

Giving Bus a Go -
campaign update November 2019



GIVE BUS A GO



#GiveBusAGo
transportfocus.org.uk

transportfocus 

What we did

In September Transport Focus launched a campaign to encourage more people in the West Midlands to **Give Bus a Go**.

There is a real opportunity for bus operators and local government across the country to encourage people to give the bus a try. We chose the West Midlands as the pilot area for our campaign – but the approach could work well anywhere.

Nine people who rarely or never travel by bus agreed to try using them throughout September. These Busketeers ranged in age from 15 to 78 and lived across Birmingham and the Black Country.

After a briefing meeting in Birmingham, the Busketeers came to our launch event in Wolverhampton at the beginning of September. They met Transport Focus, local bus operators and Transport for West Midlands and spoke to local media.

Then through the month they sent in reports on their journeys (234 in total) using our app, including photos and videos. They were asked to rate each report and almost three quarters were positive or very positive.

Our forthcoming work on bus passenger priorities tells us that in the West Midlands:

83%

think a good bus network is important to the local area

41%

think travelling by bus is a good way to get around

25%

wouldn't mind making more journeys by bus



What did the busketeers find generally?

Those who took part in **Give Bus a Go** in September said it was generally a positive, pleasant experience - much better than expected.

"Giving bus a go has been a pleasant experience as the buses and planning apps have been greatly modernised making the experience of using the buses more enjoyable than I remember from 10 years ago."

"I am on one of the Platinum double deck buses with next stop display. This is excellent. There are voice announcements as well. The bus lane near Bloxwich Lane, a big help to avoid traffic queues. The bus stop announcements are a really major help and reassurance. A very busy service."

"Generally a good run dropping me in the centre of Birmingham. while longer than a similar ride by train or car the city centre destination of the bus must be worth 10 minutes compared with the other two modes of transport and certainly cheaper."

What makes bus passengers satisfied?

We know from hundreds of thousands of bus passengers, who have taken part in our Bus Passenger Survey (BPS), that punctual, reliable services offering good value for money and modern, clean buses drive passenger satisfaction.

Our Busketeers indicated that getting these core transport needs delivered consistently would persuade them to continue using bus for some of their journeys.

Passengers rate their journeys as great in the BPS when the driver adds value on top of the functional and reliable service. Our Busketeers reported that on most bus journeys the driver was cheery, friendly and helpful.

Unsurprisingly, new buses from both National Express West Midlands and Diamond Buses West Midlands elicited a lot of praise. The Busketeers were pleasantly surprised by how punctual most journeys were and praised bus shelters where they existed.

Naturally, having experienced excellent or very good journeys, when this was not delivered the Busketeers were quick to criticise and even change their mode of transport if needed.

Most Busketeers have said they will continue to use buses for various journeys. Taking part in **Give Bus a Go** has opened up possibilities not previously considered and has delivered unexpected benefits, such as saving money:

"So it's actually stretched my imagination for things I would use the bus for."

"The output from this, for me, is that I will think carefully going forward, about when to use the bus and when to swap the bus. And actually I think that there's different modes of transport for a reason, and sometimes the bus is the best mode of transport to get, but sometimes it isn't"

So what was the overall view about using buses?

At the end of September Busketeers described the overall experience as being largely positive. Generally, they enjoyed it and learned a lot about travelling by bus. There was some surprise that the overall experience was better than expected and mostly met their journey needs.

Most indicated that they would continue using bus sometimes and would recommend travelling by bus to family and friends.

"Absolutely. The bus experience was generally much better than I anticipated and the service is very flexible."

"Yes they are more efficient at some times than a car journey."

"Yes. As and when I need to - as long as I get the timetables sorted. Saves parking and petrol."

Some felt that the bus is not practical for all journeys:

"While buses can't replace the train as faster for my most regular journeys, they have certainly opened up new destinations and activities."

Meet the busketeers



Bernadette is 55 and lives in Acocks Green. She is self-employed and has a visual impairment. She wanted to test if using the bus could give her some flexibility getting around the West Midlands.

How did it turn out for her?

She said using the bus at off-peak times *'has been an absolute dream'*. It offered a viable alternative for most of the things that she would normally do by either walking or getting a lift as she does not see well enough to drive anymore.

She used buses for things that she expected would not work like her weekly food shopping and she was surprised how easy it was to take an enormous suitcase on one journey.

Peak-time travel however was more of a problem as her journeys during those busy hours were into and out of Birmingham. While there is a regular service it was just too slow; she described it as a bit like watching paint dry.

Off-peak bus travel is pleasant and offered new opportunities and the flexibility she needs. Travelling during the peak was not enjoyable due to the journey taking too long.



Andy is 64 years old and lives in Stourbridge. He decided to **Give Bus a Go** as he felt parking at railway stations can be quite difficult and said there's no fun in driving sometimes. He was curious to find out if bus could be a viable alternative.

How did it turn out for him?

"Well I found it all very good value, in terms of catching the bus. I saved money by not driving to the station, I think, in terms of, you know, the cash. I was very surprised how cheap it is to catch the bus, it was very impressive, and I quite like that."

Bus worked for his journeys from home to the station. It was a pleasant experience and saved him money. But due to journey length the onward journey was not a practical option by bus.

Meet the busketeers



Denis is 39 and lives in Walsall. Of his 19 experiences, six were negative. He often commented on the app, Wi-Fi availability and real time journey information. At times he was frustrated by the congestion when he was on the bus.

How did it turn out for him?

"Bus was late and app wasn't working but the screen at the stop did which was useful due to the infrequent service on Sundays. Bus was 50 per cent full and relatively clean considering it was late in the evening. There is no Wi-Fi or screens with stop information on these buses which would be nice to have."



Alex is 15 and lives in Solihull. He was our youngest Busketeer and reported about bus journeys 28 times during the month.

Overall his experiences were generally good:

"I used my network pass to get in the bus at 1057. The bus doesn't have many people on it, it is clean with little disruption and the bus isn't getting stuck in any traffic. The seat I am in is uncomfortable for me as I'm quite tall (6 foot 4). The journey is quite boring as there is no Wi-Fi. There are no extra facilities such as charging points."

Part way through the journey I moved to the back and this gave me more leg room and made the rest of the journey more comfortable. The bus was also staying on time due to the fact it was in a bus lane. The bus was supposed to take 44 minutes to arrive but it was early and only took 33 minutes."

The importance of a good bus network

Bus users tell us that their priorities are more frequent services, more routes, better punctuality and better value for money. So a bus network that they can rely on to help them make the journeys they want to make.

Some Busketeers indicated that there are journeys that are just not practical to make by bus. The key barriers experienced were infrequency, journey length and lack of buses going direct to destination.

"Journey length is important so Birmingham to Stourbridge, which is 1 hour 10, it's just, that little bit too much to make it attractive compared with the train. If you just had 10 or 15 minutes off it, it would be quite competitive with the train, to be quite honest, because the frequency is there and that's quite an attraction in itself."

"The whole journey did not work as despite there being two routes to Bridgnorth both of them missed the onward connection to Shrewsbury."

"Generally, there is an issue if you've gotta get off one bus onto another bus, understanding that connection and the advertising of that connection is sometimes not clear and a barrier to actually using the bus."

What did the **Busketeers** tell us about punctuality and reliability?

We know that a punctual and predictable bus journey is critical to bus passenger satisfaction.

The Bus Passenger Survey has been tracking passenger satisfaction across Britain's bus services since 2009. In that time, passengers in many areas have seen bus journey times slow down and services become less predictable. Bus passengers have been impacted by heavier road congestion along with roadworks and a shift in traditional travel patterns.

In the last Bus Passenger Survey, 26 per cent of West Midlands passengers said their bus trip was held up by congestion and 12 per cent by roadworks.



Some of our Busketeers told us that they experienced some degree of unpredictability in bus punctuality and journey times, particularly at rush hour.

On several journeys our team told us about buses running on time, but others experienced some buses arriving late or being held up in traffic which delayed their journey. Alongside this there were both positive and negative reports of the information that was available about the times buses were due:

"Arrived exactly on time again. Fast, great service."

"Bus on time departing but despite only light traffic was a minute or two late getting to railway station. Otherwise good, pleasant journey."

"Bus arrived exactly to time per timetable. Fast journey."

We know punctuality is important to people and choosing which mode of transport to use depends a lot on how consistently reliable the service is. On a few occasions the bus let the Busketeers down resulting in them changing their planned mode of transport.

"The bus was due at 11.40, but no sign of it at 12.10. Caught the train to Stourbridge instead."

"The bus hit a lot of traffic on route and I was going to miss a 0930 meeting in Birmingham, so I had to get off the bus at Rowley Regis (roughly 40 minutes) into the journey and jump on the train."

Waiting for the bus – bus stop, shelters and stations

There were mostly positive reports about bus stops and stations. In addition to outlining how long they had spent there (ideally not long), people talked about good shelter and seating, timetable availability and real time information.

Waiting facilities were important for their overall journey experience with some negative comments where no shelter or seating facilities existed.



"Bus stop shelter in good condition with legible timetable."

"The bus stop has a shelter a live time board and a printout timetable, also it's very close to where I got off and next to some shops where I quickly went before getting on."

"Just missed the 11.25. Will have to wait 26 mins. Fortunately under cover and somewhere to sit."

"The stop is fine and convenient, but no shelter or seats."

"With it raining heavily today it was annoying that the bus stop had water running straight through it making it difficult to stand anywhere without getting wet."

"At times like this you understand the power of the humble bus shelter. Only 5 mins but soaked through backpack."

What about buses themselves?

We know from the Bus Passenger Survey that the environment on the bus is another key driver of satisfaction.

This includes the cleanliness of the bus, space available, information provision, comfort of seating and increasingly more important facilities such as USB charging points and Wi-Fi. Provision of these factors all sit within the gift of the bus operator.

Consistent provision of these factors actively contributes to a satisfactory or great journey. While the basics of a punctual and reliable journey are vital to passengers, the environment on the bus helps drive satisfaction and influence passengers' ratings for value for money. A pleasant environment can even mitigate against some delays.

The Busketeers travelled on a variety of buses, and often commented on the comfort, the cleanliness, the facilities provided (especially Wi-Fi), the levels of crowding and the behaviour of other passengers.

Unsurprisingly they noticed both positive and negative examples and would often point out that a certain experience was atypical from what they were used to. In particular they regularly pointed out the difference between the new and old buses.

"Bus left on time. One of the new double deck buses which are really superb. USB sockets (one per two seats) next stop display and PA. CCTV screen covering both decks."

"Heading off to Solihull via a very posh X2 bus that pulled up as soon as I found the stop. #lucky. Loving the ceiling signage."

"The experience on the bus was very positive. There was free Wi-Fi which allowed me to respond to a few emails and get stuff done!"

"One of the Platinum double deck buses with next stop display. This is excellent, particularly if you are new to the area which includes me! There are voice announcements as well. The bus lane near Bloxwich Lane, a big help to avoid traffic queues. The bus stop announcements are a really major help and reassurance. A very busy service."



They talked about some poorer experiences too, particularly when facilities they expected weren't available on older buses.

"Bus arrived and drivers changed. Left at 14.28. CCTV working. Older double decker and a bit shabby. As it was an older bus, stops not announced."

"Only a short trip to the stop next to Tesco. Older single deck bus without on board PA. Fairly clean, but showing its age."

"There is no Wi-Fi or screens with stop information on these buses which would be nice to have."

What about bus drivers?

As infrequent bus users, our Busketeers frequently acknowledged the role of the driver and other staff in helping deliver reassurance, being a source of advice on fares, ticket deals and journey information and generally being friendly and helpful.

The vital role played by the bus driver is also fully recognised by more regular bus passengers. The Transport Focus Bus Passenger Survey consistently shows that the bus driver is the key factor in delivering great journeys.

We know that a driver can make the difference between an acceptable journey and a great one. During **Give Bus a Go**, there were many references to things that drivers (and other staff) did to influence their perception of the journey. In most cases the experience of drivers was really positive.

"The driver (female) was charming, smiling, and greeting everyone as they got on. Definitely an asset to the bus company."

"Driver has been brilliant making sure to wait for people running in the rain to catch this bus. Bad weather, good journey."

"Friendly driver and waited for me to sit before moving off."

"The cheery driver welcomed us on board and even gave us a mini weather forecast which he assured us would be blue sky the rest of the day! Clean modern bus soon underway."

Value for money

Of all the factors rated by passengers in the Bus Passenger Survey, value for money varies most across bus operators and geographic areas.

Value is more than just the cost of a ticket. However, price is important. Typically, a passenger who felt they were very or fairly satisfied with the value for money of their journey, identify the 'cost for the distance travelled' as the factor that makes them feel this way.

However the same 'cost for distance travelled' factor is also selected by passengers who are fairly or very dissatisfied with the value for money of their journey.

Passengers take in to account several elements of their journey including punctuality, reliability and service quality and how enjoyable the time on board is. Value for money should therefore be seen more as a proxy for how a passenger feels generally about their bus service.

Our Busketeers were reimbursed for their journeys for the month, so they didn't talk very much about value, although there were some comments about bus use potentially being a more cost-effective way of travelling than their usual method.



What was being a Busketeer like?

At the end of the month, we asked our Busketeers to describe the overall experience of taking part - generally they learned a lot and enjoyed it.

We asked what was both the best and worst thing about using buses in the month...and we got some great answers:

What was the best thing about using buses in the last month?

"It was nice to be able to have a drink without the worry of driving anywhere."

"To be able to sit back and watch the world go by!"

"Contactless ticketing."

On bus company apps or the internet it was possible to plan in advance."

"Lack of traffic."

"The ease of doing some things that I thought would be challenging, like taking heavy items on the bus."

And what was the worst thing?

"Sunday service infrequent."

"The time it took door to door from home to Birmingham city centre."

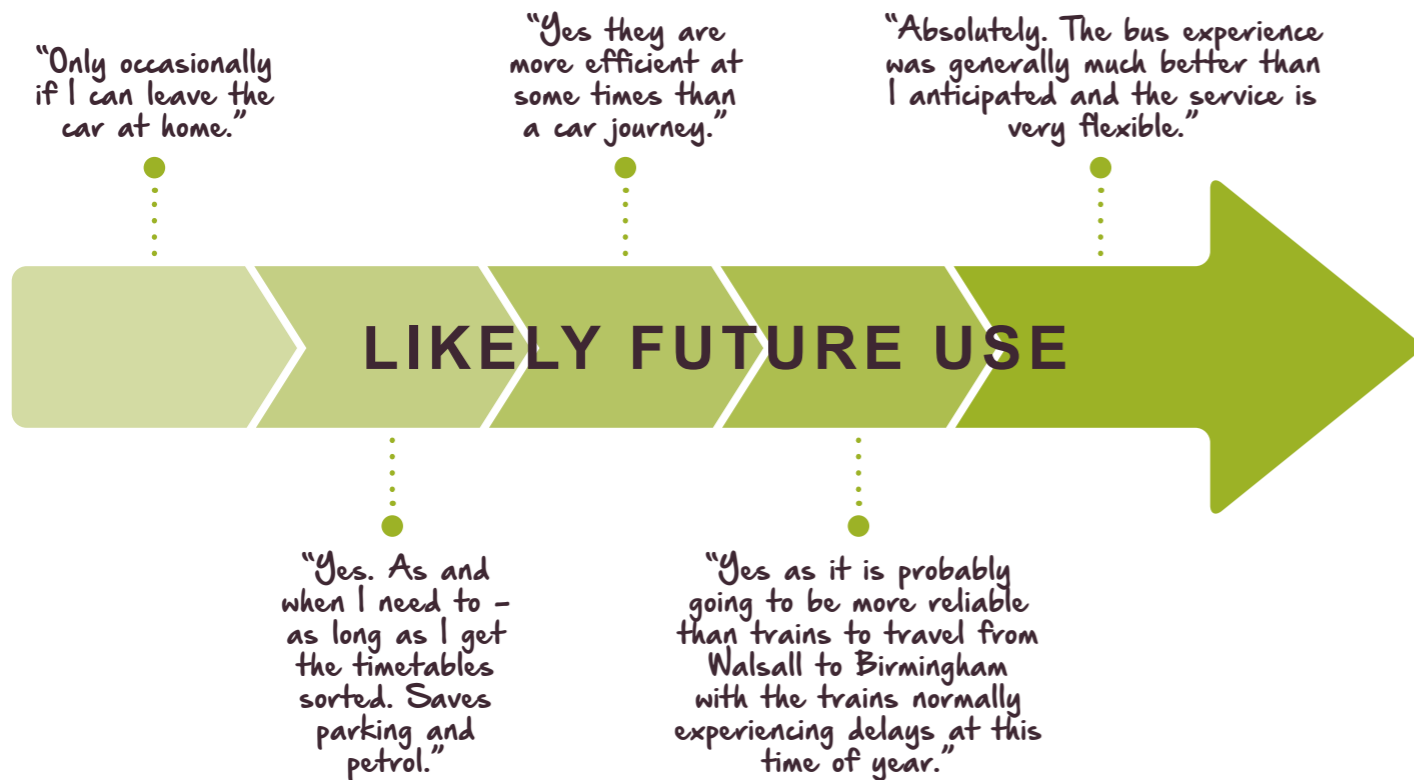
"Lack of air conditioning"

"Bus didn't turn up."

"Leg space."

"The unpredictably angry behaviour of some fellow passengers!"

When we asked them if they will continue using buses after taking part in **Give Bus a Go**, most said they would at least some of the time. Although there were some frustrations about availability of buses or timetables for certain journeys:



All of our Busketeers said that they might or definitely would recommend their friends and family to **Give Bus a Go**. When they gave their overall thoughts on participating in the project and on buses overall, there were some really good insights:

"Overall it has been exciting, pleasant and educational. Exciting to be at the launch event and be on the news. Pleasant experience as the buses and planning apps have been greatly modernised making the experience of using the buses more enjoyable than I remember from 10 years ago. Educational in the sense that it has allowed me to find out more about using the buses and routes and have a better understanding of where they can definitely replace using a car."

"I didn't feel I was as good a Busketeer as I hoped I would be. I had earmarked certain dates throughout September to use the buses, however it became apparent quite soon into the month that to do what I had hoped was going to put me under pressure, which I didn't want. I chose to use the bus within my daily life and not change my life to become a Busketeer."



"There were many positives - contactless payment, helpfulness of staff, modern buses, CCTV, surprisingly good timekeeping. Journey time can be quicker than alternatives end to end. Some negatives were the lack of "One Network" branding (ie bus numbering seems ad hoc particularly now low "easy to remember" numbers have been adopted as its confusing and of course the smaller operators don't comply anyway.

Lack of air con means misted windows in the rain and hot conditions in sun. Lack of faster connection options shown in timetables (i.e. No 7 bus goes direct from Norton to Merry Hill shopping Centre, however, 20 mins can be knocked off the journey with a simple change at Stourbridge but you need to be "in the know" to be aware).

"Overall the multiple journeys were extremely fun as I got to spend time with friends and there wasn't much to fault with the buses I went on."



"Thanks for the opportunity to be part of this. The project has taken me out on some new adventures and has impressed me with the flexibility of services. While buses can't replace the train - faster, cheaper - for my most regular journeys, they have certainly opened up new destinations and activities. I never dreamt I could bring home a full size wheeled suitcase, nor make it to timed appointments without leaving ridiculously early, nor even do my weekly food shop, all via the bus. And thanks to the lovely team who have supported us throughout. It's been a pleasure."

Conclusion

Our Busketeers activity works. Our volunteers shared some brilliant experiences, and we collected lots of reports, photos and videos which we will use to help make improvements and to understand best practice.

Overall the findings support what we know from our work on bus passenger satisfaction and priorities for improvement – but the information is more local and actionable.

Our Busketeers told us that offering the core product - a good network of routes served by consistently punctual and reliable bus services that offer good value for money - is critical to both keep people using buses and to persuade other people to **Give Bus a Go**.

The journeys our Busketeers made were better than what they expected in many ways. Busketeers have said they will use buses instead of using their car or trains for some journeys. In order to convince them to make more modal change and choose bus, the bus network needs to offer more direct destination choice, higher frequency and quicker journeys.



What next?

Share the findings

The rich and detailed feedback provided by our Busketeers will now be taken back to bus operators and Transport for West Midlands through the West Midlands Bus Alliance. There is plenty of constructive and useful feedback to work through and Transport Focus expects the industry to act upon such valuable evidence.

Action plan

Transport Focus currently chairs the Alliance so it is important that the quality of information provided by Busketeers is acted upon to seek out further improvements across the region. Working through the Alliance we will develop an action plan and publish progress against that plan.

Passenger research

Transport Focus, working in partnership with National Express West Midlands and Transport for West Midlands, will explore in more detail priority areas of improvement for passengers.

We will report on what we find about value for money, bus punctuality and passenger information in early 2020.

Help make bus more attractive

We will encourage industry to **Give Bus a Go** and allow passengers to share their experiences. Breaking down the barriers to bus use and understanding the perceptions of non-users is vital in building a successful network. Transport Focus will work with governments, operators and transport authorities to adopt the principles of **Give Bus a Go**.

#GiveBusAGo



Any enquiries about this report should be addressed to:

campaigns@transportfocus.org.uk