

# Raising the confidence of bus passengers

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Passengers waiting for a bus that never seems to arrive can understandably feel frustrated – especially when they have no information. Passenger Focus – the watchdog safeguarding the interests of passengers in Great Britain – has carried out extensive work with bus passengers to see how they are affected by delays and disruption. We also asked what would help them when this happens, and we spoke to some drivers to get their take on it.

As a result of this work we have made a number of recommendations and will be working with transport operators, government and local authorities to help this happen.

We measure passenger satisfaction with information provided while on the bus, and with the attitude of the driver, through our annual Bus Passenger Survey<sup>1</sup> so we can track whether improvements are having the desired effect.

Our delays and disruption research found that most bus passengers understand that buses will inevitably get stuck in traffic and, to

a degree, they accept that as just part of bus travel – although they want greater focus from bus companies on delays which are within their control.

Two areas stood out in terms of what would help bus passengers faced with delays: better information and a more customer-focused attitude from bus drivers.

First, passengers want better information to remove the sense of ‘powerlessness’ they feel when waiting at a bus stop, gazing up the road and wondering if a bus is going to arrive.

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

Another told us that they had even started leaving extra time on the assumption the bus could be late or even not turn up – one response stated: “I try to plan a journey so that I have another one [bus] after the one I’m going to get – a safety margin.”

Real-time departure information allows bus passengers to make an informed decision about what they do when services are disrupted.

It removes uncertainty and allows people to work around the problem the bus company is having.

In fact some passengers could not understand why it was not provided more often – one comment declared: “They have [real-time information boards] at every train station, so I can’t see why they can’t have them at bus stations.”

During the research, we asked passengers how they would like such information to be provided. Overwhelmingly, they said that real-time departure information needs to be at the bus stop itself – this would ensure that it was inclusive, not requiring the latest smartphone, and reassuring; you would know whether or not to abandon the wait and seek alternative means.

This passenger’s experience is typical of some that we heard: “I’ve been stood and waiting for a bus, and there had been an accident and they’d stopped the buses, but because it was before 9am, nobody could update their website to say that there had been a crash, so I stood there for 45 minutes. In the end I had to phone my mum to come and get me and take me to work! I had a Blackberry at the time and I was trying to look online [while at the stop] to see if anything had happened.”

Some of the passengers we asked were enthusiastic about smartphone apps that delivered real-time departure information. They could see it allowing informed choices to be made while still at home or in the office, etc. What was interesting was that despite the fact we had especially recruited respondents that

regularly used buses, very few were aware that such apps already existed in many areas of the country.

As we have found in other recent research, such as our rail information research ‘Short and Tweet’<sup>2</sup>, there appears to be a growing desire for information to be personalised – relevant to my journey not the journey.

Secondly, passengers want to see more customer-focused behaviour from bus drivers – in general, but particularly at times of delay or disruption to services.

Many passengers are looking for a simple acknowledgement of the delay, their experience often being of drivers who take the usual fare without comment, even if the bus is significantly late. If you are on a bus that gets held up, passengers want the driver to tell them what is going on. Drivers seem reluctant to do that, even when they know – partly, it seems, stemming from a misplaced assumption that the passengers have already worked out what the problem is.

Many of the comments we received were similar to this passenger’s: “The bus drivers have a radio, so why can’t they [central control via radio] give them [drivers] information on the radio, and then pass it on to passengers?”

Passenger Focus has made a number of recommendations in light of this research. One calls for government to set an objective to establish the ‘back of house’ infrastructure to run a real-time departure system in all parts of the country, i.e. a system that provides data to ‘feed’ smartphone apps and bus stop

displays. Why should it be a postcode lottery, essentially left to local authorities, whether you can get real-time departure information for your bus route?

Another calls for a long-term programme to provide a real-time departures display at as many bus stops as possible. We are not calling for one at every stop, but passengers would welcome a vision to get one, over time, at most frequently-served, frequently-used stops.

We also recommend further efforts to develop a customer-service ethos among bus drivers; that bus companies consider the role of Twitter in getting disruption information to passengers; and that real-time system operators strive to get information as accurate as possible – passengers quickly lose trust if they experience errors. A full research report can be downloaded via the Passenger Focus website<sup>3</sup>.

## References

1. <http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/bus-passenger-survey>
2. <http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/publications/short-and-tweet-how-passengers-want-social-media-during-disruption>
3. <http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/publications/bus-passengers-experience-of-delays-and-disruption-research-report-april-2013>



**Guy Dangerfield** has been with Passenger Focus and its predecessor organisation since 1998. He currently leads the watchdog’s work to improve the management of disruption to rail services, reduce the impact of engineering work on rail passengers and research bus passengers’ experiences of delays and disruption. Guy is also involved in work on rail fares and ticketing, rail passengers’ requirements from the 2014-19 control period and the transparency of train performance information.



RTPI apps on smartphones are becoming increasingly popular

## Real-Time Passenger Information 2013

Guy Dangerfield will be speaking at Eurotransport’s Real-Time Passenger Information 2013 conference in London on 11 September 2013. Meet and hear from industry experts about the real-time projects and technologies that are benefitting the marketplace. Learn more and reserve your delegate place now by visiting [www.rtpiconference.com](http://www.rtpiconference.com)

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