

Discovering the hidden causes of bus hold-ups

A collaborative research project bringing together Passenger Focus with operators and transport authorities has improved understanding of delays and led to a co-ordinated response



Why are buses late? You might think this is a stupid question. Obvious, isn't it? As a passenger you can see the road works, accidents, bad parking and traffic that hold buses up. But are suspicions borne out by the facts? Data can be a bit sketchy in this area as some operators shield their figures from the prying eyes of local authorities and the traffic commissioners. The wealth of data that informs debate on railway performance is not available. What really are the main causes of delay and what can be done about them?

This is a local issue that requires local solutions. However, what is clear is that a common approach can bring about improvements.

We know from our Bus Passenger Survey that passengers are consistently less satisfied with the punctuality of their buses than they are with bus services as a whole. Improving punctuality is their top priority for improvement.

So we thought it was high time that we talked to the people responsible for making sure the buses show up when they are supposed to. Did they know when, where and why their buses were delayed? What were they doing to tackle the problem?

After writing to every local authority in England, we agreed to work with each of the English passenger transport executives, plus county councils Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Devon and city councils Derby and Southampton.

We identified 19 routes in the local authority areas and a further ten in the PTE areas. The routes gave good coverage of both commercial and tendered services, and offered a mix of operators and urban and rural areas.

The project represented something of a departure for Passenger Focus, in that we worked

alongside operators and local authorities as they analysed their data and decided how to improve their services. The work was directed by a national steering group made up of industry and government representatives. The summary of the project, *What's the hold-up? Exploring bus service punctuality*, is now on the Passenger Focus website.

The project has improved our understanding of when, where and why buses are delayed. Though not representing a statistically valid sample of the country's vast variety of bus routes, our case studies highlighted the challenges of setting timetables to reflect variable patterns of traffic and patronage. They threw up a number

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of recurrent themes, including traffic and parking, boarding and alighting, inadequate recovery time and, perhaps most surprisingly, leaving bus stations.

The project has resulted in energetic responses from operators, authorities and the passenger transport executive, working in partnership to address the challenges which have emerged. Involving highway engineers, drivers, bus companies and others allows the breadth of challenges to be addressed. Simply doing the work, bringing people together to forensically look at delays, has led already to many tactical improvements.

For operators, the project demonstrated the value of listening to passengers and, in particular, to drivers, in a structured way. Data was used as a supportive evidence base rather than a diagnostic tool. Typically it was used to validate concerns

raised by drivers and supervisors, to provide historical comparisons, to help determine the need for interventions, to provide evidence for business cases and to monitor the effectiveness of interventions.

Partners stressed the value of focusing on trying to understand what had happened on the worst individual journeys, rather than looking at averages, which can be misleading.

Given that everyone seems to agree in principle that getting buses to run on time is the key to increasing passenger numbers, profits and satisfaction levels, it was disappointing how long it took us to get this project off the ground in some areas. We were also surprised to discover a lack of consistency about which services are monitored and how. And we assumed, wrongly, that bus punctuality improvement partnerships would automatically be used as the mechanism for taking this work forward.

We urge operators to make full use of the rich potential to use ticket machine and other vehicle-based location tracking data. We urge local authorities and operators routinely to engage with each other to use their data and experiences on delays to better manage the highway network in relation to bus punctuality. And we urge local partners to make full use of their existing punctuality improvement partnerships when acting to make the buses run on time.

Earlier this year, we published research into what bus passengers thought about punctuality in *Bus Punctuality and Timetables*, which we used to inform our comments on the Senior Traffic Commissioner's draft punctuality guidance. We would encourage operators and authorities to examine that research and the wealth of detail in the case studies in this report when seeking to implement the guidance.

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