

Does it matter if a bus is late?



Or if timetable information is a bit vague? And how much delay can passengers tolerate? A recent survey found out

At Bus Users we know from our work on complaints that many passengers are unhappy with the punctuality and reliability of their bus services. Passenger Focus carried out focus group discussions and individual 'depth' interviews with bus passengers in Hertfordshire, Devon, Manchester and Leeds recently, speaking to a range of passengers making frequent and infrequent trips and using the bus for different journey purposes. Eight in-depth interviews were undertaken with passengers with a disability.

Their findings are, perhaps, not entirely surprising but with new statutory guidance being put together the research helps everyone to understand what people think of bus punctuality and timetable information – and what they want in future.

So what did the research find? That perceptions of punctuality are largely determined by their experience of lateness at the stop where they got on the bus and that delays in arrival at the destination are considered differently; when passengers are already in transit, anxiety and frustration tend to be lower. When buses are cancelled this is frustrating, but cancellations are not normally considered in terms of punctuality unless they happen a lot.

Much depends on the type of service, so passengers using services that operate to a fixed timetable, with

each bus scheduled to arrive at a particular time, deliberately go to the bus stop early to make sure they do not miss their bus. They measure whether the bus is early or late against the timetable, and have more of an expectation that this information will be accurate.

Passengers using 'turn-up-and-go' services like the frequent services found in many urban areas, go to the bus stop expecting a bus to come in the next few minutes rather than at a set time. These passengers tend to have less of an idea of when buses are running late.

Passengers in the research said that they do not expect 'perfection' in terms of punctuality and will accept some flexibility, through windows of tolerance – however, passengers' tolerance is not unlimited. They expect their goodwill to be rewarded, in terms of good service from bus operators and drivers. This involves trying hard to be punctual, improving where there are issues and providing good communication to help passengers with their bus travel.

And what about timetables?

Not all passengers use timetables all the time, but they might be consulted for journeys they make irregularly, for journeys that might already be familiar but at a new time or completely new journeys on unfamiliar routes or in unfamiliar areas.

Passengers largely agreed that timetables should provide a relatively high degree of detail that gives the most amount of information an individual might require. And they are happy to see more complex schedules to get information that is more accurate. They prefer this to a simple, easy-to-remember timetable that does not reflect traffic patterns and is less accurate.

If timetables are not accurate, at best passenger travel experience is frustrating, with more waiting and longer journey times than anticipated. At worst, it is highly stressful (for example, for passengers with disabilities that make travelling difficult) or resulting in significant negative impact for the passenger (for example, missing other travel connections or lateness resulting in loss or penalty).

How late is 'late'?

Passengers generally consider it acceptable for buses to arrive at their stop of departure up to five minutes after the scheduled time, whether the service is frequent or scheduled (and irrespective of interval). Five minutes waiting time is the threshold after which satisfaction with punctuality decreases markedly. When passengers have to wait six to nine minutes for their bus, satisfaction falls considerably (87% of passengers are satisfied with a wait time of five minutes, compared to 77% when waiting between six and nine minutes). A similar drop in satisfaction can be seen for those passengers waiting 10 minutes.

For more frequent services, particularly 'turn-up-and-go' services, passengers consider it acceptable for buses to depart from a stop early. This is because the

"It's obvious that the buses are going to be late during rush hour. So, they have to take that into account and do the timetable based on that."

Infrequent passenger, Leeds

impact on the passenger is relatively limited should they miss the bus and there is a potential gain to them if they are able to catch a bus that arrives early.

By contrast, for buses operating at less frequent intervals (particularly those operating to a fixed timetable and over 20 minutes apart), passengers feel it is unacceptable for buses to leave stops early. This is because the impact on the passenger of missing the bus is felt to be more significant than waiting at stops whilst on the journey (since for the latter, the bus is still running as per the schedule).

Passengers tend to tolerate more delay in getting to their arrival stop – they see it as a delay to the journey rather than a late bus. Regardless of which type of service they are using, when they are on a bus and in transit, passengers say they are tolerant because they can typically see the cause of the problem. They understand, however, that this could mean a significant impact on anyone catching the bus further along the bus route.

Keep passengers informed – and on-side

Passengers' experience of bus travel is improved significantly when they receive information about scheduling updates and delays that assists with their journey planning, management and understanding of why problems have happened at a particular time. Channels for such information include live information panels at bus stops and potentially on buses; satisfaction with punctuality increases if there is a digital display at the stop showing when the next bus will arrive. Many passengers now receive live information through digital sources such as apps and websites and sometimes receive information about delays available from drivers.

Setting the goal

Passengers in this research felt that bus operators should aim to run all of their buses on time. They do not expect this to be achieved but they feel that this aim is likely to be necessary for operators to achieve what they feel is a good standard of delivery, around 80% punctuality. **BU**



At least the bus is there even if passengers can't get aboard right away.