House of Commons Transport Committee Inquiry into the Bus Market in England (outside London)

Evidence from Transport Focus

1. ***Introduction***

1.1 Transport Focus is the statutory body responsible for representing the interests of bus passengers in England (outside London). Our comments are set out below.

1. ***The effectiveness and ambition of the Department for Transport’s policies on buses***
   1. We welcomed the Bus Services Act 2017 and its aim of increasing passenger numbers. We agreed that providing a better ‘toolbox’ that enabled local transport authorities and bus companies to work together could help to make services more attractive to existing and potential users and, in turn, help cities and regions unlock opportunity and grow their economies.
   2. We note that no franchising scheme or partnership scheme has yet been published making use of the new powers in the Act. So it is too early to judge the effectiveness of any schemes. However, a number of authorities have announced their intention to do so. How many choose to go down this route and with what result remains to be seen.
   3. Another aspect of the Bus Services Act that we welcomed was the emphasis on open data. Making fares, punctuality data and real time information available would allow passengers to plan their journeys more effectively.
   4. The Department recently consulted on the delivery of the open data and accessible information provisions in the Act. We responded to both consultations, welcoming the proposed approach to on-bus audio-visual announcements and drawing on our research with passengers to comment on their requirements for open data.
   5. We are aware that the Department is planning a review of BSOG. We note the continuing importance of this funding to the viability of some services and the success of the incentives regime, for example in encouraging the installation of Automatic Vehicle Location equipment on buses, which is so important to the delivery of punctuality improvements and real time information for passengers.
   6. More broadly, however, we remain concerned about ongoing reductions to local authority support for bus services, and about the shrinking of the bus network in many parts of the country, particularly in rural areas and in the evening and at weekends – a theme we will return to in section 4.
2. ***Factors affecting bus use, including the reliability of the bus service, congestion and the ways bus companies are dealing with congestion, and the effectiveness of bus priority measures***
   1. Transport Focus’s research gives us a good understanding of passengers’ expectations and aspirations. In 2016 we published research into passengers’ priorities for improvement[[1]](#footnote-1). Over 4600 passengers across a section of rural, urban and metropolitan areas in England were asked to rank 31 different criteria.

The top ten were:

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| --- | --- |
| **Attribute** | **Rank** |
| Better value for money from bus journeys | 1 |
| More buses arriving on time at your bus stop | 2 |
| More journeys on buses running to time | 3 |
| Buses running more often than they do now | 4 |
| More effort made to tackle any anti-social behaviour | 5 |
| Buses going to more places you want to go | 6 |
| More bus stops with next bus displays | 7 |
| Being given more/better information when delays occur on journeys | 8 |
| Cleaner and better maintained buses | 9 |
| Tickets which better allow travel on all local bus companies | 10 |

* 1. Punctuality is ranked highly: with more buses arriving on time at the bus stop being the second highest priority for improvement, and more journeys running on time the third highest.
  2. Our research[[2]](#footnote-2) found that while passengers want accuracy they accept that buses will not always be able to stick to the timetable – they accept that traffic conditions are not fully controllable. 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). This is also reflected in the Bus Passenger Satisfaction (BPS)[[3]](#footnote-3) data. Five minutes waiting time is the threshold after which satisfaction with punctuality decreases markedly. A similar drop in satisfaction can be seen for those passengers waiting 10 minutes.
  3. 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 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 which 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).
  4. The research also shows a desire from passengers that punctuality and reliability figures are made public. It found that passengers should have access to information about the performance of their bus services and to key actions being taken by operators and local authorities to improve this. The research indicates that publishing this information is regarded as right in principle and is good for trust because ‘it helps keeps the industry honest’. This was the case even if individuals had little personal appetite in seeking it out – the fact that others are looking at it can often be enough.
  5. Given the importance of punctuality we also conducted further work to build a better understanding about when, where and why buses are delayed and what can be done to help them run on time[[4]](#footnote-4). Our case studies highlighted the challenge of setting timetables to reflect variable patterns of traffic and patronage and threw up a number of recurrent reasons for delays, including traffic and parking, boarding and alighting, inadequate recovery time between services and perhaps most surprisingly, exiting bus stations. We were surprised to discover a lack of consistency about which services are monitored and how this is done.
  6. In looking at factors affecting bus use it is also important to consider the views of people who use buses infrequently or not at all. As part of our research on trust and priorities we also asked nearly 2400 ‘infrequent/non-users’ about their attitudes to local bus service[[5]](#footnote-5).
  7. Encouragingly, some 28% indicated that they would consider using buses more – suggesting a reasonable market for growth exists. We found that the principle reasons why they did not use the bus were:

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| --- | --- |
| 1. | don’t run where or when I want them to go |
| 2. | door-to-door journeys would take too long by bus |
| 3. | the cost compared to the alternatives |
| 4. | I do not enjoy time spent on buses |
| 5. | I do not think they are reliable enough |

* 1. Earlier this year we also published our research into young people’s views on buses[[6]](#footnote-6). We concluded in some respects young people want the same thing from their bus journey as their fellow passengers, ranking value for money, punctuality and reliability highly as priorities for improvement. However, there are key differences:
* They don’t feel that services are designed with them in mind or that enough is being done to make them feel valued
* Not knowing how the system works or what to do is a barrier and a source of anxiety about ‘getting it right’
* Improving the journey experience is important; young people notice poor quality provision
* There is a need to design systems better, learning from other industries in the way they appeal to young people
* Fares for young people are confusing and inconsistent.
  + 1. Any review of the factors affecting bus use will also need to consider potential changes to the way that people want to travel. The rise of on demand services, typically using uber-style apps, presents a new model of demand which, in some areas, offers an alternative to conventional bus services. When looking at changes in bus use it will increasingly be important to determine whether this has been driven by a fall in demand or whether it represents a change in demand (i.e. a shift to new forms of public transport).

1. ***The provision of services to isolated communities in rural and urban areas, and the reliance of communities and groups of people on bus services***

***The viability and long-term sustainability of bus services, including the effectiveness of funding, fare structures and public grants***

* 1. As mentioned earlier, we remain concerned about ongoing reductions to local authority support for bus services and about the shrinking of the bus network in many parts of the country, particularly in rural areas and in the evening and at weekends. Over the last few years, local authority transport budgets have come under significant pressure; councils have had to make tough choices about how best to protect the bus services they support and passengers have often been at the sharp end of those decisions.
  2. Transport Focus has worked with the sector in trying to address some of these issues. In response to a request from the Transport Committee we published (and have since updated) a best practice toolkit[[7]](#footnote-7) for authorities to use when consulting on potential cuts.
  3. We have also reported on the impact on passengers of cuts to rural services. In ‘Bus service reductions – the impact on passengers’ (2012)[[8]](#footnote-8) we identified four main impacts:
* Passengers could not travel like they used to: they made fewer discretionary trips
* Dependency on others increased: awkwardness to ask for lifts and their travel plans now being contingent on others
* Sometimes the passenger paid instead: passengers bore some of the costs by using taxis or other paid means of transport
* Lack of spontaneity: fewer services on fewer days reduced the opportunity to decide on the day to go out

* 1. We have recently written to all local authorities in England (outside London) to express our concerns about the pressure on supported services, reminding them of our research and offering them advice. And we have embarked on a programme of meetings with local authorities to seek to understand their approach to meeting the transport needs of their local communities.
  2. We have also researched the role of demand responsive transport (DRT). In ‘Demand Responsive Transport: users’ views of pre-booked community buses and shared taxis’ (2016) we concluded that DRT can offer a way of providing a service where one might not otherwise exist at all. It can make a limited contribution to meeting the transport needs of isolated communities, particularly if it is introduced as part of a wider review with full public consultation. However, reductions in service frequency tend to be accompanied by falls in patronage, so any financial savings to local authorities are often achieved at a longer-term cost.
  3. However, and as mentioned earlier, we are mindful that the way people want/chose to travel is changing and that this can have an impact on the demand for conventional bus travel. Since our report on DRT in 2016 there has been a big increase in the number of new on demand travel options. Initial experience of some of these new app-based initiatives shows encouraging signs about the potential to encourage young people and car drivers to travel more by bus. It will be important that these new services and changes to traditional travel patterns are taken into account.
  4. We are continuing to develop our work on demand responsive travel and are keen to test its potential by researching the views of users.

1. ***Regulations affecting the provision of bus services and the adequacy of guidance to operators and local authorities***
   1. We do not have any evidence from passengers about regulations affecting the provision of bus services and the adequacy of guidance to operators and local authorities.

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1. [Bus passengers have their say - 2016](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/bus-passengers-have-their-say-quantitative-report/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [What’s the holdup? Exploring bus service punctuality - 2014](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/whats-the-holdup-exploring-bus-service-punctuality/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Bus Passenger Satisfaction (BPS)](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/research/bus-passenger-survey/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [How late is late – What bus passengers think about punctuality and timetables 2014](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/how-late-is-late-what-bus-passengers-think-about-punctuality-and-timetables-full-report/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [Bus passengers have their say - 2016](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/bus-passengers-have-their-say-quantitative-report/) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [Using the bus: what young people think - 2018](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/using-bus-young-people-think/) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [Bus service reviews consulting on changes to local services - A best practice toolkit - 2012.](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/bus-service-reviews-consulting-on-changes-to-local-services-a-best-practice-toolkit/)

   [Bus service reviews consulting on changes to local services - progress report - 2017](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/bus-service-reviews-consulting-on-changes-to-local-services-progress-report-february-progress-report/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [Bus service reductions – the impact on passengers 2012](https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/bus-service-reductions-the-impact-on-passengers/) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)