

MetroBus Quality Partnership Scheme – Transport Focus response

July 2015



1. Introduction

Transport Focus welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the above consultation. [Please note. Passenger Focus became Transport Focus on 30 March 2015. In addition to representing rail, bus, coach and tram passengers, Transport Focus now represents users of the Strategic Roads Network (SRN) in England.]

As the statutory body representing the interests of bus passengers in England (outside of London) our starting point is to focus on outputs to passengers. The acid test for the proposal is whether it will improve the delivery of services to passengers.

To assess this we look first at passengers' aspirations/ expectations and then map these against the proposals in the scheme.

2. Passenger Aspirations

Our research gives us a good understanding of passengers' expectations and aspirations. In 2010 we conducted research into passengers' priorities for improvement. Some 3800 passengers across a section of rural, urban and metropolitan areas in England were asked to rank 30 different criteria. The results are not bespoke to the Bristol area but can be used as indicative of bus user aspirations. The top ten priority areas are shown below for 'urban areas' with scores for the wider South West region and the national average also shown for comparative purposes.

Criteria (in order of priority – 1 being the highest)	Urban	South West	All
More buses are on time or within five minutes of schedule time	1	1	1
Buses run more frequently at times when you want to use the bus	2	2	2
All bus drivers are helpful and have a positive attitude	3	5	7
All passengers are able to get a seat on the bus for the duration of their journey	4	6	3
All bus stops have a well-maintained shelter	5	10	10
Tickets that entitle you to travel on all bus services in your local area, not just those operated by a specific bus company	6	4	4
Buses go to a wider range of destinations in your local area	7	8	5
Accurate timetable and route information available at all bus stops	8	9	8
All buses drive at an appropriate speed and are free from jolting	9	11	15
Correct route number and destination clearly displayed on outside of all buses	10	14	14

The results emphasise the importance of what might be termed the 'core product': a punctual, frequent bus service on which you can get a seat. Staff also feature highly

(both in the form of helpfulness and driving style), as does information on times and route. [Note. We are in the process of updating this research with the results expected later this year.]

Transport Focus also conducts the Bus Passenger Survey (BPS) to find what passengers think of the current service provided. The results for the West of England Partnership (made up of the four unitary authorities for Bristol City Bath & North East Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire) are shown below – with the average for all unitary authorities also shown for the latest period.

West of England Partnership (WEP) Criteria % satisfied	2011	2012	2013	2014	2014 Unitary Authority Average
Overall journey	84	82	83	84	88
Punctuality	69	69	69	67	75
Helpfulness / attitude of driver	70	67	69	69	74
Availability of seating or space to stand	81	81	85	84	87
Value for money (all fare paying passengers)	43	35	48	60	59
Overall satisfaction with the bus stop	71	77	78	82	80
Information provided at the bus stop	-	68	68	69	72

During the survey passengers are also given the chance to comment on what they would like to see improved. The top three suggestions are the design/comfort/condition of the bus, punctuality and frequency.

As its name implies, the Bus Passenger Survey targets actual passengers on-board buses. It was not designed to cover non users of services. Experience suggests that non users of a service typically have a lower opinion /perception of services than do actual passengers. This could be caused by a number of issues – e.g. the lack of a service in the first place, a previous poor experience when travelling (even if years ago) or negative publicity - people being far more likely to remember and talk about a poor journey than a good one.

To better understand this issue we carried out research into barriers to bus use (in Milton Keynes) in 2010¹. This found that:

- Participants would be more likely to use buses if they could be relied on to turn up on time, particularly when making time-critical journeys.
- Services on some routes were thought to be too infrequent to use to get to work, or to return from a night out. In particular, some said they would consider using

¹ [Barriers to Bus Use in Milton Keynes](#). Passenger Focus. December 2010

buses instead of taking taxis if there were more buses after 8pm or if night buses were available.

- In the longer term, more could be done to raise awareness of bus services and promote their use. Many non-users had negative perceptions of bus travel. Some also found it hard to know where to start – in other words to find out about bus times and services in the first place.
- Participants welcomed the introduction of newer, modern buses, but felt that this would not be enough on its own to overcome the negative perceptions created by other barriers.

3. The proposal

This set of aspirations from users (and non-users) provides a passenger checklist against which the proposal can be reviewed.

Reliability and performance

Transport Focus is pleased to see the emphasis within the proposal on providing a more reliable service. From our perspective this covers three main areas: punctuality, stability and getting a seat.

- Punctuality
We welcome the provision of punctuality targets within the proposal (paragraph D5). However, we would query the definition of 'on time' contained within the proposal. This is set at 'within 1 minute early and 5 minutes 59 seconds late' rather than at the level contained within the traffic commissioner's guidance (one minute earlier and up to 5 minutes late) – why is there an extra 59 second allowance? The commitment in D5 that 97 per cent of services will depart, and leave intermediate stops, within the window of tolerance is ambitious. Perhaps it is achievable, given the high level of bus priority measures. If it proves unattainable, what happens? It is described as a 'standard' which implies that it is something that passengers should expect and that some form of redress should be triggered if the standard is not met. Is this the case, and if so, what would the mechanism be for providing redress to passengers? We welcome a stretching punctuality target but should not call it a standard unless there are some consequences for failing to meet it.

Over the past few years we have been working with operators and authorities to understand more about when, where and why buses are delayed and what can be done to help them run on time. Our report² looked at the way data on performance was gathered and used. It found that Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL) systems were potentially a very rich source of information. However, even where sufficient data exists, we found that some operators and authorities struggle to take advantage of its potential. Often there is no dedicated resource

² [What's the hold-up? Exploring bus service punctuality](#). Passenger Focus. December 2014

for analysing data and the particular statistical and problem-solving skills required are not always available among the staff to whom the task falls, a problem compounded by staff sickness and turnover.

Hence, we welcome the creation of a MetroBus performance review group which will “work together to collect data for monitoring purposes”.

Another of the findings of our punctuality report was the impact of traffic and highway design on punctuality. Increasing volume of traffic and constraints on road space were specifically mentioned by our partners in a number of the big cities, and provide a constant challenge to running buses on time. Narrow roads limited the scope for sufficiently wide bus lanes and increased the impact of parked cars and other obstructions. The bus priority measures contained within the proposal, and the accompanying Traffic Regulation Orders (TRO) should help to address much of this. Can we also welcome the specification that all vehicles should have double doors (C1)? One of the findings in our bus punctuality project was that there was a whole set of factors which contributed to delays while boarding and alighting, one of which was that, with a single set of doors, passengers boarding the bus had to wait until everyone had got off before they could start to get on. We broadly welcome double doors as a way of speeding up boarding and assisting with delivering punctuality, however have not researched with passengers how they would trade off faster journeys with reduced seating capacity.

Following on from that, can we welcome the commitment to daily enforcement of waiting and loading set out in Schedule 4? Another of the findings from the bus punctuality project was that enforcement has not always kept pace with developments in parking, e.g. lack of enforcement on Sundays which has become an increasingly busy day.

Our research³ also shows a desire from passengers that punctuality and reliability figures are made public. It found that passengers should have access to information about the performance of their bus services and to key actions being taken by operators, local authorities to improve this. The research indicates that publishing this information is regarded as right in principle and is good for trust because ‘it helps keeps the industry honest’. This was the case even if individuals had little personal appetite in seeking it out – the fact that others are looking at it can often be enough.

Our research in the rail sector shows that rail passengers value the publication of such performance data⁴, believing that greater transparency generates greater

³ [Bus punctuality and timetables](#). Passenger Focus. January 2014

⁴ [Putting Rail Information in the Public Domain](#). Passenger Focus and the Office of Rail Regulation. May 2011

accountability on the part of the service provider. Providing this for bus services could also help address the perception that services are less punctual than they actually are.

It is important, however, that any performance figures are made as relevant to an individual as possible. The use of area-wide averages that mask poorer performing routes does not give a true perspective. It will be important to disaggregate the figures by service group or route to ensure that they remain relevant to passengers.

We note that the proposal commits parties to “robust data collection, monitoring and reporting” but does not specify the extent to which any reports will be made public. It will be important that the scheme contains provision to provide passengers with the information that they want.

- **Stability of services**

It is clear from our research that the ‘core product’ is very important to passengers – the essence being that they have a stable service that they can depend on. As well as punctuality (as mentioned above) this also covers the frequency with which timetables can be chopped and changed.

In our report *Bus Service Changes*⁵ we reported on passengers’ attitudes to service changes. Two-thirds did not think it acceptable to make changes to bus services more than twice a year and more than six out of ten (62 per cent) wanted to be given at least four weeks’ notice of major changes. Our research also showed that the best place to inform passengers of changes is at the bus stop itself: 75 per cent of passengers wanted information at the bus stop, 61 per cent wanted it on board

We are very pleased, therefore, to see a clear commitment in the proposal to minimise the number and frequency of changes to the timetable and to establish one fixed date per year for changes (Annex 1). We agree that this will help increase customer confidence and, in turn, contribute to passenger growth.

It will also help if the proposal were to contain details of when and how passengers will be informed of these changes.

- **Capacity**

Getting a seat is another high priority for passengers. Specifying minimum frequencies and intervals between services will help achieve this as will the

⁵ Bus Service Changes. Passenger Focus. October 2010.

provision in paragraph C4 that “no passenger should be left standing at a bus stop...because a bus is full save in case of exceptional demand...”.

Staff

The attitude/ helpfulness of the driver scores highly in our priorities for improvement work. So we are pleased to see the proposal include standards for drivers and that this includes a being polite and providing assistance for passengers with disabilities (para D9).

The importance of staff was reinforced by our work on value for money⁶ and on delays/disruption⁷ both of which highlighted the crucial role played by drivers. The bus driver is the face of the company and is responsible for far more than driving the bus. They are the main source of information on fares, the provider of information on delays and disruption, and a reassuring presence when it comes to personal security. And yet, as we have found in our recent report on driver training⁸, much of the focus is on technical skills and on driving.

Hence we would also like to see the section of driver training and conduct contain a commitment to wider role of the driver in delivering customer service – in terms of training, delivery and how this will be monitored.

Customer care and satisfaction

Notwithstanding the comments on driver training above we are pleased to see customer service being mentioned within the proposal (D12).

Provision for compensation for delays is a particularly positive development. It will be important that information on how to claim is prominently displayed in order to get maximum consumer benefit out of this proposal. In a similar vein it will be important to put in place a robust complaints handling system.

We also welcome the commitment to engage passenger groups and to survey passengers twice a year about their aspirations and reactions to the scheme. ‘Hard’ measures of punctuality and service frequency are very important but there is also a need to keep one eye on service quality. Our strong preference is for targets based on what passengers think – the best judge of quality being those who have used the services in question. This could encompass driver attitude (the fourth highest priority of improvement in our research) and also such things as personal security, the condition and upkeep of the bus stop and the provision of information.

⁶ [Bus passenger views on value for money](#). Passenger Focus. October 2013

⁷ [Bus passengers experience of delays and disruption](#). Passenger Focus. 2013

⁸ [Bus driver training. What works? What Next?](#) Transport Focus. July 2015

As we mentioned earlier Transport Focus conducts the Bus Passenger Survey⁹. This provides an independent assessment that can be benchmarked against other areas and operators. We would be pleased to discuss how BPS might play a role in setting targets and monitoring performance going forward.

Passenger Information

One of the most valuable facilities at bus stops is the provision of information, especially real-time information displays. Our report *Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption*¹⁰ found that delayed or cancelled buses have a real impact on passengers in terms of being late for work, late picking up children, or late for medical and other appointments. As well as practical issues, passengers talked about the anxiety and stress that this brings.

Our research found a clear desire for better information. Passengers feel powerless when faced with delays. Providing real-time information that empowers passengers to make an informed decision in these circumstances will make a significant difference at bus stops. This was reflected in our research work in areas such as Southampton and Leeds where passenger satisfaction levels were driven up by the provision and use of real-time information.

The use of AVL ought to provide the infrastructure on which to provide real-time bus information. Ideally this would cover both displays at bus stops and information provided via an App.

Passengers also expressed an interest in providing electronic displays on the bus itself. This would help keep passengers informed during diversions or traffic jams. It could also be used to inform passengers about planned disruption. Moreover, such screens could help to reduce the workload of drivers – many of whom are, by default, the chief source of information for passengers. C1 requires buses to be equipped to enable drivers to communicate with the control room but is silent about helping the driver to communicate with passengers.

Our report *Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption*¹¹ recommended that bus companies, transport authorities and Government consider how communication with passengers already on board a bus can be dramatically improved. Could a television-style visual display become standard in new buses? They could provide information about current delays, temporary route changes/expected delays because of roadworks and notification about permanent changes to the timetable (see earlier *Passenger Focus* research)¹². They could show where the bus is on a map, airline-style, to help passengers get off at the correct

⁹ [Bus Passenger Survey](#). Passenger Focus.2014

¹⁰ [Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption](#). Passenger Focus. April 2013

¹¹ Op cit

¹² [Bus Service Changes](#) Passenger Focus. May 2010

stop. Importantly, the information could be tailored specifically to the needs of passengers on that bus. Could public address become standard on new buses? It could be used by the driver to make live announcements or trigger pre-recorded ones, or potentially for staff back at the control centre to make live announcements direct to passengers on a particular bus. For example, to explain what is happening if a bus is stuck in unusually heavy traffic or is about to be diverted off its normal route.

The commitment to include RTI displays at every stop (Table 6) is very welcome and goes well beyond what is provided on most bus routes, where only the busiest stops will normally be fitted out in this way. Opinion research indicates that at-stop RTI displays impress non users as well as existing passengers.

Fares and ticketing

This is another area we have covered in our research. Our report, *Bus passenger views on value for money*¹³, looked in more depth at what had the biggest influence on value for money perception and, importantly, what might help to improve things.

The key findings again emphasise the ‘core’ product. When passengers buy a ticket they expect a punctual, reliable service and a seat in return. Focusing on performance should further improve perceptions of value for money.

Better access to information on fares and ticketing is also essential. Passengers often relied on word of mouth and the bus driver for information on times, routes and fares. All of which begs the question of how much business is lost because potential passengers simply don’t know how to use the bus or because people can’t find the ideal ticket for their needs.

It also found that many passengers didn’t realise what ticket types existed, how they could buy them or where they could find out the information they needed. The research found a very strong desire for more centralised sources of information. For example websites, apps and notices on the bus.

We note that a lot of the ticketing strategy in the proposal is directed at maximising the use of smartcards/electronic ticketing and minimising the role of the driver in taking cash payments (section B). Our research on smart ticketing^{14 15} demonstrates passenger support for new forms of ticketing. It also shows a desire/expectation that smart ticketing facilitates the introduction of new types of tickets – indeed this was felt to be essential to encourage uptake. Will passengers switch from a paper ticket to a plastic version, if the ticket type and cost is the same? We know that one of the key reasons that passengers get a smartcard is that they are able to choose from more flexible types of tickets, which will be better suited to

¹³ [Bus Passenger views on value for money](#). Passenger Focus. October 2013

¹⁴ [Smart Ticketing: Oxford SmartZone](#). Passenger Focus. September 2013;

¹⁵ [Smart ticketing in Norfolk: what do passengers think?](#) Passenger Focus. March 2015

their own travel patterns, so saving money and time. It also stands to reason that facilities and procedures for switching to smart must be easy to use and well explained.

We would also urge caution when it comes to removing a cash option altogether. There are those who will only travel occasionally and who will not 'join' a smartcard scheme - it will be important that this doesn't create a new barrier to travel.

Bus Stops

The provision of a well maintained bus shelter is another important item for passengers. We have already mentioned the provision of right time information but we are also pleased to see that CCTV, WiFi, ticket purchasing facilities and timetable display/route maps will be provided as standard at all bus stops (schedule 4).

We also welcome the comprehensive list of maintenance and cleaning standards (table 11).

Service integration

We welcome the wider planning of bus and rail services by TravelWest, including Metrobus and Metrowest. These schemes need to work together in a way that is complementary, creating a network of service choice for passengers; with passenger information and ticketing products across modes, operators and services that will create attractive and simple integration opportunities for passengers.

In conclusion we believe that there is much in the partnership proposal that aligns well with passenger aspirations. It focuses on many of the outputs that matter to passengers, especially in the key areas of performance, punctuality, and real time information. We would, however, like to see more detail on transparency – ie giving passengers access to performance information - and on how passengers will be able to contact operators.

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