



Barriers to bus use in Milton Keynes

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Foreword

Passenger Focus' role is to represent the interests of bus, coach and tram passengers – not just those currently using these services, but also 'potential' passengers, across England (outside London).

Since taking on our statutory responsibilities, we have researched the priorities and satisfaction levels of existing bus passengers. With this piece of work we are starting to turn our attention to people who never use buses, but might do, and previously regular users who no longer travel by bus. With the pressure on bus operators and local authorities to 'grow the market' likely to increase as taxpayer support is cut back, interest in what would motivate such groups to travel by bus is bound to intensify.

Milton Keynes, the self-styled 'city of the car' seemed like a tough nut to crack. If measures to encourage bus travel could be made to work here, it should be possible to make them work anywhere. Participants in the research (part-funded by Milton Keynes Council) were not simply asked about the barriers to bus travel; we invited them to challenge their perceptions – to plan journeys and travel by bus before providing their feedback.

Our research showed that although participants were prepared to 'try out' the bus for research purposes, few of them could see anything wrong with continuing to use their car or conceive of why they would need to catch the bus.

Many found it difficult to get started: identify the routes they needed, find the right stop and work out what time their bus left. Bus stops could be hard to spot, and many had no timetables or shelter from the elements. Poor lighting at bus stops also made participants feel less safe.

Many found actual bus journey times faster than expected and valued being able to get off in the city centre rather than having to look for (and pay for) a parking place further away, but the time getting between their home and the stop, and waiting for the bus, gave car travel a significant advantage. This was exacerbated by not being able to rely on buses turning up on time, which some felt made them unsuitable for going to work or other time-critical journeys. More frequent buses were needed in the evenings to give them an advantage over taxis after a night out.

Participants identified a range of barriers associated with the behaviour of other passengers – fear of crime, anti-social behaviour, poor hygiene and cleanliness – and the requirement to share a confined space with them. Concerns were also raised about bus drivers going too fast.

They expressed a number of anxieties about fares and tickets, such as the difficulty of buying tickets (knowing where to buy them from, knowing which ticket to buy, the need to have the right money) and the perceived high cost of bus travel for children and families.

Smart, clean buses got the thumbs-up, but were not enough on their own to overcome the negative perceptions created by the other barriers.

Our research findings correspond closely with the conclusions of previous studies in other parts of the country.

Unreliable buses and the cost of travelling by bus are mentioned in many other studies as important barriers to using the bus. Existing research also supports our findings around

people feeling less safe on buses at times, mainly due to the behaviour of other passengers. Unsurprisingly, a lot of the research also talks about how convenient it is to use a car to get around so people see no compelling reasons to use the bus more.

We are keen to work with operators, local authorities and Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) in other parts of the country to further explore what stops more people from travelling by bus and how they might be encouraged to leave their car behind.

Earlier research into barriers to bus use

Much research has already been done across the country looking into what stops people using buses or using them more often. How do the findings from earlier studies compare with what we found in Milton Keynes?

The people we spoke to in Milton Keynes have a strong preference to use their car to get around and can see no reason to switch to the bus. Other research has reached a similar conclusion. The Office of National Statistics¹ found that just under half of people surveyed in the UK who used the bus less than monthly or not at all, mentioned the **convenience of car travel** as the main reason for not using the bus more. Research collated by Gill Wales² for the London area suggests that some car users justify driving because they feel public transport is inferior. Unsurprisingly, cars are seen to be more convenient and driving is seen to be far quicker than making the equivalent journey by bus.

Not using the bus because it is **unreliable** is a common finding across our research and previous studies. Research by Centro³ found that non users viewed unreliable bus services as one of the most significant barriers. Journeys were felt to be much quicker by car or train. Similar findings came out of research by the Scottish Government⁴: there was a widely held perception that bus travel simply took too long and that you could not rely on a bus to turn up on time.

Many participants in our research mentioned that one of the reasons they did not use the bus was because of the **cost**, saying it was cheaper to travel by car particularly if a group of people were travelling together. The Scottish Government research also found that cost was a barrier; not everyone was clear about the precise cost of bus travel and opinions were usually based on past experience (which may have been some time ago) and hearsay from other people. When comparing the cost of car travel with bus, only petrol costs were taken into account, not the cost of buying, maintaining or insuring a car. These costs are sometimes seen as a given, and having incurred these costs already, some were unwilling to give up their car completely. Some mentioned the fixed costs of a car were so high that there was no incentive to pay extra to take a bus. However, the research does suggest that introducing cheap or free travel days could help change some peoples' minds about bus travel. Some progress has been made in Milton Keynes with the 'Greener Journeys' initiative, a pilot scheme currently running in a number of areas in the UK. This initiative highlights the environmental benefits of travelling by bus and aims to take one billion cars off the road in the UK over the next three years. It is also giving away free bus tickets so people can try out the bus and hopefully change any negative views they may have of travelling by bus.

Other passengers' behaviour is also mentioned in many other research reports as a barrier to bus use. The Centro research showed that safety was an important concern for people who no longer used buses. People were afraid to use buses at night and lapsed users said that they avoided the back of the bus and top deck due to anti-social behaviour from other passengers. People felt that if they were threatened on a bus, it was unlikely that anyone would come to their rescue. Safety and security is also a concern for younger passengers and our findings support this too. Research in London⁵ with younger age groups found that they are a lot more vulnerable and dependent on public transport than

¹ National Statistics Omnibus Survey, June 2007

² 'Encouraging Car Drivers to Use Public Transport in London – Summary of existing market research' Gill Wales, 2004

³ 'Bus user, lapsed bus user and non bus user - Public perceptions research' Centro, January 2008

⁴ 'Understanding why some people do not use buses' Scottish Centre for Social Research, 2010

⁵ 'Understanding the youth market' Transport for London, 2006

other age groups. Since the introduction of free travel for under 16s in London, bus drivers have noticed an increase in anti-social behaviour by this age group.

The London research found that people who mainly travel by car have a **limited knowledge** of buses; it is important to make them aware of the bus services available and their benefits. Our own research shows that views of bus travel in Milton Keynes are usually based on perceptions and were challenged when undertaking bus journeys before the focus groups.

A barrier which came up in our research but was not as significant is the poor **image of the bus**. This is covered in some detail by National Express⁶ research on affluent groups. Buses were felt to be the least aspirational form of transport for affluent people, and for some they are a last resort.

Some of the existing research also helps to explain the **relationship between different barriers** to bus use. Research by the Department for Transport⁷ indicates that thresholds exist for non bus users which need to be overcome before bus travel is considered as a viable option. Performance on 'hard factors' such as reliability and punctuality need to reach a certain threshold before performance against 'softer factors', such as driver qualities, security, cleanliness come into play. The research also shows that the soft factors which are the most likely to persuade non users to travel by bus are around personal security onboard the bus and at the bus stop. Similar concerns are highlighted in our research in Milton Keynes.

So how can barriers to bus use be overcome?

The Scottish Government research classifies infrequent and non users of buses into three categories:

- 'bus refusers' are very attached to their cars and would never consider travelling by bus, even if substantial improvements were made
- 'bus pessimists' are those, if pushed, say they would like to use the bus more, but do not have a strong desire to make this change
- there are however some people who are 'willing to be convinced'. This group of people would like to use the bus, giving positive reasons such as a dislike of car travel or the environmental benefits of bus travel, but they still feel there are considerable barriers preventing them from doing so. It is this 'willing to be convinced' group which are most likely to be bus passengers in the future and any positive messaging through marketing campaigns or other means, should be targeted at this group initially as they are the most receptive.

It suggests that the advantages, personal and environmental, for bus travel should be highlighted and the disadvantages – particularly journey time and reliability issues – challenged. It should be made **as easy as possible to use the bus** – to find out about routes and times, and to remove the need to have the exact fare – concerns which are highlighted in our research too.

The way customer **complaints** are dealt with is also considered key. This is particular important for people who no longer use the bus anymore because of a bad experience which may have put them off using buses in the future. This is an area Passenger Focus has been actively involved in. We researched bus complaints handling in England in 2009 and are

⁶ 'Bus travel in affluent areas' National Express, June 2008

⁷ 'Role of soft factors in patronage growth and modal split in the bus market in England' DfT, March 2010

currently working with operators, local authorities and passenger transport executives to review how they handle their complaints.

In keeping with our own research findings, the Scottish research indicated that another way to tackle the barriers is by looking at how different bus companies market their services. This could help to explore possible solutions to overcome the stereotyped views of buses and bus passengers.

Barriers to Bus Use in Milton Keynes

Qualitative Research

Report of Findings

Prepared for:

Passenger Focus
and
Milton Keynes Council

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Management Summary

Since becoming the statutory watchdog for bus passengers in England, outside London, Passenger Focus has concentrated its research on current bus users. With this research we are starting to explore the attitudes and experiences of non users, with our partners in Milton Keynes Council.

Research was conducted to provide an understanding of the barriers that exist to using buses in Milton Keynes, the relative importance of each and the relationships that exist between them and to identify potential improvements that would encourage non-users to consider travelling by bus in Milton Keynes.

6 group discussions (6-8 respondents per 90 minute session) and five depth interviews among residents with disabilities (60 minutes each) were conducted among non and lapsed bus users in Milton Keynes. The research was conducted in March 2010 and findings were presented in May 2010.

The key findings that Passenger Focus and Milton Keynes Council should note are:

1. Overall, the research indicates that it may be possible to counter entrenched pro-car mindsets among residents of Milton Keynes but there are unlikely to be any quick wins in this respect. Instead it would appear that some opportunities exist that could be exploited in future as identified in the conclusions below.
2. Most of the barriers identified were consistent across sample segments and locality and broadly consistent with previous research findings on this subject in other areas of the country. Specifically, lack of familiarity with bus services and a car driving habit was a key theme in this area in which car usage has previously been encouraged. Reservations about total journey times emerged in comparison with using cars, which was the default mode for the majority of respondents in this sample.
3. The car users represented in this research had a pro-car mindset rather than an anti-bus mindset. All respondents (except those with disabilities) agreed to make at least four bus journeys prior to attending the focus groups. Their subsequent comments indicated a range of disadvantages associated with bus usage rather than an antipathy towards it.

4. This exercise illustrated that some perceptual barriers can be challenged by experiences of using buses in Milton Keynes; some participants claimed that they would be likely to consider making certain journeys by bus in future. Many claimed to have quickly identified the bus numbers and routes likely to be most relevant to them and bus journey times were often faster than had been expected.
5. However, for the majority of respondents, there are considerable practical barriers that will need to be addressed before bus travel could be regarded as a viable alternative to most journeys currently being made by car. These relate primarily to the low visibility of bus stops and information relating to services as well as the frequent problems with reliability that were experienced.
6. Indeed, most are aware that the rationale to travel by car is stronger in Milton Keynes than most other towns or cities. It will therefore be necessary to address the barriers and challenge mindsets if they are to be persuaded to leave their car behind and take the bus. This will require a campaign of education and promotion of bus services.

Conclusions

This research indicates that the following suggestions should be adopted in order to begin to address the barriers to bus use that currently exist in Milton Keynes:

- **Focus effort and attention on making residents aware of the existence and promoting services and the benefits of bus travel.**
- **Address the most important barriers identified to allow bus travel to begin to be considered as a realistic alternative to current modes (especially car). Most important in this respect is the need to enhance visibility of bus stops and service information in the first instance and improving perceptions regarding poor reliability as a longer term objective.**
- **Prioritisation of bus services is unlikely to resolve current problems and may be resisted. Not being seen to support the perception of Milton Keynes as being ‘the city of the car’ may have the same long term effect, as there was some evidence from the research to suggest that as parking has become more difficult and expensive in the recent past, this may be interpreted as a tacit encouragement to consider alternative modes.**

1. Research Context & Objectives

Since February 2010, Passenger Focus has been the statutory watchdog for bus passengers in England, outside London. This role involves representing not only current bus passengers, but also 'potential' bus users.

Passenger Focus has already published national research into existing bus passengers' priorities for improvement¹, and a satisfaction survey of existing bus passengers in 14 areas of the country².

Before embarking on researching the opinions of non-users, Passenger Focus looked at the findings of other people's research into this group. Research is often conducted to explore the experiences of bus users but comparatively little is known about the views and attitudes of non-users towards travelling by bus. Work that has been carried out with this group indicates that they consistently rate the quality of their local bus services lower than regular users. There also appear to be a number of barriers that act as a deterrent to bus use.

Although these projects provide some insight into the barriers to bus use, further research was needed to understand the attitudes that underlie these barriers, and the seeming reluctance of many non-users to consider using their local bus services.

The city of Milton Keynes is very unusual in that it has been designed with the car in mind; its well planned road structure and ample parking facilities make it easier to get around by car. However, Milton Keynes is a growing city and its population is set to rise by over 50,000 by 2026. As more residents use cars to get around, this increased pressure on the road system cannot be sustained in the long term. The city is already beginning to suffer from increased pollution and congestion. Traffic forecasts predict a 57 per cent increase in morning peak time car journeys by 2013 which, if left unchecked, will only add to the problem. Milton Keynes Council feels that in order to address these issues and reduce the number of vehicles on the road, people should be encouraged to leave their cars at home for some journeys and use buses instead. Further research was also needed to understand how the particular characteristics of Milton Keynes influence and shape these attitudes and perceptions.

¹ Bus passenger priorities for improvement, March 2010

² Bus passenger survey, July 2010

Passenger Focus has compared the findings of these earlier studies with the findings of our research in Milton Keynes (see *Earlier research into barriers to bus use*, page iii).

The overall objectives of this research were:

1. To understand the way the bus service in Milton Keynes is perceived through the eyes of non-users
2. To identify strengths and weaknesses of the bus service in relation to preferred modes of transport being used instead
3. To identify the barriers that exist to bus use and to provide a detailed understanding of the relative importance of each and the relationships between them
4. To prioritise the barriers that exist in terms of perceived importance among non-users
5. Where possible, to understand how particular issues and characteristics of Milton Keynes influence and shape attitudes and perceptions
6. To identify what practical steps non-users expect Passenger Focus, Milton Keynes Council and other stakeholders to take in order to remove or minimise these barriers in order to encourage reconsideration of services
7. To understand the extent to which the needs of passengers are likely to be met by what can realistically be delivered by the parties concerned in this respect

2. Methodology & Sample

Qualitative research comprising focus groups was conducted to meet the research objectives. The sample was constructed to represent a broad cross-section of residents who are non or lapsed users of bus services in Milton Keynes (defined on the next page). The sample encompassed those living in central and rural areas of Milton Keynes as well as those living on new estates with good bus services and others living on new estates with poor bus provision.

Fieldwork was conducted in Milton Keynes in March 2010. Full details of the sample structure are outlined below:

Six group discussions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes with 6-8 respondents in each session:

- **Group 1.** Non-users of bus services in Milton Keynes living in Wolverton or Bletchley aged 20-40 and socio-economic group C2D
- **Group 2.** Non-users of bus services in Milton Keynes living on the Grange Farm or Oxley Park estates, aged 41-55 and socio-economic group BC1
- **Group 3.** Non-users of bus services in Milton Keynes living on the Kingsmead or Tattenhoe estates aged 15-16 and socio-economic group BC1
- **Group 4.** Non-users of bus services in Milton Keynes living in rural areas aged 41-55 and socio-economic group C2D
- **Group 5.** Lapsed users of bus services in Milton Keynes living in Wolverton or Bletchley or on the Grange Farm, Oxley Park, Kingsmead or Tattenhoe estates aged 25-50 and socio-economic group BC1C2
- **Group 6.** Lapsed users of bus services in Milton Keynes living in rural areas aged 20-40 and socio-economic group BC1

Five depth interviews (60 minutes each) among the following respondent types:

Depth 1: Respondent with impaired vision

Depth 2: Respondent with impaired hearing

Depth 3: Respondent with mobility impairment

Depth 4: Wheelchair user

Depth 5: Respondent with learning difficulties

Additional recruitment criteria:

- A mix of both sexes in each group
- A representation of lifestages as appropriate to each of the passenger categories, e.g. mothers with (pre) school age children, students, retired/grandparents etc.
- Non-users lived within walking distance of a bus route and never travel by bus
- Lapsed users were frequent bus users 12 months ago (three times a week or more) but now take the bus less regularly or not at all

Standard industry exclusions were applied to ensure that the research did not include any respondents who work in market research, marketing, advertising, journalism or anyone who works within the bus industry or public transport.

All respondents (except those with disabilities) agreed to make at least four bus journeys before attending the focus group. All completed a self-completion 'Travel Diary' to record views of each journey as part of this process.

3. Main Findings

3.1 Modal Preferences – Strengths and Weaknesses

3.1.1 Car



This tended to be the default mode for most respondents who were aware that Milton Keynes had been designed with car users in mind. This meant that travel by car was considered to be even faster and easier than alternative modes than would be the case elsewhere and helped to remove the need to think or plan ahead. As usual in research of this nature, the key benefits of travelling in one's own space and being in control were frequently mentioned.

“Milton Keynes was built on a grid system with car users in mind so it's easy and quick to get around and there's not as much traffic as in other places”

[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

However, there was also some acknowledgement of disadvantages associated with car travel. The ongoing costs were becoming a problem for some in the current economic climate, which in conjunction with environmental concerns was making driving increasingly difficult to justify. Some claimed that traffic was an increasing problem for certain journeys and that parking close to the shopping centre is not as easy as it used to be and has recently become more expensive.

"It can sometimes be difficult to park close to the shopping centre and they have recently put the cost up"
[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

3.1.2 Cycling (and Walking)

Respondents who regularly walked or cycled in preference to travelling by car were a small minority within this sample, although there was some recognition of this being aspirational.

Those who did cited health and environmental benefits as important motivators without the problems of parking or journey specific costs associated with car travel. The Redways in Milton Keynes have the effect of making direct journeys faster than using roads to the extent that some felt that this could be an advantage over bus travel.

"Cycling is cheaper than driving and you don't have to worry about parking. Nothing is further away than about 20 minutes so it's quick as well"

[Non User Wolverton / Bletchley]

"The Redways provide a direct route to anywhere so there is no excuse not to cycle in Milton Keynes"

[Lapsed User, Central]

However, for most the practical barriers were felt to outweigh what were seen as weak or marginal benefits. Most felt that poor weather and the inability to carry large or heavy items precluded consideration for most journeys. The need to shower and / or take a change of clothes made cycling impractical for work-related travel. Other barriers mentioned were the initial financial outlay and concerns about secure parking facilities, in addition to a general feeling of inertia and inconvenience.

"The weather in England isn't good enough to be able to rely on cycling everywhere. Look at the winter we have just had"

[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]

3.2 Bus Barriers - Spontaneous

3.2.1 Overview

The barriers to using buses in Milton Keynes identified from this research can be grouped into five broad categories. These can be summarised as follows:

Journey Time & Service Availability

Journey time covers the time taken from the start point to the end point, not just the bus journey element in isolation.

Familiarity

This is a major issue for non-users of bus services

Bus Related

These often transpired to be generic public transport issues in reality, rather than specific to buses or Milton Keynes

Bus Stops

Also included access to bus stops and non-existent bus stops in some locations

Financial

Tended to be expressed in absolute terms rather than relative to alternatives (as is often the case when considering fares as a per journey cost)

Each of these barriers comprises a number of constituent elements that are described in detail in the following sections. Within each category, the barriers identified can be assumed to apply across the sample except on occasions where an especially strong link with a particular segment has been indicated.

3.2.2 Journey Time & Service Availability

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the length of the total journey time was the dominant theme across the sample among this most important group of barriers.

Summary of Associated Barriers

- Total bus journey time: The amount of total journey time spent on the bus. This will depend on the total number of stops made and whether the bus travels through or round estates.
- Indirect services: All services go to or from the city centre rather than from one estate to another. Although beneficial in terms of journey times into Milton Keynes, this was a disadvantage for those wanting to make journeys between estates.
- Not a door-to-door service for most: Obvious disadvantage compared to driving
- Constrained by timetables: Therefore inflexible and unable to travel at times to suit
- Infrequent services: More of a problem in some areas than others but an important perceptual barrier nonetheless
- Unreliable: Due to the combined effect of not having the flexibility to be spontaneous with travel plans and the low perceived frequency of services
- Impractical: Especially for certain journeys (such as commuting due to lack of reliability)
- No late or night services: Therefore not an option after a night out without the car. In conjunction with other recommendations identified through this research, this could be regarded as an area of future opportunity to stimulate bus usage
- No bus lanes: Not wanted by car users but a theoretical barrier to bus usage

*“It’s difficult to get a bus after 8pm and I think they only run until about 10.30 so it’s no good after a night out”
[Non User, Kingsmead / Tattenhoe]*

3.2.3 Familiarity

Numerous barriers were identified in this category, especially among non rather than lapsed users. It is likely that the established pro-car mindset that is common among residents of Milton Keynes will be the most difficult to address.

Summary of Associated Barriers

- Lack of habit: Extremely difficult to overcome since buses often expected to be a difficult habit to acquire when an acceptable alternative already exists
- Lack of consideration: Buses often not top of mind enough to register as an option, especially for non-users (rather than lapsed)
- Unsure of routes: Unsurprising among non-users who have no reason to investigate
- Unable to plan journey: Perceived to be more difficult than the closest natural comparison i.e. making a journey by train
- Buses don't go where I want / cover all estates: Widespread assumption rather than based on knowledge or experience
- Unspontaneous: Due to the need to be constrained by timetables and therefore regarded as inherently inflexible
- No advertising or promotion: Bus services in Milton Keynes were felt to have low visibility and prominence
- Why use buses? This was a common question among respondents throughout the research since none were able to identify any obvious reason or benefit to do so
- Hassle / too difficult: Related to the previous point as inertia prevents the majority from wanting to find out about bus services
- Dislike of buses: Although all were recruited as non-rejectors of travelling by bus, some assumed that they would not enjoy the experience if they tried it
- Not as easy as London: The bus network was felt to be easier to use by respondents who had lived in London or were regular visitors, although the unfairness of this comparison was readily acknowledged
- Not part of an integrated system: Not a major barrier but Milton Keynes occasionally unfairly compared to London where buses were felt to be a more natural choice due to the way they linked with other modes
- Not obvious or easy to get to know how to use: Although some admitted to not having given buses a fair chance to disprove this perception
- Poor image / unprofessional: Some felt that buses and bus users have an inferior status compared to travelling by car (or train). Consequently, one or two claimed it would be unacceptable to be late for work or a business appointment due to problems with a bus journey

- Milton Keynes is easy / designed for car users: Theoretically, this should be a benefit for buses using the same grid infrastructure but this was not identified by respondents in this research
- Different bus operators and types of bus: Minor concerns relating to uncertainty over consistency of service delivery offered as an excuse rather than a genuine barrier

*“I’ve never used buses in Milton Keynes so I wouldn’t know where to start. It’s not something I have ever thought about before”
[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]*

*“It’s not as easy as jumping into your car and it would take ages because I live a long way out and the bus would go through all the estates and stop everywhere”
[Non User, Rural]*

*“It’s just not something I would think about because none of my friends use buses. You never see anything to encourage you to think about it. They should promote it more in schools”
[Non User, Kingsmead / Tattenhoe]*

*“It’s not the same as in London where there are loads of buses that all link together and are easy to use. In Milton Keynes it’s easier to travel by car than in London”
[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]*

*“There’s definitely a stigma associated with bus travel. I don’t think my boss would be very impressed if I was late for work because my bus hadn’t turned up”
[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]*

*“It’s just too inconvenient to consider for most of the journeys I make. I’m too busy to be bothered with all the planning that would be needed”
[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]*

3.2.4 Bus Related Barriers

As for the previous category, there was evidence from the research to suggest that the most important of these barriers may be things that will not be easy to change or influence.

Summary of Associated Barriers

- Personal security: Unsurprising for this to be identified as a barrier to use public transport but compounded on this occasion by the fact that respondents were often aware of buses running almost empty which was felt to heighten the risk
- Anti-social behaviour (especially associated with youths playing loud music or swearing): Even those who were not concerned about personal security often claimed to be put off using buses for fear of experiencing this either directly or the consequences of it (e.g. rubbish, graffiti etc)
- Other passengers: Not really connected to the previous two points, but simply due to the fact that some who preferred to drive expressed a reluctance to share their personal space with other passengers, regardless of their behaviour or the perceived level of threat
- Worrying about strangers: In the teenage group, some of the respondents mentioned that they were aware that this was a concern to the extent that their parents would rather take them everywhere by car than allow them to take a bus
- Overcrowding: The opposite of the empty bus problem was that some anticipated that buses would be too busy to travel in comfort or adequate privacy
- Space available: Even in situations where overcrowding was not a concern, those who would have a need to travel with buggies or shopping expected that there may not be sufficient space available
- Poor hygiene / cleanliness: No more than the generic public transport concern about having to share space with other users
- Uncomfortable: Associated with concerns about overcrowding but was also raised in relation to expectations about the quality of bus seats
- CCTV / Privacy: A minority concern expressed by a small number of respondents who objected to this but accepted the principle for security reasons
- Driver attitude and conduct: Often based on poor past experiences of lapsed users rather than perceptions among non-users. Also likely to be isolated examples rather than ongoing problems
- Foreign / unhelpful drivers: Some were aware of drivers being unable to help with questions from passengers relating to route information or services if English was not their first language
- Dangerous driving: Residents of Grange Farm and Oxley Park especially voiced concern about the speed at which they see buses

being driven through their estates which gave rise to genuine safety concerns

- Nothing to hold on to: Related to the previous point but also a more general concern among those who thought they may not always be guaranteed to get a seat

“I wouldn’t feel safe if I was waiting at a bus stop on my own at night and I think my parents are concerned about random people who might be on the bus”

[Non User, Kingsmead / Tattenhoe]

“I prefer to have my own space and I’m concerned about hygiene when you hear about things like Swine Flu”

[Non User, Rural]

“Last time I used a bus I didn’t feel safe. The driver pulled away before I had sat down then drove dangerously fast through my estate. It was really bumpy and there was nothing to hold on to”

[Lapsed User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

“I always think they are going too fast for a residential area and there are no seat belts on buses”

[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

3.2.5 Bus Stops / Access

These tended to be infrequently raised barriers that were of low overall importance for most, some of which may also be things that may be relatively easy to address.

Summary of Associated Barriers

The first four of these barriers were more likely to be mentioned by residents living in Kingsmead, Tattenhoe, Grange Farm, Oxley Park or rural areas.

- No bus stops in local area: Some claimed that they wouldn’t know where to wait for a bus if they wanted to use one
- Invisible bus stops: Others who were aware of where buses stopped claimed that this was not always necessarily indicated by a clearly visible sign or otherwise just a pole that was not obviously recognisable as a bus stop

- Hail & Ride unknown: Potentially a major barrier to bus use among those who are unfamiliar with how this works and haven't noticed bus stops in their local area
- No timetables / information: Often linked to the lack of visible bus stops since this is where most would expect this information to be available
- Personal security: More likely to be mentioned in a theoretical sense as a concern if using buses late at night or in unfamiliar areas
- Lack of lighting: Connected to points one to five above and naturally associated with the lack of bus stops in the Milton Keynes area
- Poor weather: Obviously a disincentive if needing to wait for a bus in a location where no shelter is provided
- Buses don't stop when hailed: Some lapsed users claimed to have experienced this happening in the past and non-users unfamiliar with Hail & Ride were concerned that this would be a possibility
- Buses departing early: Some lapsed users claimed this to be even more frustrating than buses arriving late

"I didn't know what to do because there are no bus stops in Grange Park! I wanted to look at a timetable so didn't know how to find out when the buses run"

[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

"Apparently you are supposed to hail buses in our area because there are no bus stops but how are you supposed to know that?"

[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

"I used to catch a bus from outside the prison and sometimes the bus would just drive past, even when there were people waiting"

[Lapsed User, Central]

"I'd rather get a lift from my mum than walk to the bus stop and hang around in the cold or get wet when it's raining with no shelter"

[Non User, Kingsmead / Tattenhoe]

3.2.6 Financial

Non-users assume that bus travel should be cheap so this tended not to be raised as a spontaneous barrier among them. Lapsed users were able to talk from experiences

Summary of Associated Barriers

- Cost of group travel: Public transport is often assumed to be more expensive than using a car for families or groups travelling together
- High cost vs. London: Some were aware that the unit price of a bus journey in London could be lower than in Milton Keynes when made on a Travelcard or Oyster Card
- No half fares before 9am: Occasional comments from some teenagers and one or two parents who thought they had experienced this when travelling with children
- Unexpected associated costs: Specifically raised in relation to occasions when respondents had expected to get a bus home after a night out but had needed to pay for a taxi due to an unreliable or infrequent bus service
- No Oyster / discount: Related to point two above among those who were unaware of whether All Day or period passes were available and felt that an Oyster style product would be less relevant to Milton Keynes
- Variable fares: Some lapsed users claimed that the fare structure seemed to be inconsistent or had been charged different amounts for the same journey
- Ticket purchasing issues: Due to the low familiarity of using buses, some were uncertain about where or how to obtain tickets to travel on buses
- Need correct change: A perceptual barrier among some who assumed that change may not be available, either from ticket machines or drivers
- Need to ask parents for bus fare: A disincentive for some of the teenagers who felt uncomfortable about asking for this in addition to spending money for a day out (especially since the more convenient alternative of getting a lift was often perceived as being a 'free' journey)

"It would be more expensive for all of us to go out for the day by bus, especially if you want to travel early in the morning"

[Lapsed User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

"There are no concessions for children in Milton Keynes. You get a free Oyster card if you live in London"

[Lapsed User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

“It would be cheaper for my parents to take and collect me than to give me money for the day and the bus fare on top”

[Non User, Kingsmead / Tattenhoe]

“I once had an experience when the ticket machine was broken and the driver wouldn’t let me on because I didn’t have the exact change for the fare”

[Lapsed User, Rural]

3.3 Immersion Exercise

All respondents (except those with disabilities) agreed to make at least four bus journeys before attending the focus group (this research technique is known as an 'immersion exercise'). All completed a self-completion 'Travel Diary' to record views of each journey as part of this process. The output of this exercise was then used to compare actual experiences with recall (of lapsed users) and expectations (among non-users) and to help identify further triggers and barriers to bus usage in Milton Keynes.

3.3.1 Ingoing Expectations

It became apparent from discussions with respondents that a key problem is that many are unable to envisage any reason or potential benefit that they would derive from switching to bus travel from their current preferred mode.

As a consequence of the range of positive factors associated with car usage in Milton Keynes, as previously identified, it was understandably difficult to encourage respondents to think beyond the comfort and familiarity of this default mode. Due to the fact that these benefits were felt to hugely outweigh any disadvantages, for the vast majority there is an absence of factors pushing them away from car usage towards buses as an alternative.

In Milton Keynes, this is compounded by the fact that residents are unaware of any reason why they should be drawn towards buses in favour of their cars. Indeed, the lack of familiarity or reasons to consider bus usage created considerable inertia across the sample and low enthusiasm to switch to a mode that was expected to be so much slower than the car. There was frequent evidence from the research to suggest therefore that many had approached the immersion exercise with a negative mindset rather than an open mind.

3.3.2 Experiences

The immersion exercise was approached with generally lower levels of enthusiasm than when we recently conducted a similar project among non-users of trains. Respondents reported that the exercise lacked any sense of excitement (except for a few who had involved young children) and most had regarded it as a hassle rather than an adventure. Many had adopted a half-hearted approach rather than

being fully committed and some admitted that they had looked forward to completing what they regarded as a chore. There was minimal evidence of respondents wanting to use the exercise as an opportunity to challenge negative pre-conceptions surrounding bus travel.

*“I felt as though I couldn’t be bothered to think about it, especially because it meant having to get up earlier than usual”
[Lapsed User, Central]*

In reality however, experiences were often not as bad as most had expected at the outset, although there was also not much evidence of respondents being pleasantly surprised either. In many cases the immersion exercise confirmed barriers that existed at a spontaneous level and in some cases reinforced them.

Our impression from the research therefore is that it may prove to be difficult to create interest in bus travel even for those who are most receptive to the idea of it in theory. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that it would be more difficult to convert current non-users who experience the service in its current format. The following sections provide an overview of experiences from the immersion exercise and the way in which this related to pre-conceptions and future likelihood to consider bus travel.

3.3.3 Journey Planning

Due to the length of journey and low level of financial risk involved, these respondents were less likely to have made efforts to plan journeys than we have observed when conducting this exercise among non-users of trains. In fact, many claimed to be unsure how to do so and this fact is unlikely to have had a positive impact on experiences overall.

Indeed, none of the information sources used were felt to meet all the information needs of passengers which had the overall effect of turning journey planning from a perceptual barrier into an actual one. Even if this part of the process works well, it is likely to be regarded as successful only if buses then run according to timetables.

*“It took ages to plan because I didn’t know where to look to get a proper timetable so I gave up in the end”
[Non User, Rural]*

Those who did some planning in advance inclined towards three main sources:

Bus Stop

This tended to be the automatic channel for most although as explained above, this was not always possible in areas without bus stops that are clearly visible. Furthermore, some who knew where their local bus stop was were disappointed to discover that timetables or service information were not always available.

*“My first thought was to go to a bus stop but I discovered there aren’t any in Tattenhoe so I wasn’t able to get the information I needed”
[Non User, kingsmead / Tattenhoe]*

Online

Those who used the Internet mostly seemed to have Googled Milton Keynes bus timetable (or something similar) in the hope of locating relevant information about local services. However, having done so, it was not always immediately obvious where to start or what to do next from the options available.

*“My search took me to links for MK Metro and Arriva but both were rubbish and neither provided me with anything useful”
[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]*

The main difficulties that were reported with this channel were that respondents usually didn’t have sufficient knowledge about their route or stop name to be able to narrow their search. Most, however, claimed that they were able to locate and print relevant timetables if this was what their objective of going online had been.

*“It was easy enough to find a timetable online which is what I was looking for but then I realised that it was out of date so I went to the library in the end”
[Lapsed User, Central]*

Phone

This was used by one respondent who had been unable to locate the information required online. This person called Milton Keynes Council and was given appropriate information about bus routes and times.

Unfortunately however, some of the details proved to be inaccurate when the resident attempted to make the journey intended.

3.3.4 Bus Stops

Attitudes were polarised according to the exact nature of the bus stops used. In reality, it will be impractical to meet all needs across all (geographic) areas or to provide the quality of information required in all situations.



Perceptual barriers identified in relation to bus stops were often confirmed when respondents were unable to locate a bus stop when attempting to make a journey as part of the immersion exercise. Even those who had not identified this as a spontaneous barrier were often surprised that bus stops were not more clearly visible. In these situations, expectations regarding lack of shelter or information tended to be confirmed meaning that passengers had no idea of when to expect the next bus. More importantly, some were extremely critical of what they considered to be unpleasant waiting environments in which they claimed to have felt vulnerable and exposed, especially in poor weather and in the dark (respondents made these journeys in February 2010).

“There’s not even a post to indicate where the bus stop is supposed to be & when someone showed me I stood there like a lemon on the pavement next to a field with cars going past. I wouldn’t want to do that in the dark”

[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]



Attitudes towards shelters however were generally much more positive. These were regarded as being more hospitable and helpful to passengers in several respects: Not only did they offer protection from the weather and timetables, but those with real-time service information and seating were especially welcomed. Responses were not always positive however since these benefits were felt to be negated when shelters had not been maintained and signs of vandalism were felt to be an especially off-putting problem.

“In Milton Keynes they have proper shelters with seats and timetables and information about any delays”
[Lapsed User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

“The Wolverton bus terminal is dire. It’s a three sided Perspex thing with six seats and there are six buses that terminate there!”
[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]

3.3.5 On The Bus

Experiences were often not as bad as many had anticipated but safety concerns represent a genuine barrier to future consideration.

Positive experiences were often based on the fact that buses proved not to be as busy or noisy as most had expected and the journeys made were almost always made on nearly empty buses so were not uncomfortable or cramped. Most reported that the buses were almost always newer and nicer inside than envisaged and the visible presence of CCTV helped to allay safety concerns. Drivers were felt to have

been friendly and helpful and no negative experiences were reported over the course of the immersion exercise.

“There was always lots of room so I got a seat every time. The seats were cleaner and more comfortable than I expected so I was pleasantly surprised”

[Non User, Rural]

On a more negative note however, some expressed concern that buses had been driven erratically or ‘dangerously’ and the lack of seat belts created a fear of falling out of seats. This was a particular concern for those who had travelled with children who had been unrestrained.

“I definitely didn’t feel safe on one of the journeys because it felt like the driver was on a mission. Maybe he was running late but he was driving much too fast through the estate”

[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

A few thought that the journey experience had been disappointing in terms of the comfort of the seats and lack of personal space but a more common problem was that some buses felt dirty and not properly cleaned which was a particular problem in instances where gum or graffiti had been experienced.

“I didn’t like other passengers coughing and spluttering over me, using mobile phones and putting their feet on the seats. The floor was muddy and the seats had chewing gum and graffiti over them

[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]

More minor concerns were the variability of fares charged for the same journey and not knowing which stop to get off at (or ask the driver for).

3.3.6 Arrival at End Point

Importantly, positives identified in this respect across the sample indicate the potential to encourage switching for certain journeys in future.

Among the key strengths of using the bus rather than a car was the overall stress reduction experienced by some, especially since this removed the need to worry about where to park and arriving closer to central Milton Keynes than is possible by car. Some also enjoyed the novelty of travelling by a different mode, especially when children were involved since this was felt to be a more relaxing experience, especially for leisure journeys. Respondents often enjoyed the freedom of being able to read or make phone calls or send texts that would not be possible when driving. A small minority also appreciated the opportunity provided by the bus to have more interaction with their children to simply to feel more in touch with the outside world than usual.

“It was less stressful than driving so I felt more relaxed than usual at the end of the journey. The kids enjoyed the novelty of it too so overall it was a good experience”

[Non User, Rural]

Others, however, reported the opposite of what they would usually experience when travelling by car. One respondent complained of having to go to work in wet clothes after getting caught in a shower at a bus stop without a shelter. However most were more concerned about the prospect of having to travel home by bus when feeling hassled and tired at the end of a long day. None claimed to relish the prospect of waiting for a bus after work and one or two claimed to have felt sick as a result of a bumpy journey and were pleased when the journey came to an end.

“The first time I was hot and flustered because I was late for work which made me realise I couldn’t trust buses for this journey. I was also soaking wet because it was raining so it wasn’t a very happy day”

[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]

3.3.7 Bus Journey Time

The immersion exercise demonstrated that the bus journey time (as opposed to overall journey time from door to door) was often not a problem and may indeed offer advantages over the car and other modes.



This was due to the fact that bus journey times were often shorter than expected, occasionally to the extent that the bus was felt to be driven too fast for comfort in some instances. Many were pleasantly surprised about the small number of stops made on certain routes, especially when buses went round rather than through estates.

“It was much quicker than I thought it would be but I live quite near the end of the route and the ride was a bit scary, especially at the roundabouts”

[Lapsed User, Central]

“The bus journey was faster than I expected, the problem is waiting for the bus in the first place due to the frequency of them”

[Non User, Kingsmead / Tattenhoe]

The fact that all routes go through the central hub of Milton Keynes was regarded as a major advantage of taking the bus to the shopping centre or train station rather than the car. In addition to the direct access provided, bus travel also removed the stress of finding a parking space and the associated costs.

“It’s perfect for a trip to the shopping centre because you don’t have to worry about paying for parking or finding a space”

[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]



3.3.8 Total Journey Time

The perceived lack of reliability of timetables was widely regarded as a major disadvantage of bus travel compared to trains as the most natural point of comparison. Indeed, some who had experienced long waits at bus stops complained that the timetable had proved to be irrelevant to the extent that it was impossible to know whether buses were arriving early or late.



*“I think they should address the randomness of the timings. The timetables should be more realistic and truthful and buses shouldn’t be allowed to leave early”
[Lapsed User, Rural]*

This meant that residents claimed it would be difficult for them to be able to plan journey times since experiences had demonstrated that buses don’t run every 10 minutes (as claimed in advertising on buses that some had noticed while participating in the research exercise). The overall impact of these experiences therefore was often to confirm spontaneous expectations of buses being too unreliable to consider for certain journeys.

*“I would certainly be prepared to consider taking the bus at the weekends for leisure journeys when time isn’t an issue but I couldn’t rely on buses for my commute”
[Non User, Rural]*

*“The main problem for me is that you can’t be spontaneous because of the need to plan every journey which is a nightmare”
[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]*

3.3.9 Milton Keynes Specifics

A number of potential barriers specific to the area were put forward for research by Milton Keynes Council. There was no strong evidence to suggest that any of these represented additional barriers to usage and responses to each can be summarised as follows:

Stop Location

Bus stops on fast roads were not felt to be a problem since most assumed these were located in lay-bys rather than at the roadside and were more likely to be proper shelters rather than exposed.

The underpasses needed to access these stops were felt to be more of a problem from a security perspective, as were the gridlocks caused by bus stops located on busy roads in certain estates.

*“It’s not the bus stops that are a problem but I wouldn’t want my daughter to be walking through underpasses on her own at night to get to them”
[Lapsed, Central]*

Bus Prioritisation

One or two thought they could recall hearing something about an initiative to prioritise buses, which was assumed to apply in central areas only. Most therefore expected nothing to materialise, which meant that this was not cited as a reason for not using buses in Milton Keynes.

“I think I remember hearing something about this but I don’t expect anything to come of it. It’s not something that would stop me from using buses”

[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

Outsider Expectations

Although some who had lived in London or other areas claimed that local services compared unfavourably to what they had experienced before, this was raised as a disincentive rather than a barrier to use buses in Milton Keynes.

However, a more important issue often identified in this context was the fact that some felt there was less promotional activity for buses in Milton Keynes than they had noticed in other areas. This created a feeling that there was no reason or incentive to consider using buses as an alternative to regular modes.

“When I lived in London I used buses all the time because there were more of them, they were more frequent and I used night buses instead of taxis”

[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]

City of the Car

Although many were aware that Milton Keynes has this status, behaviour was influenced by practical issues rather than image benefits so this was not a strong influence on mindsets or predispositions to use cars. Indeed, some drivers mentioned that increasing parking costs and other difficulties had created recent disincentives to travel by car in Milton Keynes.

“The fact that Milton Keynes is the city of the car is irrelevant, it’s just that going by car is so much easier even though the parking situation is awful and getting worse”

[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]

3.4 Addressing Barriers

The following section is intended to provide some suggestions about what could potentially be done to help address some of the barriers identified by the research. Some of these were spontaneously generated by respondents in the focus groups and others were suggested in advance by Milton Keynes Council or Passenger Focus.

3.4.1 Service Improvements

Priorities in this respect focus on how to address the issue of Total Journey Time as the dominant barrier to emerge from the research.

Service Frequency

The general view was that if service delivery could match the 'every 10 minutes' claim that some had seen advertised there could be no cause for complaint in this respect. However, passengers would need to have confidence in this in order to address concerns about total journey times.

Some also claimed that if service frequency was better after 8pm or if night buses were available, that they would consider using them instead of taxis and could become the default option when drinking, on the basis of positive experiences elsewhere.

"If there were night buses or even if they ran later than they do now I would think about using the bus to get home after a night out with friends"

[Lapsed User, Central]

Service Reliability

This was often regarded as a more important issue to address than service frequency in order to overcome current credibility problems that exist. Some claimed that reliability concerns currently precluded consideration of buses for certain time-critical journeys, such as travelling to work or to get to an appointment. There was some feeling that this should be relatively easy to address in a city designed with road users in mind, given that the advantages intended for cars in this respect should also be applicable to buses.

*“You want to know what time the bus is going to turn up and for them not to just get dropped which seems to be a common problem now”
[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]*

Journey Time

As previously discussed, this was not a barrier to use (based on experience) although the opportunity to improve was also recognised. Interestingly, this was not always expressed in terms of needing to make journey times shorter since there was some recognition that to meet all needs, stopping and express services may be required on some routes in addition to routes that go through estates as well as bypass them.

*“Maybe they need to rethink the routes if not enough people are using them because the thought of getting on buses that are always empty is intimidating”
[Non User, Grange Farm / Oxley Park]*

City of the Bus

Although not a strong theme to emerge from the research, there may be an argument that this positioning could be considered to be a logical extension to the city of the car. Indicating that buses are able to take advantage of benefits originally targeted at car drivers may have some resonance, especially since this is less likely to be resisted than prioritising bus services.

In order to achieve this mindset shift it will be necessary to establish and promote bus initiatives to encourage residents to challenge the way that they currently (do not) think about bus services in Milton Keynes. The Park and Ride scheme was intended to do this but the lack of interest in it among residents suggests that something with more popular local appeal will be required since this initiative was assumed to have been targeted mainly at non-residents.

3.4.2 Other Issues

These factors emerged as secondary to service improvements but a successful communications programme in conjunction with other initiatives could help to raise awareness and encourage consideration of buses in Milton Keynes in future.

Communications

This was often identified as an obvious gap at present, especially in direct comparison to other areas in which buses were acknowledged to have a higher profile, especially London.

In this respect, the current situation would be easy to improve on, even though the nature of the task in Milton Keynes is a difficult one since it will need to achieve a mindset shift rather than focus simply on increasing awareness of bus services. This should therefore be regarded as a long-term objective rather than a quick win although there may be an opportunity to stimulate bus trial and usage in the immediate term through a programme of promotional activity.

Bus Prioritisation

Naturally it will be difficult to find a successful positioning for an initiative that appears not to be in the interest of car users. This will be a secondary rather than a primary measure until bus usage becomes more established and a more receptive environment has been created among residents.

The natural expectation was that activity in this respect would focus on creating dedicated bus lanes or express routes although there may also be advantages to be gained by exploiting more subtle reasons to promote bus travel over cars, such as environmental benefits.

"I would be very opposed to the idea of bus lanes. I can't see how that would solve any problems and it wouldn't make sense in Milton Keynes because the bus journey time isn't an issue"

[Lapsed User, Rural]

There was some evidence to suggest that it may be worth approaching this initiative from the indirect angle of car penalties since an increase of car parking costs has a similar effect to bus prioritisation but is less likely to be resented if not presented as such.

New Buses



There were positive responses to the Trent Barton bus example shown to respondents in the focus groups (above). Respondents regarded this as a definite improvement on the buses they had travelled on during the immersion exercise and reactions to the practical 'wipe clean' surfaces were especially positive.

However, this unsurprising reaction was not strong enough to indicate that this alone would be sufficient incentive to encourage residents to switch from current modes. While a fleet of new buses would therefore be welcomed, this would be unlikely to have a significant impact on attitudes or usage volumes.

"That's a definite improvement. The surfaces can be wiped clean which is a good idea. It's a better image and all very nice but it won't make the journey time any faster"
[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]

Fares

Although fares for journeys made were often higher than expected, the cost in absolute terms was not identified as a barrier to bus travel. Instead, the main issue for non-users was the relative cost they were

asked to pay for the service provided as an alternative to their preferred mode. The emphasis therefore needs to be placed on improving the service rather than reducing the cost of it in order to encourage reconsideration.

“They should advertise the fact that it’s cheap to get into Milton Keynes on the bus, especially compared to the cost of parking all day”
[Lapsed User, Central]

Although there was high claimed interest in an Oyster-style product, this was based more on the principle and advantages of the product in London rather than an expectation that the benefits would be replicated for bus users in Milton Keynes. In reality, residents are more likely to be interested in discounted travel rather than a universal smartcard.

3.4.3 Potential Incentives

There was no evidence from the research to suggest that any of these specific measures suggested by Milton Keynes Council or Passenger Focus would be likely to have a significant impact on propensities of current non-users to consider or use buses in Milton Keynes.

Park & Ride

Some were aware of the availability of a Park & Ride scheme in Milton Keynes, which tended to be associated exclusively with the Christmas shopping period, although none had experience of using it.

The general consensus was that the scheme had not been successful and was assumed to be aimed at those who lived outside the local area rather than at themselves as residents. Indeed, there was some feeling that the reduction in cars coming in from outside Milton Keynes represented an incentive for these respondents to drive into the centre themselves.

*“They have tried to introduce a Park & Ride scheme here before but I don’t think it was successful but driving isn’t usually a problem in Milton Keynes so I think it was meant more for outsiders rather than residents”
[Non User, Wolverton / Bletchley]*

Although there was some recognition that an extension to the scheme could alleviate or help prevent future parking problems, there were indications to suggest that this would be resented rather than welcomed.

Individual Travel Plans

There was high awareness of the National Rail Journey Planner, which was considered to be helpful and easy to use. Some had found the similar online service for buses in Milton Keynes, although this had not been put to the test in this research since most had made short or simple journeys as the immersion exercise.

There was some feeling that a phone facility may be helpful for this purpose, especially among non-users with lowest levels of familiarity with services. This was requested especially among those who had found existing information sources to be inadequate.

Modal Integration

This was effectively regarded as a non-issue across the sample since most felt that buses were already well integrated with the train station (although none knew about specific services).

Overall therefore, the general view was that modal integration is not really a relevant issue for Milton Keynes and may be difficult to improve on.

Concessionary Scheme

There was minimal awareness of the concessionary scheme for young people and no details were provided for research, but all were receptive to the idea in theory.

The teenagers especially (and those who were parents of school-age children), were surprised not to have heard of a concessionary scheme for bus users of this age group in Milton Keynes. This was based on widespread awareness of initiatives that exist in other parts of the

country to encourage young people without independent transport to start using buses at an early age. Indeed, there was a feeling expressed in the teenage group that this was regarded as a missed opportunity since some claimed they would be more likely to acquire the habit of using buses while there was a financial incentive for them to do so, before they were put off by full adult fares or old enough to start driving.

“I’m not aware of any discounts for students but if there are any, why don’t they let us know about it?”

[Non User, Kingsmead / Tattenhoe]

“There’s nothing like Oyster in Milton Keynes. In London you get free travel on public transport if you are at school so why can’t they do that here?”

[Non User, Kingsmead / Tattenhoe]

3.5 Passengers with Disabilities

Unsurprisingly, bus usage can be regarded as problematic for passengers with disabilities who anticipated genuine usage barriers.

As we have observed in previous similar projects, a different set of needs and concerns were highlighted among the disabled passenger groups represented in this research. However, those with milder impairments were likely to identify similar barriers to bus usage as those without disabilities.

Naturally the extent of the barriers anticipated were heightened by the nature of each respondent's impairment or disability so unlit bus stops were a concern for those with vision impairments and the anticipated lack of access or dedicated space was a barrier for wheelchair users.

It is worth noting that we interviewed five respondents, each with a different type of disability, so the following findings should be regarded as indicative rather than conclusive:

Vision Impaired

Woman with age-related long-sightedness problem, which had forced her to stop driving recently

This respondent reported that when using buses in the past, she had experienced a heightened feeling of vulnerability when waiting at bus stops due to her vision impairment, especially at night. She claimed to feel isolated and uncomfortable due to the fact that she was unable to see who was approaching the bus stop and whether they were likely to represent a threat to her safety. She felt this to be more of an issue in the city centre than at her local bus stop (since she was more likely to be making an outward journey in daylight).

"I have problems seeing into the distance and standing at some of the bus stops in the city centre can be intimidating. I can't see who is approaching and there are a lot of kids that hang around there, especially at the back of the shopping centre."

[Vision Impaired]

She also had some difficulty reading timetables, generally and at bus stops, although claimed to have no problems relevant to her disability once she was on the bus.

Hearing Impaired

Older man with damaged hearing from factory work

In spite of being registered disabled, this respondent reported no strong disability specifics in relation to bus travel and his barriers to usage were instead broadly consistent with the non-disabled sample. However, he mentioned that crowded and noisy environments were a problem for him as is often the case for those with hearing impairments, which could represent a problem on a crowded bus on a busy route.

“I can struggle in crowded spaces so don’t know how much of an issue that would be for me on a bus. The main reason that I don’t use buses is that the routes they take are not direct enough. I prefer to drive.”

[Hearing Impaired]

Mobility Impaired

Male respondent who had only recently become disabled

The main problem for this resident was that he was still coming to terms with his disability and the implications of it for him. The resulting lack of confidence he was experiencing was prohibiting bus usage, as he didn’t want to be treated differently to other passengers. He expressed concern that he wouldn’t be able to get onto a bus if the step up was too far above the pavement and he would not want to have to ask for help if needed.

“I don’t use buses because I am not sure I would be able to get on board. I would find it really embarrassing if the driver had to help me.

It’s much easier for me to drive”

[Mobility Impaired]

Wheelchair User

Woman with multiple disabilities

This respondent was aware from past experience that there would be no guarantee that the bus would have wheelchair access since this was known to vary by type of bus. This was a particular concern for this respondent who also used a mobility vehicle and she was concerned that the entrance doors would not be wide enough to drive through even if the bus was accessible.

Additional barriers identified were that drivers had not always been as helpful as they could have been in the past and the lack of space for a wheelchair, especially at busier times.

"I'm never sure if the bus will have a ramp facility. I have waited for a bus in the past and not been able to get my wheelchair on it. There isn't always space for my chair on board either"

[Wheelchair User]

Learning Difficulties

Woman who was dyslexic

As we have found in previous similar projects, timetable information can be problematic for respondents with learning difficulties. Specifically in this respect the barriers that are most frequently experienced are to do with text being too small so that words become obscured and abbreviations that tend to be used to save space are not always clear.

This respondent had no issues if needing to make an occasional, familiar journey but claimed she could become easily confused in the event of needing to make a new journey. Although she had no problem with numbers or times, she acknowledged that the provision of clear, unabbreviated timetables would help this disability group to navigate current timetables which can be confusing.

"I'm okay with numbers so I can get by, but sometimes it is confusing when they abbreviate destination names. I don't think it would be a problem as I would always take the same bus and I know I could ask the driver if I got confused"

[Learning Difficulties]

4. Conclusions & Recommendations

Perhaps unsurprisingly, travelling by car was widely claimed to be the default mode of transport used by the majority of respondents in this sample, although a few were also taking advantage of Redways for cycling and walking, weather permitting.

Given that Milton Keynes was widely known to be 'the city of the car', this is likely to have had a bigger overall impact on propensities to consider bus travel than would be the case in other locations. Non users could not see compelling reasons to consider using buses instead of, or as well as, their car. At a practical level, none were experiencing the problems often associated with car travel in other areas that may provide the incentive to consider more frequent use of public transport.

However, it is important to observe that this status infers advantages for travelling by car rather than representing a barrier to bus usage, even though this was not always apparent to respondents. In this respect, there is evidence to suggest that the well-planned road network and lack of congestion in Milton Keynes could be turned into a compelling reason to use buses.

Non users spontaneously and consistently identified a range of barriers to using buses in addition to some specifics relating to geographical area and the quality of bus provision. However there was sufficient commonality of response to suggest that the issues identified from the research are likely to be universal rather than specific to bus routes or passenger profile.

Some of the perceived barriers were based on misapprehensions: in theory, these should be the easiest issues to address.

A more fundamental problem is the lack of obvious rationale or incentive to travel by bus rather than car. This will be much more difficult to address and overcome in the short term.

Encouragingly however, there were a sufficient number of positives to emerge from the research to suggest that it may be possible to stimulate bus use in Milton Keynes over time:

- Barriers are often based on perceptions rather than negative usage experiences
- Perceptual barriers were confronted and often challenged when research participants tried out the bus before the focus groups
- Some respondents claimed they would be prepared to consider making certain journeys by bus in future (even if no changes or improvements were implemented)

Conclusions

This research indicates that the following suggestions should be adopted in order to begin to address the barriers to bus use that currently exist in Milton Keynes:

- **Focus effort and attention on making residents aware of the existence and promoting services and the benefits of bus travel.**
- **Address the most important barriers identified to allow bus travel to begin to be considered as a realistic alternative to current modes (especially car). Most important in this respect is the need to enhance visibility of bus stops and service information in the first instance and improving perceptions regarding poor reliability as a longer term objective.**
- **Prioritisation of bus services is unlikely to resolve current problems and may be resisted. Not being seen to support the perception of Milton Keynes as being ‘the city of the car’ may have the same long term effect, as there was some evidence from the research to suggest that as parking has become more difficult and expensive in the recent past, this may be interpreted as a tacit encouragement to consider alternative modes.**

5. Appendix

5.1 Discussion Guide

Milton Keynes Bus Barriers Discussion Guide (90 minute Groups)

Context

[Moderator to explain that research is being conducted on behalf of Passenger Focus and Milton Keynes Council who wish to understand reasons for non-usage of bus services in Milton Keynes.

[Moderator to explain that feedback will help inform decisions taken, but that any views expressed will not necessarily be implemented]

Introduction

- Explanation of nature and purpose of research
- Respondent introductions: name, age, occupation, current mode associations and usage

Background

- Frequency / purpose of making journeys at present. How is this affected by journey purpose
- Explore habitual travel preferences / patterns prior to participating in research
- Why prefer to travel by modes currently used. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each
- What are the benefits and disadvantages of current modes relative to each other

Bus Barriers

- What are the reasons for not making journeys by bus. Are these based on perceptions or past experiences
- What are the barriers to bus journeys. **[Allow full spontaneous suggestion and discussion and prompt with the following]:**
 - Lack of awareness of services / timetable
 - No convenient bus for journeys made
 - No direct service / need to get more than one bus
 - Bus journey takes too long
 - End-to-end journey takes too long
 - Service frequency / reliability issues
 - Concerns about personal security
 - Other passengers / anti-social behaviour
 - Overcrowding / unable to get a seat
 - Bus driver problems

- Bus comfort / cleanliness
 - Poor imagery / status
 - Cost
 - How would issues identified be ranked / prioritised
 - Which of these are the strongest and how could they be overcome
 - To what extent have these proved to be perceptions rather than reality during the course of the pre-sensitisation exercise
- [For younger respondents and parents of teenagers]**
- How important is car ownership (or aspirations). What are the issues (independence, peer pressure, cost, image / status)
 - Any awareness of difference between child / adult fares. How much of a barrier is this transition

Discussion of experiences based on pre-sensitisation exercise

Experience of Bus Journeys

- What did you expect when agreeing to participate. What were the main concerns or reservations
- [Brief summary of experiences to provide overview and set context for subsequent discussion]
- What have been the best and worst bits and how did these compare to expectations
- What have been the most surprising findings of the exercise
- How much knowledge did you have about making journeys by bus before agreeing to participate. How much of a barrier was this. Did you expect this to be easy or difficult to obtain. How did the experience match your expectations
- How does bus compare to usual modes
- What are main differences in terms of cost, speed, comfort, etc.

Journey Planning

- How did you feel at the beginning of the bus journeys
- How would you usually feel and explain differences
- What modes are involved with usual journey
- How much planning was required to make journey by bus
- What information sources have been used
- Which channels were used (online, phone, at bus stops / stations)
- How easy or difficult to access were the information sources required. To what extent do you regard this as a barrier to making bus journeys.
- Does using a bus involve more or fewer modes of travel
- (Respondents to identify key differences to usual modes and strength of positive or negative feeling attached to each)

Bus Route / Bus Stop Access

- Specifically, how much of an issue is this in context of journeys
- What are the main concerns in this respect

- How much of a barrier has this been to bus travel in the past
- Did this turn out to be more or less of a barrier than expected since participating in the research
- Describe experiences during Travel Diary journeys. What were main barriers experienced
- Did the situation improve over the course of the journeys made
- Would you get used to it in time

At Bus Stop

- Reactions to environment and waiting areas. Better or worse than expected. To what extent are needs met. Any unmet needs
- What information are you looking for to help you make this journey
- How readily available is information required. How easy is it to understand
- Are you aware of any Real Time information. How much difference did / would this make
- Ease / difficulty of buying ticket. How did you know what type of ticket to buy. Did you buy tickets on the day or in advance. How do you know that you bought the correct ticket for the journey
- Feelings about personal safety and security

On The Bus

- Punctuality of service. What does this mean. How does this compare to preconceptions
- Reactions to buses. What are the key strengths and weaknesses
- Ability to get a seat or stand comfortably / safely
- Response to seat comfort.
- Feelings about numbers of other passengers. Better or worse than expected
- Feelings about cleanliness and tidiness
- Does information available meet requirements. How could this be improved

At Destination

- Punctuality of arrival. What is expected / tolerated in this respect.
- Do you require information for onward journey. If so what are you looking for? Was information readily available and did it meet your needs? What else is required in this respect?
- Feelings about personal safety and security

Travel to End Point

- (Discussion to be tailored to mode used)
- How do you feel about this part of the journey
- How convenient is the bus stop for your ultimate destination. How does this impact on overall journey time
- What mode required to reach end point
- How does this compare to usual modes used for journey

Arrival at End Point

- How did these journeys compare with other days using preferred modes
- How does overall journey time compare with usual mode
- How does experience overall compare
- What were the best and worst bits of the journey
- How did you feel on arrival compared to usual
- To what extent would you be prepared to consider using the bus in future
- What are the key triggers and barriers
- How could key barriers be overcome
- Would you get used to it over time

Review of barriers against experiences

General thoughts

- What are the things that have stuck in your mind most
- What has surprised you
- How did experience differ to perceptions of bus travel
- What were the best and worst bits
- How does travel by bus compare to usual mode

Revisit Barriers to Bus Use

[Moderator to review barriers identified earlier and review these against pre-task experiences]

- Lack of awareness of services / timetable
- No convenient bus for journeys made
- No direct service / need to get more than one bus
- Bus journey takes too long
- End-to-end journey takes too long
- Service frequency / reliability issues
- Concerns about personal security
- Other passengers / anti-social behaviour
- Overcrowding / unable to get a seat
- Bus driver problems
- Bus comfort / cleanliness
- Poor imagery / status
- Cost
- Which of these barriers would be easiest to overcome
- What would it take to remove barriers. What would need to be done
- How to engage other non-users. What needs to be done to communicate that perceptual barriers may not exist
- What communications / incentives are required. Would a free journey make any difference. What else might work to promote a change of attitudes and mindsets

Milton Keynes Specifics

[Discussion of other issues that may impact on bus usage in the local area, as follows]

- **[Teenage Group only]** Explore awareness of the concessionary scheme for Young People in Milton Keynes. Impact on propensity to use buses.
- Location of bus stops on fast-moving grid roads which are often only accessible via underpasses
- The image of Milton Keynes as a 'city built for the car'
- Resistance to extending/prioritising bus services by those who oppose the expansion of Milton Keynes. Any awareness of this?
- High expectations that people who have moved to Milton Keynes from London have (eg. around service frequency)
- Any other issues? (To be provided by Passenger Focus / Milton Keynes Council)

Future Changes / Improvements

- What are the most important issues that need to be addressed
- What improvements would you like to see introduced to encourage you to use buses in the future.

[Allow full spontaneous suggestion and discussion and prompt with the following]:

- More / more frequent services
- Improved service reliability
- Faster services / improved journey times
- Bus prioritisation measures eg bus lanes
- Better integration with other modes
- Multi-modal tickets / smartcards
- Improved bus information / comms
- Cheaper fares
- More luxurious buses (such as Trent Barton)
- Individual Travel Plans
- Park and Ride
- What are the specific needs by user group. Do business users want faster buses. Do they need smarter buses? Do students want dedicated buses / routes or cheaper fares? Any interest in a late night service for late shopping? How about a service for drinkers / pub users

[For younger respondents and parents of teenagers]

- What specific needs / issues exist. What can be done to counter aspirations to own a car and car related benefits. Could these barriers / segments be targeted specifically. What would work best.

Ideal service

- Thinking about each of the elements of making bus journeys (as discussed), what would you like to see changed (practically and realistically)
- What would represent an improvement on the current service. What would your ideal look like.
- How close is this to the current service. What would need to change to achieve this.
- What would Good, Better, Best look like for each element
- What are the trade-offs that would be required to deliver each improvement

[For each suggestion made] How would this impact on current mindsets and modes used. How does this affect each suggestion. What would best suit your needs, in reality

Summary

- Overall concluding thoughts
- Impact of participating on future bus usage
- Which method is cheapest? Fastest? Most comfortable? Safest? Most reliable? Most convenient? Greenest? Healthiest?
- What is most persuasive argument in favour of using the bus for future journeys? Cost? Convenience / speed? Green? Other?
- On balance are you likely to use the bus more or less often in the future? Why?
- What are the most important barriers?
- How could these be overcome?
- What is the one single thing that would encourage future bus usage



© 2010 Passenger Focus

Passenger Focus
2nd Floor
One Drummond Gate
Pimlico
London SW1V 2QY

0300 123 0860
www.passengerfocus.org.uk
info@passengerfocus.org.uk

Passenger Focus is the operating
name of the Passengers' Council