

Managing service disruption – the user perspective

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1 February 2018

About Transport Focus

Transport Focus is the independent transport user watchdog. We represent the interests of:

- all users of England's motorways and major 'A' roads (the Strategic Road Network)
- rail passengers in Great Britain
- bus, coach and tram users across England outside London

We work to make a difference for all transport users.

Research into bus passengers' ...

- Experiences of delays and disruption
- What would help when it happens

Qualitative

- Focus groups of passengers in Leeds, Manchester, Exeter, Brighton, Birmingham and Sudbury (Suffolk)
- Interviews with passengers aged 16 to 60+
- Interviews with passengers with a range of disabilities
- Interviews with bus drivers.

Consequences

- Late for work
- Late picking up children
- Late for medical appointments
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Additional expense.

I ended up picking up my daughter late from school the other day because the bus was really late because of road works. That was really stressful just thinking about my daughter being left there

(Leeds – commuter)

I have to get two buses to work and that can make things difficult

(Leeds – commuter)

There's always anxiety of the last bus is late... you get the bus or it's a £30 taxi

(Sudbury – concessionary pass holder)

I was cross about that, because I missed my [doctors] appointment and they wouldn't let me in; I had to go back another day

(concessionary pass holder, 84, Leeds)

Passengers' needs

- Practical – help with the immediate practical implications and alternative travel options
- Emotional – how does it *feel* as a paying customer? Does anyone appear to care?



What would help passengers?

- Better information – particularly real time information
- Greater customer focus from bus drivers, including information provision.



What would help passengers?

Real-time displays at bus stops

Passengers strongly favour real-time departure displays at bus stops

- Inclusive
- Reassuring
- Allows them to make an informed choice

It gives you the impression that somebody out there knows what's going on
(Birmingham – commuter)

I think it's the best idea there is, really
(concessionary pass holder, 84, Leeds)



What would help passengers?

Smartphone apps

Real-time information via Smartphone apps has strong appeal for some.

But

- Almost no awareness of existing apps for bus travel outside London
- Few associated apps with bus travel – a feeling that bus companies (except in London) don't do that sort of thing
- Assumption that an app would give static information – not disruption information in real time.

What would help passengers?

Greater customer focus from bus drivers

- Significant gap between passengers' experiences and their desire that bus drivers behave as a customer representative during disruption
- Passengers want drivers to be providing **information**, demonstrating **empathy** and expressing **regret** during delays and disruption
- But they also recognise that, at times, there is genuine conflict between 'operations' and 'customer service' in a driver's role.

What would help passengers?

For most people the only interaction they have with the bus company is through the drivers so they should make a lot more effort than they do

(Brighton – leisure)

Bus drivers give you no info, you can hear them being given info via the radio but they don't feed it back

(Leeds – commuter)

[The driver was] utterly, utterly indifferent, and it was chaos and people were panicking and they were frightened that they weren't going to get home... he couldn't have been less helpful if he'd have hit me over the head with a fence post

(Sudbury – concessionary pass holder)

I work in customer services and would never get away with how the bus drivers speak or grunt at people. They are stuck behind the times with customer service.

(Exeter – leisure)

Bus drivers should relay the information [they receive over radios] – that's useful, courtesy and customer service

(Leeds – commuter)

What would help passengers?

Bus driver as 'travel consultant' ...

- If you aren't a regular passenger, the bus driver is *the* source of information about routes, times, prices
- Many passengers need an approachable, knowledgeable driver to give advice about the most cost-effective option for their journey
- Passengers' experiences of bus drivers as neither approachable nor always knowledgeable impacts on value for money satisfaction.

What do bus drivers think?

- Recognise they are passengers' only point of contact
- Understand they are viewed as grumpy old men and women
- Some reluctance from drivers to 'take on' customer service responsibilities, as well as traditional duties
- Perception that it is best for your physical/emotional security not to interact with passengers.

"I'm sort of reluctant really 'cause the driver does a lot of different things. At the end of the day you've got a 10-tonne double decker and your load is not boxes, it's live people, so you've got to drive with that in mind all the time. There are people [who] stand up and wander around, go upstairs, swap seats and it's all going on while you're driving that bus, and you can't help but look. So I think another job on the driver's not ideal."

"Whilst bus drivers are seen as grumpy old men and women! I think it's more [because of] our blank expression sometimes because that one person may have a pop! but that bus driver's probably had about 300 pops by the time he gets to the afternoon shift."

What do bus drivers think?

When it comes to information, bus drivers tend to perceive passengers know more than they do:

- assumptions that information has been seen, read, understood and remembered
- assumptions that passengers have noticed what is going on around them (even though many will have their head in a book, newspaper or smartphone).

They can see that something's happened there, it's not just a queue of traffic, they've probably seen that there's been an accident [so I don't need to mention it]

You can see the posters up at the stop so they know the bus will divert [so I don't need to mention it]

Other findings

Websites

- Most assume that bus companies and local councils will have information about disruption online, but virtually none could see themselves looking at it
- Websites will be used by bus passengers to research new routes, e.g. just moved to the area/changed job or looking for timetables – but not for disruption planning
- In contrast, passengers talked about using websites for disruption information when travelling by train or car.
 - Rail and car journeys of greater consequence?
 - Not part of the mind set when travelling by bus?
- Some experience of information not being updated – outside office hours, for example.

Publications – past and present

- Short and Tweet: How passengers want social media during disruption – June 2012
- Bus passengers' experience of delays and disruption – April 2013
- Using the bus: what young people think – February 2018.

