

Give passengers more say on bus services

As the main funders of services, bus users deserve a stronger voice. The latest Passenger Focus survey provides a rich seam of information to allow an informed debate



Passengers often feel powerless. They feel they have little say in the services they use and probably rarely think about either complaining or suggesting improvements: what's the point? Passenger Focus has just finished some research on passenger involvement in the bus and rail industries. The results are stark: passengers feel there is an information void about services, which the media fills.

However, the time has come for passenger power and Passenger Focus is going to make it happen. As central and local government funding goes down, passengers are increasingly the main funders of bus services. As such they should have a much greater say in the way those services run.

One simple way of doing this is to ask a representative group of passengers what they think. This is the core of the Passenger Focus business model. Do that research in a number of areas and you can start to get some comparison. This work does not provide the answers. It simply means debates about improvement start in a sensible place.

So the latest wave of our Bus Passenger Survey, just published, should provide a rich source of information. In this year's work, more than 22,000 passengers from 20 areas around England,

outside London, told us what they thought about their bus service. For the first time we have also surveyed passengers using bus rapid transit systems in two areas.

In a time of continued pressure on individual and public budgets, our work provides benchmarked, comparable evidence to ensure that valuable resources are targeted where they are most valued by passengers.

We ask passengers to rate all aspects of their bus journey covering key factors such as planning the journey, the facilities and information provided at the bus stop, fares, the helpfulness of the driver and their driving standards, aspects of the actual journey itself and the cleanliness and condition of the bus.

This year we show the reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction (for farepayers only) in each area

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surveyed. The factors affecting satisfaction are broad, but often relate to the bus driver, in particular "smoothness/freedom from jolting". The factors most associated prevalent causes of dissatisfaction are "on-bus journey time", "safety of the driving", "smoothness/freedom from jolting", and "length of time waited".

Passengers continue to rate overall satisfaction with their journey fairly highly, though there is still much room for improvement. The proportion satisfied overall with their bus journey varied across areas from 73% to 92% (averaging 84%).

Passenger satisfaction with value for money ranged from 30% to 70% across the areas surveyed (averaging 54%). Are fare levels, combined with the current economic climate, now really starting

to hit passengers' pockets and their views of value for money? We have done some additional research in this key area which will be published later in 2013.

Bus rapid transit featured for the first time. Both the Cambridgeshire and Hampshire systems scored well on overall satisfaction, with 87% and 97% respectively. However, value for money was middling for Cambridge at 55% and low for Hants at 30%. Punctuality ratings not as high as you might expect – 79% and 81% respectively. Perhaps a reflection on the number of commuters using the services, the fact the Hants system is relatively short and the economic situation in that part of the county?

The strength of the Bus Passenger Survey is in its benchmarked comparability, independence and our research methodology. It is increasingly used by operators and transport authorities as a measure of their bus passengers' experience. We will try and involve more local authorities and bus companies. The bigger the pool of data the more powerful it is. We will try to force more change on the ground to help make the bus a better choice.

Passenger Power? We are not there yet but this research is a good start in giving passengers a greater voice in services.

• Additional surveys were carried out in the autumn 2012 wave which almost doubled its size – thanks to extra funding from the following transport authorities and bus operators:
• West Midlands (Centro), Merseytravel, Devon County Council, Essex County Council, Kent County Council, Milton Keynes Council, Northumberland County Council, Suffolk County Council, Tees Valley Group and Thurrock Council
• First UK Bus North Division, Go North East, Reading Buses and Stagecoach North East.

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Satisfaction with bus rapid transit was high overall, but value for money scored poorly

