be delays, just as there will be if you drive ... I don't expect to be early, and I don't expect them to leave before they say they will but there is some tolerance on when they're going to arrive."

Infrequent passenger, rural Devon

Indeed, they consider it to be unlikely that buses will all be on time given the range of factors which are out of the control of the operator and drivers and which may affect the timing of each service. For example, frequently expected issues mentioned traffic congestion, high numbers of passengers slowing down services, weather issues, roadworks and other unplanned traffic problems such as accidents.

"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

"The roads are a nightmare so you have to give them leeway... Things like traffic are out of their control."

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

For this reason, they have 'rules of thumb' for interpreting published timetable information and what they define as punctual is not 'true punctuality'.

7.2 Bus passengers' behaviour to help manage journey times

Many bus passengers have also built a range of steps into their travelling behaviour to help mitigate problems and manage bus travel overall

For example, passengers using fixed timetable services (especially those that are more than 10 minutes apart) will generally plan to turn up a few to five minutes ahead of the departure time if at all possible.

“Of course I’ll leave a bit of time, get there with a few minutes to spare.”

Frequent passenger, rural Hertfordshire

For more time-critical journeys, passengers across different service types (frequent or less frequent turn-up-and-go or fixed timetable services) will start their journey earlier and aim to catch an earlier bus than they would usually, to allow for potential delays.

“If you’re going on a journey with a time you need to arrive it’s your responsibility to plan your time. Especially if you’re going to a busy city, you’re subject to delays. It’s up to the people to leave an allowance.”

Infrequent passenger, mobility impairment, Hertfordshire

“We’ve found that with the bus to London, you can guarantee what time you get on it because the line starts here, but you can’t guarantee what time you’re going to arrive, so when we’re going to the theatre we’ll get one or two buses earlier.”

Frequent passenger, Hertfordshire

“This morning I waited half an hour for one to go to the dentist but they are doing roadworks so I made allowances and I got there on time because I left plenty of time.”

Frequent passenger, Manchester

Despite these mitigating behaviours, passengers expect operators and buses to also be very familiar with the sort of things that can happen to affect bus services and to plan and set schedules accordingly. This means it is still possible to trust published information and that the bus operator has a high chance of meeting their promises in terms of scheduling.

Specifically, passengers expect bus operators to:

- share their definitions of the window of tolerance as this means their rules of thumb will work
- set temporary schedules and communicate changes including corresponding published information during periods of extended disruption
- change and update timetables (communicating again as relevant) when travelling changes permanently.

See below for further details.

7.3 How bus passengers assess punctuality

What time the bus turns up at their stop is the main point of consideration for bus passengers in terms of punctuality

Irrespective of the journey length and frequency of service, the window of tolerance for the bus turning up late is generally between five and 10 minutes. Five minutes was suggested most often as the length of time that it was acceptable to wait.

“I’d expect them to be there within about five minutes.”

Frequent regular passenger, rural Devon

“Within five minutes I’d consider on time... maybe three minutes either side and I could still make my first connection, over that I’d consider it late.”

Frequent passenger, hearing impairment, Manchester

There was some sense amongst passengers that the bus turning up within two or three minutes after the scheduled time would not even be registered as late.

A number of passengers felt that it was acceptable for a bus to depart up to 10 minutes after the expected time. This was more likely to be the case for passengers using infrequent services or travelling long distances or on rural, single-lane routes, where it was felt that more could go wrong.

“They’re every 20 minutes and I’d consider them late after 10 minutes

Infrequent passenger, Manchester

“Routes where buses aren’t on the main road... they’re a bit more subject to being late as unexpected things can happen – like cows in the road!”

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

“There’s 25 miles from where my bus starts to where it stops. So, it could be that it’s late because of that.”

Infrequent passenger, Leeds

It was generally agreed that services arriving more than 10 minutes after the expected time needed to be explained by a significant event (such as an accident). Passengers felt that if this level of lateness arose from simply leaving the depot late then that was less acceptable, as the bus company and driver were not making sufficient effort with the controllable factors to adhere to the bus timetable.

“Factually it’s late if it’s not leaving when it should do, I think within the context of reasonableness within five minutes is acceptable and over 10 minutes it becomes annoyingly late.”

Infrequent passenger, rural Devon

“My buses are every half an hour and I give it five-10 minutes, 10 minutes maximum, then I give up on it.”

Infrequent passenger, Manchester

“The one I use to go to work is never on time. It’s always late. It’s the most unreliable service. Sometimes it can be 10 minutes late and sometimes more. I once waited an hour. It makes me feel angry.”

Frequent passenger, Leeds

Passengers do not understand how the current standards are calculated but feel they are broadly in line with their expectations

The idea that a bus running on an infrequent service should be no more than five minutes after the stated time to count as punctual felt fair and right to passengers as this fitted with their spontaneous thinking.

The standard for more frequent services was also broadly accepted, based on the example of 6.25⁴ minutes for a 10-minute frequency service.

However, the calculation was hard to understand and make sense of as a passenger. From a theoretical perspective, it was generally longer than expected for a service due every 10 minutes, since the time of arrival of the bus was closer to the next bus than its original scheduling.

“I’m happy to wait five minutes – any more would be silly because they come every six-10 minutes anyway!”

Frequent passenger, Manchester

Passengers catching this type of service also largely accepted that they may have just missed a bus when they get to their stop, and so are happy to wait up to the maximum duration between buses, for example, up to seven minutes for a service running every eight minutes. As such, a standard of ‘within about five minutes on top of the service frequency’ was considered to make more sense.

What passengers are measuring lateness against varied depending on whether they are using a turn-up-and-go or a scheduled service

Passengers using scheduled services are paying attention to actual time of arrival at the departure stop, since they are using the published departure time to plan and make their journey.

⁴ Operators are required by the Traffic Commissioner to run turn-up-and-go services within an excess waiting time of 1 minute 15 seconds, which is calculated by halving the frequency which the bus is registered to run at and adding on 1 minute 15 seconds. For example, the standard for a 10-minute frequency service would be 6 minutes 15 seconds and the standard for an eight-minute frequency service would be 5 minutes 15 seconds.

There is some acceptance that watches or clocks of passengers and buses may not be exactly synchronised and this contributes to their perceptions of a need for tolerance.

Passengers using turn-up-and-go services, that are advertised as running at intervals rather than at specific times, are paying less attention to actual time of arrival at the departure stop . Rather they are basing their judgement of punctuality on their expected waiting time.

Non-arrival at the stop of departure or cancellation of buses is considered differently and, while it does create a negative experience and perception of the bus company, this does not impact on perceptions of punctuality

Passengers acknowledged that cancellation of buses was frustrating when they were directly affected as it generally negatively impacted their journey experience. A delay and lateness to their own journey usually occurred and discomfort was also often increased, especially at peak times, since the number of passengers on the next available service was higher.

The impact tended to be magnified on infrequent routes, where cancellation of an expected bus tended to mean that the service had failed completely in respect of that particular journey and negative repercussions would be experienced.

“They’re normally very good, it’s only things like the bus breaking down that really disturbs the journeys.”

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

Where cancellation was experienced frequently, it was felt to be infuriating and requiring attention from the operator. However, where it was very occasional, passengers felt this was excusable, imagining that it might be the inevitable consequence of mechanical/safety issues for example.

Arrival at the destination stop tends to carry a bigger window of tolerance

The time of arrival at the journey destination was less likely to be raised spontaneously by passengers when they were discussing punctuality. Considering themselves in the journey, rather than waiting for it to start, their thinking was focused more on speed of journey than punctuality of arrival.

Irritation and anxiety was also somewhat offset by being on their way and in transit, which gave them a higher sense of security than if at a bus stop. For example, they felt they would reach their destination even if slowly. They were also often more comfortable, feeling safer and less exposed to the elements, depending on their particular departure stop .

“Being already on the bus, you can normally put the delays down to busyness or roadworks – because I know why and it’s out of the service’s control I would be OK.”

Frequent passenger, Manchester

“If there’s a delay when you’re on your journey there’s nothing the driver can do. It would be the same if you were in the car.”

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

“It’s a bit less annoying when you’re on the bus because you can see why it’s late.”

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

As a result, the window of tolerance in relation to punctuality at the destination stop was often around 20 minutes for all service types and frequencies.

Passengers did acknowledge, however, that a 20-minute delay to their journey while on the bus would mean passengers waiting 20 minutes for the bus to turn up at stops further along the route. Framed in this context, 20 minutes felt too long and passengers reverted to five to 10 minutes as an appropriate window of tolerance (as for their own stop).

8. What role does good customer service and communication play?

8.1 Overview

Although passengers are willing to be flexible to a degree and accept margins of error in relation to punctuality, they want bus operators to do what they can to reciprocate their tolerance.

“You do your bit... by being there on time and making allowances. They should do their bit too, trying to keep their promises and telling you what's going on.”

Frequent passenger, Leeds

In the first instance, this means bus operators:

- setting schedules that are realistic
- publishing information about schedules that is accurate, reliable and easy to use
- making a visible effort to meet their timetable promises.

“On a Sunday night when there is no traffic on the buses every half an hour – when that's late it's annoying. I expect them to be on time pretty much bang-on at that time.”

Frequent passenger, Manchester

However, passengers are also seeking as much proactive delivery of live departure information as possible, and contribution from bus drivers to help manage information needs.

8.2 Live travel information

Access to live travel information significantly improves the customer experience and overall tolerance level.

Live travel information had variously been experienced through digital panels, information delivered via apps or website to a smart phone, or text messaging. Some had also received it ‘second hand’ via other passengers at the bus stop with access to a smart phone.

All those passengers who had experienced live travel information, felt this had substantially improved their travelling experience. They felt that real-time information had made the timetable obsolete for the immediate journey by replacing it with information that was more accurate.

The benefits of this were reduced anxiety about how late a bus might be and an increased sense of security and control over their journey.

“It’s really handy to be able to call and say I’ll be there in 20 minutes or whatever.”

Infrequent passenger, rural Hertfordshire

“I can work out whether to get the bus or not – if it’s quicker to walk or if it’s worth waiting ‘til the next one comes.”

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

This was particularly important for those waiting at a stop for a delayed bus on an infrequent service, where there was high anxiety related to not knowing whether a late bus was delayed, cancelled or had been missed.

“What’s stopping them from saying ‘bus cancelled due to accident’ or ‘bus severely delayed by 25 minutes’? ... It would give you a chance to make a decision rather than stand there going ‘what do I do? Do I do anything?’”

Frequent passenger, rural Hertfordshire

There was some acceptance that it is unlikely to be economically feasible to provide digital information at every bus stop. However, passengers were keen that any means to make live information available are used.

“This is Stevenage - we don’t have any electronic updates! It’s just the paper timetables at the bus stops. To me it’s just annoying when they don’t run to time because you’re stuck at the bus stop not really knowing what’s going on!”

Infrequent passenger, mobility impairment, Hertfordshire

8.2 Role of bus drivers

Bus drivers are seen as a potential source of live travel information and explanation of the issue from the bus driver is likely to help reduce dissatisfaction

Passengers felt that bus drivers are likely to be aware of both current road problems and potentially the regularity of, or issues with, other buses on their route.

As such, they felt that bus drivers should offer information or explanation of lateness or delays. This could be when passengers were getting on the bus, during the journey (potentially by public address system) or at least in response to questions.

Passenger experience, however, was often to the contrary which added to any frustration around their journey.

“Two buses didn’t turn up in a row and then the bus driver of the next one was rude to me, he just said ‘I don’t know what happened’.”

Frequent passenger, rural Hertfordshire

Even if an explanation is not possible, passengers felt a simple apology would help reduce the frustration, dissatisfaction and anxiety that had built up while waiting.

“You’re paying for that service so they should at least apologise if they’re late. It’s just common courtesy. It would make people feel better.”

Infrequent passenger, Leeds

8.3 Need for proactive communication on changes

For passengers, good customer service in relation to timetabling includes on-time updating and providing clear notification of updates and changes

Passengers generally felt that they happened across timetable changes in the course of their bus use rather than being informed of them directly.

This was an area that they felt bus operators could improve, with better ‘signposting’ or announcements of changes. This included notification of temporary changes arising from roadworks.

“You’d think they would have altered the timetable to reflect the fact that the roadworks are causing delays.”

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

“Maybe they should be making people aware online what sort of things may be causing delays so people can plan, like road works on Smith Street.”

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

“I think they do need to keep you notified of things that will cause disruptions, like on Carnival day.”

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

They also felt it was critical to keep timetables up to date. Some participants had experience of not being able to access an up-to-date timetable when they needed the information.

“It’s infuriating if the information at the bus stop is out of date. That’s basic.”

Frequent passenger, Leeds

“I think if things were affecting journeys like road works they’d have to put in extra buses to try and counteract it, especially in those peak times when people are relying on getting to work on time!”

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

9. Passengers' awareness of Traffic Commissioners and the impact of this on their perceptions and behaviour

9.1 Awareness of Traffic Commissioners

Low awareness of Traffic Commissioners impacts on passenger perceptions and behaviour

There was no awareness of Traffic Commissioners amongst passengers in this research.

Some participants thought there was no regulatory body at all, while others thought a regulator would exist but they were unsure who this was and what their specific role, responsibilities and powers of authority would be.

"There must be some kind of regulatory body. I don't know who but I would imagine that there is some kind of independent inspector."

Infrequent passenger, urban Devon

"There should be an organisation which monitors the bus companies, but I don't know if there is one."

Frequent passenger, rural Devon

This lack of awareness about Traffic Commissioners contributed to some more negative perceptions amongst passengers and impacted directly on behaviour.

Firstly, lack of knowledge about how buses are regulated and by whom led some to the perception that bus operators are largely left to their own devices and perhaps do not act with passengers' best interests at heart.

"You'd think they might try and find out about how happy passengers are but I don't think they do."

Infrequent passenger, Leeds

Secondly, the desire to complain amongst passengers was very low. While this partly relates to other factors (see below) the absence of a known authority to which the bus operator is accountable contributes to inertia.

9.2 Making complaints about punctuality

Passengers' current willingness to complain is low

All participants assumed they would need to complain to the bus company directly.

Overall, they were not compelled to complain when issues with punctuality were experienced occasionally rather than regularly. As mentioned earlier, overall tolerance is relatively high because passengers feel that occasional delays are likely to be due to circumstances beyond the control of the operators and drivers.

However, many also felt that the effort of complaining simply was not worth it. This was either because they felt the problem created was not of great enough significance or because they expected their efforts would be in vain, with no worthwhile response from the bus operator.

"If I've already spent 15 minutes waiting for the bus, the last thing I want to do is waste any more of my time by complaining about it."

Infrequent passenger, urban Devon

"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

There was an additional sense for some passengers that the relatively low cost of bus travel reduces the desire to complain. Where an occasional bad journey has been experienced, the financial cost is not significant (versus other modes of transport or the overall cost of bus travel to the individual) and this reduces the desire to make the effort required.

There was also some evidence that those with concessionary travel felt they did not really have a right to complain given they bear no personal financial cost for their bus journey.

"I've got a Freedom pass so I don't even pay for my travel – I'd feel bad making a complaint!"

Infrequent passenger, Manchester

However, a few instances were mentioned in this research where passengers had wished to make a complaint about punctuality. This tended to be when the running of the bus service was regularly experienced as substantially 'out of kilter' with published information, making the latter hard to use and the experience of using the bus poor.

In these instances, the bus was almost always experienced as 'late' and passengers felt it was impossible to know when it was going to arrive which made planning and bus travel difficult.

"I have really not had brilliant experiences with the buses going to Borehamwood. I've never got there on time, everything about it is stressful; we call it the 1-0-seldom! It never comes!"

Frequent passenger, visual impairment, Hertfordshire

In addition, participants reported some additional instances which they felt warranted complaint. These included:

- cancellations substantially impacting on journeys and associated plans
- withdrawal or changing of services.

“I had numerous problems with my daughter’s school bus. They don’t run it anymore, they used to skip stops, go random routes- because the drivers had no idea where they were going! I was always complaining... it’s the most dialled number on my mobile!”

Frequent passenger, mobility impairment, Manchester

In some of these instances, the desire to complain was boosted by a lack of communication from the bus driver explaining and/or apologising for difficulties.

“I had to get to work and I would be late even though I arrived at the bus stop early. It made me annoyed but we never got any explanation.”

Frequent passenger, rural Hertfordshire

Despite wanting to complain, some passengers had not done so. In line with expectations of others, they assumed that they would not get a satisfactory response and had opted not to make the effort.

For those who did complain, experiences were mixed. Some had not received a response of any description. For these passengers, the lack of response from or interaction with the bus company tended to create the perception that it is not worth complaining, since the effort will not generate any return.

“I sent an email but I didn’t get a reply.”

Frequent passenger, rural Hertfordshire

Other passengers had received a response but felt it was unsatisfactory in some way.

“I’d rung the bus company and they asked me do I know the name of the driver who was late. How would I know? I never called them again.”

Infrequent passenger, Leeds

“We just got excuses ... it won’t happen again, it won’t happen again.”

Frequent passenger, mobility impairment, Manchester

“They were doing roadworks so all the buses had been cancelled through the high street but there were no signs on the shelters to tell you that the buses had been diverted. It was belting it down with rain and I was waiting for about 25 minutes before I clocked that the buses were going around the back.”

“I went to wait where I thought the bus was going from and the driver drove straight past me – apparently I shouldn’t have been there but there were no signs to tell me where I should be standing. I was so annoyed I wrote an email to Stagecoach and in the next few days there were signs everywhere. They did apologise but their email implied that there were signs in place – well there were, but only after I’d complained.”

Frequent passenger, urban Devon

Raising awareness of Traffic Commissioners changes passenger perceptions and appears likely to impact on behaviour

During the research, participants were introduced to some basic information about Traffic Commissioners. This explained their role as including:

- licensing and regulation of those who operate buses and coaches
- granting licences to bus/coach drivers and taking action against them if necessary
- ensuring that buses are operating safely
- imposing fines or other sanctions if they are not fulfilling the terms of their license.

This information had the effect of changing some of their perceptions about the bus industry and bus operation in their area.

Passengers felt reassured that regulation and authority was in place. The information gave an impression 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

“It sounds good if it works, that they’ll take steps to make sure that the customer gets satisfaction and puts restrictions on companies if they’re bad on some routes... take the route franchise from them.”

Frequent passenger, Leeds

“They’re important points that someone should be regulating, especially the drivers...It’s reassuring, it’s makes the public feel more safe about using buses.”

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

“They’re there to ensure that the public are getting a good enough service for what they are paying for.”

Frequent passenger, Leeds

Overall perceptions of bus operators also tended to improve. Passengers understood from this information that bus operators were necessarily 'responsible' as they are under an obligation to deliver to the standards and regulations imposed on them. Passengers also assumed that bus operators would make the effort to do this or they would otherwise risk losing their franchise or license.

Finally, awareness of Traffic Commissioners was felt to be likely to increase their propensity to complain in the event of serious issues or service problems.

"I've never heard of the Traffic Commissioner; they should be advertising their wares a bit more. They should have a notice up that says if you're having trouble, contact us. That would be beneficial to the company running the service and to passengers."

Frequent passenger, Devon

As noted above, expectations of a lack of response directly from the bus company contributes to the lack of willingness to complain. By contrast, passengers felt that complaining to someone with authority, responsible for making sure bus companies deliver to their obligations, and who is acting with passengers' interests at heart was more likely to generate a response. Specifically, they felt the bus company was more likely to respond and produce an outcome in some way.

Passengers still felt, however, that they would only complain about issues they felt were serious, as the effort would not be worthwhile for occasional or minor issues.

"At times bus drivers are very rude, outwardly rude. I had an experience where a couple of girls pushed me, they were swearing at me and I was so shaken up and upset and the driver did absolutely nothing... I thought he should have thrown them off. I felt unsupported. I've never heard of [the Traffic Commissioner] and if I'd have known about them I'd have rung them the moment I got home."

Frequent passenger, visual impairment, Hertfordshire

Passengers had confidence that their issue would be heard and added to Traffic Commissioners' understanding of the performance profile of a bus company. Traffic Commissioners would then use this to monitor and manage each operator. A complaint may also be acted on directly, however, depending on the severity of the issue.

10. Passengers' needs for punctuality information

10.1 Overview

Passengers considered the role of punctuality information from two perspectives – their personal use and use by Traffic Commissioners.

As such they see two different roles for punctuality information, with different requirements for detail.

10.2 Punctuality information for bus passengers

Passengers' have an interest in limited punctuality information for their own use

Participants in this research felt they were unlikely to actively seek information about punctuality of buses in their area or nationally themselves, due to little need and low interest. However, they considered local information might be useful in occasional circumstances to the following two groups:

- people considering moving location (either within an area or to a new area) who were reliant on public transport, particularly if making other transport connections
- people considering purchasing a car as an alternative to public transport.

There was also some mild interest in simple, headline information 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

"If they put it on the bus, you would maybe read it."

Infrequent passenger, Leeds

Specifically, passengers thought they would be interested in seeing headline figures for:

- bus punctuality – the numbers of buses arriving on time
- service reliability or numbers of cancellations.

"Straight away you can see punctuality is 91 per cent."

Frequent passenger, urban Hertfordshire

In all cases, passengers assumed that such information would only be useful or interesting if linked to their own route in some way. Some passengers felt it would need to relate to their specific bus number and route, while others felt generalised information for the operator in their local area was sufficient.

“Most people have a certain bus that they catch; you’d want information for your route. I don’t care about the whole of Stagecoach, I just care about my route.”

Frequent passenger, Devon

Information that is more general than this (for example, at national level) was felt to lack value, since they would not be able to extrapolate what it means for them personally.

Opinions also varied on whether or not such information should be limited to peak-time travel or averaged across the day. Some passengers felt that they would naturally assume lower punctuality during peak times (due to increased congestion), whereas others felt it might be useful to report these separately.

The benefits they expected to gain from this information included:

- general reassurance about the overall reliability of their bus service (or not)
- help in assessing whether their ‘rules of thumb’ about operating schedule and timetable accuracy are right (see Section 7 for more detail).

Requirements for content and display of information were highly consistent. Passengers only wanted to see headline statistics expressed as percentages (such as, 80 per cent per cent of buses on time) or numbers out of 10 (for example, eight out of 10 buses on time). Although numbers out of five were generally understood, numbers out of 10 were generally preferred as these were very easy to convert to a percentage for those who liked to think in those terms.

Participants were not interested in more detailed information provided in graph form or displaying trends as this was considered difficult to read at a glance.

10.3 Punctuality information for industry regulation

Passengers feel more detailed information will be essential for monitoring and management of the bus operators by regulators

Although they have no personal interest in viewing more detailed information, passengers felt that it would be important for this to be collected about bus performance by route (in terms of punctuality and cancellation).

Specifically, they felt this would provide the essential data by which each operator could be assessed and therefore regulated.

“It could potentially be useful if it was used to get the buses to run more on time according to the timetable, not really the members of the public.”

Frequent passenger, Manchester

“If Traffic Commissioners have these responsibilities they should be looking at the punctuality information and deciding if the operators are running the service to a satisfactory standard.”

Frequent passenger, urban Devon

In light of this, there were some concerns about bus operators collecting this information without any validation or auditing from an independent party to ensure data integrity.

In line with issues in other industries and sectors, passengers felt that it might be in bus operators' interests to report figures positively.

“[Traffic Commissioners] should do mystery shopping and see for themselves because you can't necessarily believe the public or the company ... although I think that if [the operators] have got trackers they could feed back the reports to the regulator about their punctuality.”

Frequent passenger, Leeds

In terms of what level of performance bus operators are aiming for, passengers generally considered that this should be 100 per cent on time to published schedule and 100 per cent service reliability (no cancellations).

“I think every company should aim to achieve hundred per cent accuracy.”

Infrequent passenger, Manchester

Although passengers wanted companies to aim for 100 per cent, they did not expect this to be achieved. However, they considered that it was good business practice to aim for 100 per cent. In their view, doing so was also likely to ensure a good standard of delivery, which was defined at around 80 per cent.

“I know from driving ...it would be unrealistic to expect 100 per cent [of buses to be on time].”

Frequent passenger, Hertfordshire

An alternative was to set a goal of continuous improvement, given there would always be room for this.

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

Infrequent passenger, rural Devon

In one of the examples of performance information shown (relating to train travel), the performance goal was expressed as 90 per cent, with actual performance reported as a lower figure. This raised concerns that travel companies were not trying as hard as they should be.

For bus companies specifically, with the likely margin of error arising from uncontrollable circumstances on roads, this led to a concern that a goal of 90 per cent might only deliver 50-60 per cent in reality. This felt low and unsatisfactory to passengers.

Appendix: Discussion guide

1982 – Passenger Focus Discussion Guide Quads with Bus Passengers (1.5 Hours) Depth Interviews with Bus Passengers (1 Hour)

Notes on Approach:

- *This Guide indicates the areas to be explored in the discussion, the likely order in which topics will be covered and the kinds of questions and techniques which may be used. However, as this is qualitative research, the approach will be flexible depending on the dynamics of each session.*
- *Questions in this guide are written in our own words. In each interview moderators will adjust their language to meet the needs of the particular individual.*
- *The objectives of the research may be addressed through direct questioning, indirect questioning, observation of non-verbal response, or analysis of data post hoc.*

Stimulus [see PPT pack]

- Example bus timetables
 - Timetables 1a and 1b: clockface style (regular throughout the day irrespective of actual running time).
 - Timetables 2a and 2b: showing variation at different times of the day (regular off peak and regular (but different) peak running time)
 - Timetables 3a and 3b: showing variation in times on school/non school days (3a) and bespoke based on historic running time for each journey (3b).
- 3 examples of punctuality reports from various train companies (including one from Stagecoach).

1. Introduction (2 mins)

- **Introduce:**
 - *Moderator to introduce self and explain the process of market research to respondents (MRS guidelines, confidentiality and audio recording).*
- **Explain:**
 - *This research is about understanding your views on and needs from bus timetables in your local area. We'll be discussing what kind of information you need from bus operators to help you make your journey, whether your current needs are being met and how the information provided could be improved.*
 - *There are no right and wrong answers – all we are interested in are your opinions and ideas. If you disagree with each other that's fine too, we want to understand all points of view as they are all relevant.*

2. Warm up and discussion of pre-task (5 - 10 mins)

- **Respondent details:**

Moderator to ask respondents to introduce themselves (use stick man exercise as ice-breaker if appropriate) covering as appropriate:

- Name
- Age
- Who they live with (including whether they have children or not)
- Whether they work outside the home and if so where. Moderator also ascertain how far their commute is and mode/s of transport used to get to work

Moderator to ask respondents to refer to their pre-tasks and probe as follows:

- Looking over Exercise 1 in your pre-task⁵, can you give me an overview of the types of journeys you make by bus?
 - How often do you travel by bus?
 - At what times of the day do you tend to travel?
 - How long are the bus journeys you take?
 - What type of routes do the buses you use take e.g. do they go to/through/from a town centre, between villages/small towns, from one part of the city to another part etc.
 - What are the main reasons that you make these bus journeys? Why do you use the bus in these instances?
 - Who, if anyone, do you travel with?
 - Do your buses arrive on time to pick you up?
 - Do they arrive on time at their destination?
 - Is there any difference in your journeys in terms of how important it is you arrive at a specific time? *Moderator to probe fully to understand how time-critical/ non time-critical/journeys are distinguished e.g. the need to arrive within a 5 minute window as opposed to a 10 minute window etc.*
 - *If time:* can you briefly talk me/us through one of the journeys you have recorded in your pre-task as an example of your bus travel? *Moderator to understand how this example illustrates their bus travel and make a note of positive/negative perceptions of bus travel/punctuality in their local area.*

3. How timetable information is used (15-20 mins)

Explain to respondents that the first part of the discussion will be about how they use bus timetables to help plan their bus journeys and how well these fit with their needs. Moderator note: probe initially on local bus journeys and if time then cover journeys in different areas too i.e. unfamiliar bus routes.

⁵ This exercise asked respondents to fill in a self-completion with details of up to 5 recent bus journeys

Thinking about the bus routes you use...

- How frequently do these services run? *Moderator to note whether these services are timetabled or Turn up and go*
- What are the main differences in the way you plan the different journeys you make/services you use?
- *Taking each service type/journey in turn moderator to probe:*
- How, if at all, do you plan this bus journey?
- Do you use a timetable before getting to the bus stop? *Moderator ascertain whether this online/paper copy etc. Why/why not? Do you just/in addition use the timetable at the bus stop? Why/why not? If yes, what are the key bits of information you are looking for on the timetable? Explore fully: e.g. time of departure, frequency of departure, time of arrival, journey length, detail of the bus route etc. Are you always able to find the information you need?*
- Do you use/rely on the real time information at bus stops (where available) in addition/instead of the timetable?
- How much do you rely on each of these timetables? Does it differ by journey type/service? Or anything else? *Moderator to ascertain importance of arriving at stated time.*
 - How important is it that buses run exactly according to the timetable? Does it differ by journey type/service? Or anything else?
- How much do you trust these timetables? Does it differ by journey/service type? Or anything else?
 - Do buses in your area run according to the timetable?
 - What does 'on time' mean? What does 'late' mean? *Moderator explore fully to understand how punctuality is assessed e.g. if buses arrive later than 5 minutes it is considered late, but anything under that 5 minutes is 'on time' etc. Moderator to distinguish between journey time and arrive to schedule*
 - How do you feel when the bus is late arriving at your stop?
 - What about when the bus is on time arriving at your stop but late in arriving at your destination i.e. the delay happens whilst you are on the bus?
 - What are your expectations in terms of bus punctuality, i.e. roughly what percentage/proportion of buses do you expect to be on time?
 - What is an acceptable level of punctuality within a service?
 - Does every bus have to run on time?
 - Is a service sufficiently punctual overall if, 95% of buses are on time⁶
 - Or if 4 out of 5 buses are on time?
 - What other benchmarks make sense?
 - Does this vary by frequency of the bus service? If so, how?⁷
 - What is acceptable in terms of punctuality? What should the targets be?

⁶ The Traffic Commissioner sets the target at 95% of buses should be on time

⁷ Moderator to probe around services that run every 1 – 10 minutes, every 11 – 20 minutes and every 21 minutes+

- Are there any services that are more/less likely to be punctual? Why do you think that is? How do you feel about that?
 - *For any routes/service considered by the respondent to be unpunctual:* how do you manage this e.g. factor in extra time for journeys, or have learnt from experience when the bus will arrive? How much of an issue is this?
- Are there any differences between what you do when you are at home or visiting another area where you are less familiar with the buses? *Moderator explore fully as per probes above.*

4. Preferences for timetable information (20-25 mins)

Moderator explain, we are now going to look in more detail at types of timetable information, to understand what would best fit their needs.

Thinking about the timetables we asked you to look at in the pre-task...

- How would you describe them?
- How easy/difficult are they to use?
- What is the key information that these timetables get across?
- Is there any information on there that you don't need/think is 'extra' detail?
- Is there any information that you feel is missing?

Moderator to check rotation and outline first timetable approach:

Tighter timings timetable: *one type of timetable is where you have tight timings between stops. This doesn't, for example, allow for peak time traffic congestion which means that at these times of the day, services can be running late according to the timetable.*

- What are your initial thoughts about this approach to timetabling?
- What would the key benefits to this approach be?
- What would the drawbacks be? *Moderator listen out for understanding that services may run late in peak hours and increase likelihood of buses stopping short⁸*
- Thinking about the journeys you take, how do you feel about this approach overall?
- How might this approach be improved?

More time between stops timetable: *one type of timetable allows more time between stops so buses are almost always on time, even at peak hours, according to the timetable. However, this means that at non-peak times buses are more likely to have to wait at stops because they will be 'ahead' of the timetable, and will not be allowed to leave early from stops.*

⁸ This is where the bus is turned around short of final destination in order to help keep service on time

- What are your initial thoughts about this approach to timetabling?
- What would the key benefits to this approach be?
- What would the drawbacks be? *Moderator listen out for understanding that services may have to wait at stops in non-peak hours*
- How do you feel about this approach overall?
- How might this approach be improved?

Comparing these two approaches...

- Which approach do you think your local buses are taking at the moment? What does this mean for your experience of you local bus service?
- Which approach do you think is preferable? Why? What are the overall benefits and drawbacks of each approach? *Explore fully*
- Does that differ by service/journey type? *Moderator explore fully: e.g. for timetabled vs. turn up and do services? For weekday/weekend journeys? Etc.*
- Is there a better solution? What does that include/involve?

Moderator to check rotation and outline first timetable type probe as follows, then repeat for second timetable type:

Clock-face/regular interval timetable: These timetables have regular times and buses will sometimes depart early or late depending on the time of the day, week, year etc. Examples would be Timetables 1a and 1b in stimulus pack. Moderator to probe on both but ensure thorough coverage/probing of 1b.

More complex timetable with variations in timings: these timetables attempt to reflect the complexity of traffic conditions which can vary by time of day, day of the week, time of year (e.g. bank holidays, school holidays). Examples would be Timetables 2a and 2b, 3a and 3b in stimulus pack. Moderator to probe on all but ensure thorough coverage/probing of 2b and 3b.

- What are your initial thoughts about this type of timetable?
- What would the key benefits to this type be?
- What would the drawbacks be? *Moderator listen out for understanding that services may have to wait at stops in non-peak hours*
- How do you feel about this type of timetable overall?
- How might this timetable be improved?

Comparing these different types of timetable...

- Which do you prefer? Why?

Are there any different journey types/routes that would be better suited to either one of these types of timetable? Why?

5. Demand and preference for information on bus punctuality (25 mins)

Moderator explain that now we are going to discuss bus punctuality. Check rotation and start discussion with either section 1 or 2:

Section 1

- Are you familiar with, or do you use punctuality information in relation to any forms of public transport you use? Why/why not? If yes, how do you use it?
- What do you think about bus companies publishing information on their punctuality records?
- Does this information sound interesting/useful to you in any way? How? What difference would having this information make?
- Is there any particular information you would like to know? *Moderator make a note of spontaneous suggestions.*
- How detailed would you like/need this information to be?
- What type of information do you think should be provided e.g. should it be:
 - Route specific?
 - Area specific?
 - Operator specific?
 - Relating to peak time punctuality only or all day punctuality?
 - Referring to averages?
 - Referring to numbers of late services?
 - Relating to cancellations?
- *Moderator explore key benefits/drawbacks to each of these types of information to gauge overall interest and perceived value.*
- How often should punctuality information be published? *Prompt with:* Yearly? Quarterly? Monthly? Why?
- What period of time should the information refer to? *Prompt with:* Yearly? Quarterly? Monthly? Why?

Moderator to check rotation and distribute first example of punctuality data from train companies. Probe as follows then repeat for remaining examples before leading discussion on drawing comparisons:

- What are your first thoughts?
- What is it telling you? Anything else?
- What is the most useful piece of information on there for someone who uses the service?
- Is there anything missing?
- How would you use that information? What difference would having this information make? To you? To your bus journeys? To anyone else?
- How easy/difficult is it to understand?
- What does this reading this make you feel about the transport operator running this service?
- What could bus operators use /learn from this and apply to communicating bus punctuality?

Specific areas to probe when showing the Stagecoach punctuality stats

- How interested are you in:
 - The very high level stats (i.e. 99.4% buses ran, 91.0% within 5 minutes of scheduled time across the whole of Stagecoach's East Midlands 478 vehicle subsidiary)?

- Figures for your own town (cancellations and punctuality)?
- Stats for the particular route that you use (cancellations and punctuality)?
- The record for very specific routes and times e.g. the 0817 'number 93' (cancellations and punctuality)? *[NB. the giant database approach]*
- How content are you with punctuality data that state bus arrivals/departures "within 5 minutes" or do you want to understand true punctuality?

Comparing these different types of punctuality information...

- What is the best way to present this type of information so that people can clearly understand it? (i.e. the format in which is presented)
- Can you think of any alternative/improved ways of communicating this information?
- Where should this information be provided, e.g. online, bus stops, offices, tourist information etc? *If online probe fully: would you prefer accessing this information on a desktop/laptop, Smartphone, website or app?*
- Who should publish this information? e.g. bus operator, local authority, etc.

Now thinking about how punctuality is defined for the purposes of these statistics⁹.

- Currently, for bus services which run once every 11 minutes or more often the traffic commissioner considers them to be 'on time' if they arrive anytime between one minute early of their stated time and five minutes after that time
 - What are your thoughts on this?
 - How fair does this seem to bus operators? And to passengers?
- For any services running at 10 minutes or less (defined as frequent services), the target and definition of excess waiting time is as follows:
 - Six or more buses per hour to depart the starting point on 100% of occasions, with the interval between buses never exceeding 15 minutes
 - The excess waiting time of frequent services at timing points is expressed as a target: 1.25 minutes above the average waiting time
 - [Average waiting time is calculated by halving the headway between services. So passengers catching a service which runs every 10 minutes would have an average waiting time of 5 minutes, and the excess waiting time would be 1.25 minutes over and above that 5 minutes, i.e. the bus would be on time if they waited no more than 6.25 minutes]
 - What are your thoughts on this?
 - How fair does this seem to bus operators? And to passengers?

Section 2

- Have you personally had experience of a bus being regularly late, or where a particular journey was at least 15 minutes late? *Note to moderator: do not dwell too much on individual experiences of one late bus but rather a bus which is*

⁹ This section explored in one group discussion only – otherwise covered in Follow up interviews (see end of document)

regularly more than 10–15 minutes behind schedule or where it was so late that it had negative consequences for the passenger e.g. missed connection

If yes:

- Why do you think the bus was late? *Moderator listen out for whether lateness considered an issue with the operator or for a reason out of their control e.g. bad traffic.*
- How did you feel about that?
- What did the bus operator do/say as a result?
- What action, if any, did you take as a result? Did you do anything else differently the next time you travelled?
- What rights do you think you currently have as a bus passenger in these circumstances?
- What rights do you think bus passengers should have if buses are late?
- Are you aware of any organisation or body responsible for regulating bus companies (and ensuring they run punctual bus services)? *Moderator take note of any organisations named.*
- How important do you think having such an organisation is? Why/why not?
- What do you think an organisation such as this would be responsible for? What wouldn't they be responsible for?
- Should an organisation such as this respond to complaints from the public in order to understand where the issues are? Or should bus companies be required to provide punctuality data? Which method do you think would work better and why?
- How likely would you be to get in touch with an organisation like this to make a complaint about bus punctuality? What would stop/motivate you?
- How do you think you'd be able to get in touch with them?
- What do you think the outcome would be? Why? *Moderator explore short and long term outcomes.*

If respondent is not aware of Traffic Commissioners, moderator to share information about them and probe as follows:

- What are your first thoughts?
- What could they do differently/in addition to help ensure bus operators run punctual services?

6. Final Summary and Closing (5-10 mins)

Dependent on content of above discussion, summarise thoughts and feelings towards current timetabling and impact that this has on bus travel, and ideal versions of timetables and what impact this would have on attitudes towards bus travel.

Thinking about all the things we've talked about today...

- What do you think is the best approach and type of timetable for *your* bus journeys/routes?
- If you were in charge of bus timetabling in your local area, what approach to timetabling would you take?
- How important do you think communicating bus punctuality information is to people who use the service? Why?
- What one piece of advice would you give to bus operators to make sure their service is as good as it can be for bus passengers?

Ask respondents to talk about this topic further with friends and family to gauge their reactions. Remind them that we will call them in around a week to gather any further/final thoughts.

Also check they are happy to be quoted anonymously or contacted for further information so that their story can be used as a case study (again this would be anonymised).

Thank respondents for their input and how valuable all their comments and contributions have been so far. Close session.

Follow Up Calls

- What do you remember from our initial conversation?
- Have you spoken about the topics we discussed with anyone else? If so what did they say?
- Has the conversation in the group / depth:
 - Had any impact on how they think and feel about the buses they've taken / their bus journeys? If so, how?
 - What about how you use / think about timetables? If so, how?
 - Impacted on how you think about punctuality? If so, how?

***To explore a few issues that have come up in analysis in a little more detail:
For all:***

- How do you feel if the bus is on time arriving and departing from your stop but then becomes late whilst you're on your journey? Is this part of how 'punctual' the bus is or something else? *Explore thinking/rationale.*

For those using frequent services (10 mins or less) and/or services 11-20 mins (exploring any differences between the two):

- When do you consider the bus to be late? *Explore what they use as their benchmark or measure.*
- As appropriate, is this still the case if you are taking a different service (i.e. one that runs more often/less than once every 10 minutes)?

For all:

- Currently, for bus services which run once every 11 minutes or more often the traffic commissioner considers them to be 'on time' if they arrive anytime between one minute early of their stated time and five minutes after that time
 - What are your thoughts on this?
 - How fair does this seem to bus operators? And to passengers?
- The current regulations state that a frequent service (that is one that runs every 10 minutes or more frequently) is effectively late when a passenger has been waiting for half the time between services, plus 1¼ minutes. For example, if a bus service runs every 10 minutes it becomes late when passengers have to wait 6¼ minutes (half of ten = 5 minutes + 1¼).¹⁰
- What are your thoughts on this?
 - What are your thoughts on this?
 - How fair does this seem to bus operators? And to passengers?

Thank respondents for their input and how valuable all their comments and contributions have been.

¹⁰ As required, explain that this is worked out as follows: Average waiting time is calculated by halving the headway between services. So passengers catching a service which runs every 10 minutes would have an average waiting time of 5 minutes, and the excess waiting time would be 1.25 minutes over and above that 5 minutes, i.e. the bus would be on time if they waited no more than 6.25 minutes



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