

Waiting for better buses

Passenger Focus Chief Executive Anthony Smith underlines the main areas of improvement bus services need to target, as cited by the people using them...

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 just published qualitative research into bus passengers' experiences of delays and disruption. It follows extensive work in this area among train passengers. We 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 that are within their control.

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 come. One respondent said: "It's mental torture sometimes at bus stops working out whether to stay or whether to go."

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.

As part of 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, etc.) and reassuring; you would know whether or not to continue to wait or seek alternative means.

Some passengers were enthusiastic about smartphone apps that delivered real-time departure information. They could see it enabling them to make informed choices while still at home, in the office, etc. What was interesting was how many respondents, most recruited because they used buses regularly, were not aware that apps already exist to do this in many parts of Great Britain.

As found in other recent research, there appears to be a growing desire for information to be personalised – relevant to 'my' journey, not 'the' journey.

Passengers also 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.

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. That is, 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, that determines whether you can get real-time departure information for your bus route?

Another recommendation calls for a long-term programme to provide real-time departures displays at as many bus stops as possible. We are not calling for one at every stop, but passengers would welcome a vision to implement them, over time, at the 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 make information as accurate as possible – passengers quickly lose trust if they experience errors.

The full report can be downloaded at: www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/publications/bus-passengers-experience-of-delays-and-disruption-research-report-april-2013.



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