

Punctuality: Don't ignore it

User watchdog Transport Focus is holding six seminars on bus punctuality, in which it looks at the findings of its recent report *What's the hold-up?* In Liverpool last week, Senior TC Beverley Bell had her say on the issue – and that's worth listening to. Tim Deakin reports

Punctuality is important to bus passengers, and most operators realise this, doing their best to ensure that their services run as closely to time as possible. It isn't an easy task, but the Traffic Commissioners expect high standards: 95% compliance, with a window of tolerance of one minute early/five minutes late, is the target.

But why is achieving this important? Transport Focus held bus punctuality workshops in nine areas of England outside London earlier in 2015. Its report *What's the hold-up?* dissects the results, and it is discussing these findings at six seminars. The fourth was held in Liverpool last Monday (29 June).

All bus operators must monitor their services' punctuality, and the key to doing so properly is data collection, says Mike Bartram, Transport Focus Bus Policy Advisor. "We found some areas of the country where little data was collected, and others with automatic vehicle location (AVL), which makes things much easier.

"But AVL is no panacea; it doesn't tell you why the bus is late. The old-fashioned way of collecting data by riding on buses is illuminating. AVL can then be used to back up what people have seen."

You must monitor

Monitoring punctuality and collecting data is something that all bus operators must do, says Senior Traffic Commissioner (STC) Beverley Bell, but most important is how you use the findings.

"Some operators have too

much data and don't know what to do with it – but if they have the data, they are automatically deemed to have knowledge of it," she says. The task of tracking punctuality should be allocated to an individual within the business, although the intensity of monitoring need not be the same across the board.

"TCs don't expect routes that are highly-compliant to be monitored as often as those that aren't," says Mrs Bell.

A checklist of what TCs do expect regarding monitoring can be found in the annex of Statutory Document 14, published in March 2015 and relating to punctuality and windows of tolerance. The whole publication is available at www.zigs.me/4Xk; the annex is a very important document, adds the STC, and is required reading for bus operators.

It is not, however, necessary to become obsessed with the 95% target, she adds. TCs are aware that it's not always achievable, and they will accept certain reasons for failure.

"We're familiar with reasonable excuses, but what is not reasonable is blaming delays on ticket sales, for example," she says, adding that the onus is on operators to mitigate the traditional Monday morning slow-down as passengers renew weekly passes. Incentivising off-bus purchases, such as via automatically renewing smart-cards, should be looked at closely in this situation.

Operators should also make use of the facility for short-notice registration alterations if punctuality deteriorates; "we would normally approve them under those circumstances," adds Mrs Bell.

The LA effect

Local authorities (LAs) have a key part to play in helping punctuality, but some are much better at doing so than others. It's easy for operators that meet with non-cooperation from LAs to throw in the towel and change tack, but to do so is dangerous.

"You must attempt to engage with them, because it's a line of

defence at Public Inquiry (PI) if the LA is non-cooperative," says Mrs Bell.

Operators must be able to prove attempts to work with LAs, even if they amount to nought, she adds, and if local politicians shirk from their obligations towards bus services then they, like an operator, can be called to PI to explain why.

But even if an operator has a good relationship with an LA, getting highway alteration work scheduled is seldom easy, and those expecting instant improvements may be disappointed.

A representative of Merseytravel puts a balancing view across. Any request for road layout changes must be backed up by facts, not opinions, he says, and that's where data collection is again important. When an operator can provide clear evidence of a problem, it will have a much stronger case for improvements to be made.

Nevertheless, even then approval is still not guaranteed. The Merseytravel man explains that LAs and ITAs must also listen to the views of the population, and by default politicians, when considering operators' needs and wishes.

Instead of lobbying LAs to make highway improvements, it may often be viewed as easier just to alter schedules to reflect actual running times, says Mr Bartram.

But adding extra time across the board and 'padding' timetables is not the way to go, and that also returns to the point of having accurate punctuality data. "We find that most passengers are actually quite forgiving



Bus passengers prefer accurate timetables, even if they are tricky to remember

of late buses, and accept that traffic levels cause problems," he says.

"They prefer accurate but harder to remember timetables to those which are easily recalled yet unlikely to be a real representation of the service. However, they do not want schedules to be padded, which can cause buses to layover mid-route." Doing so may tempt drivers to run early; not only is that the last that thing passengers want, but the TCs may also take a keen interest.

Beware complainants

Passengers are also more tolerant of delays accrued during the journey than as a result of a late departure from the start point, adds Mr Bartram, but in Transport Focus' experience users are reluctant to complain and seldom know of the TCs' function.

That view is disputed by Mrs Bell. "People do complain to us about unreliability. They go to the trouble of writing the letter and posting it, and that means they're bothered.

"When we receive a complaint, we see if we've had any others about that route. We then forward it to our compliance people, and write to the operator asking what they're doing about it," she says. The response is well advised to be that it is addressing the problem, or has a reasonable excuse.

The key message is that proactive route punctuality management is imperative; an operator aware of non-compliance and doing nothing about it can expect a call to PI, and TCs are empowered to fine those that fail to comply and have no reasonable excuse.

Several operators have already been dealt with in this way, a trend which will continue. TCs plan to ensure that all operators are advised by email when guidance is issued; whether operators choose to read it or not, TCs will assume that they are aware of it.

The message is simple: operators must do their utmost to meet compliance targets, and those that don't will be targeted.

Perhaps surprisingly, the

assembled audience, made up predominantly of senior management from operators, agreed that this is a fair course of action, although a show of hands at Mrs Bell's demand demonstrated that all those present monitor punctuality already.

However, attendees were

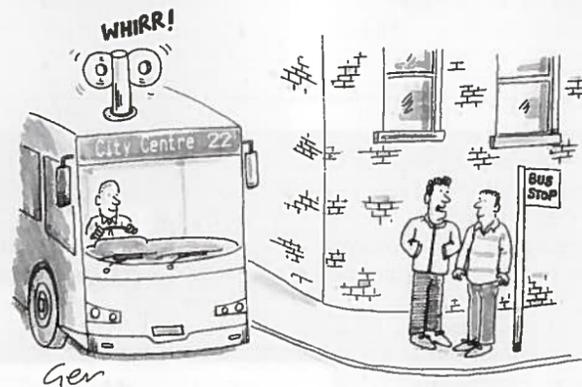
overwhelmingly from the big groups, and it was surprising that few small operators were represented. That's something David Sidebottom, Passenger Director of Transport Focus, would like to see change at the remaining two seminars, which will be held in London on 9 July and Cambridge on 23 July. **K1**

routeone comment

There's an indication that bus punctuality targets are going to be taken very seriously by the TCs in the future. Operators are expected to be aware of them and have a monitoring framework in place that allows each service's compliance to be measured; it's a "must," says Beverley Bell.

But, just like passengers, TCs are aware that, in the real world, there are many genuine reasons why buses run late. Both parties are forgiving if the cause is outside the operator's control and can be viewed as a reasonable excuse.

But both parties are less tolerant of delays within the operator's control. Any that regard instances such as the Monday morning rush of ticket sales, mid-journey driver changeovers and known traffic hotspots as legitimate reasons for tardiness, must think again if fines are to be avoided.



"Nothing wrong with punctuality around here, mate, our buses run like clockwork!"