What makes bus travel value for money?

Passenger Focus has tried to find what lies behind bus users' perceptions of value. The results are illuminating – but there is a cloud of uncertainty around best-value fares

"I just stick to what I know as the choice is too complicated." "There are so many ticket options, how do I know I've got the right one?" "I just don't understand why some operators are more expensive than others."

These are a selection of the comments made by passengers during our latest research into bus passengers and value for money.

Over the years Passenger Focus has done a lot of research into rail passengers' views on value for money. As our bus research gains momentum we wanted to find out more about this key area.

Passenger Focus avoids commenting on fare levels – one person's cheap is another's expensive. We prefer to stick to value for money as a guide to what passengers think about fares. The responses to value-for-money questions provide a useful snapshot of what passengers think about the whole service – cost and all.

We know a bit about value for money among passengers from our Bus Passenger Survey. We can break this data down by age, journey purpose and concessionary-pass holders. Though the range of scores is quite wide – from 35% satisfaction in the area covered by the West of England Partnership to 70% in Nottingham – many areas are recording fairly satisfactory scores. It is no surprise that commuters record lower scores, as on the railway.

To get more of an understanding of this issue, we carried out 12 focus groups in Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham, Leicester and Staffordshire. The aim was to probe what affects passenger perceptions of value for money. This might then give the Government and industry some ideas on how to go about improving the scores.

The focus groups were illuminating. On the whole, as the bus passenger survey shows, passengers feel they are getting value for money from bus travel when compared to the cost of other travel.

However, there is a cloud of uncertainty hanging over best-value fares. As the quotes above illustrate, passengers feel overwhelmed, uncertain and sometimes penalised by their lack of knowledge about fares. Younger people (16-18 year olds in particular) feel they are charged as adults while having lower incomes than most over-18s.

In trying to track changes we tried to find out some single fare levels. Websites helped to a degree, but often we were reduced to phoning head offices. On one occasion we were put through

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to an inspector who called out our requests to off-duty drivers in the mess room to find the fare. Not very transparent. Is it anti-competitive to not tell potential passengers what relative costs are?

As part of the material prepared for the focus groups we drew up lists of local fares and ticket types. Passengers fell on these and, in some cases, asked to take them away – they said they had never seen comparative fares set out like this and wanted more information. Some felt annoyed when they worked out a better-value fare existed.

As with rail, the price of the ticket is only part of the story. The key elements of the service are also important in rating value for money: punctuality, frequency, being able to get on the bus are among the other key factors, as is real-time information. But connections with other forms of transport, the experience of buying tickets and the condition of the bus stop were much less important to passengers when considering value for money.

We have put forward three policy recommendations to help improve information about fares:

• A central, amalgamated information source
• A more standardised ticket structure
• Electronic payment cards

Many of these ideas are already being put into practice and we will push for improvements.

Another piece of research work, soon to be published, provides further illumination. As part of a series of studies on passengers and smart ticketing we are doing for the Department for Transport, we have evaluated the Oxford Smartzone project. This involved service improvements as well as the first multi-operator smart ticket.

We interviewed 1000 Oxford bus users. Over seven in 10 users gave the card a top rating of "very satisfied". A further 27% were "quite satisfied". Satisfaction was high with ease of use, including topping up. Smartcard holders were more likely to agree that bus services offered value for money. Passengers were making more trips.

Among non-users of the smartcard, we found the main reason for not taking it up was that they felt they wouldn't use it enough. So a product aimed at less-frequent users would help.

A glimpse of the future? The business case has to stack up, but this is the sort of modern image that the bus needs.

Anthony Smith is chief executive of Passenger Focus.