



Buses on Highways

England's roads:

meeting the needs of passengers
and bus companies

December 2019



Foreword

Transport Focus represents the interests of all users of the motorways and major 'A' roads managed by Highways England. Where bus services run on its roads, this includes the passengers and the bus company.

I am delighted that Highways England asked Transport Focus to carry out this work. Where scheduled bus services run on England's motorways and major 'A' roads, both the passengers and the bus company are Highways England's customers. This study looks at Bristol and Brighton, where buses use the M32 and A27 respectively, to understand how Highways England can better meet the needs of these road users.

Bus passengers want punctual services. In Transport Focus's annual Bus Passenger Survey, punctuality is top of the list of improvements they want to see. Our previous research *bus passengers have their say*¹ highlights that delivering the essentials, including punctuality and reliability, is a core requirement. And it's equally important to bus companies because passengers trust bus services that consistently deliver on the essentials.

In this research bus passengers highlight that the section of route on Highways England's network is often the fastest, smoothest part of the journey. The M32 and A27 are clearly having a positive impact on bus travel. However, passengers also highlight that congestion, including at specific locations on or approaching Highways England's network, is their greatest concern.

Transport Focus has made a number of recommendations in light of this work. While recognising Highways England's need to balance the needs of different groups of road users, Transport Focus looks forward to working with the organisation to bring about improvements.

Anthony Smith
Chief Executive

¹ Bus passengers have their say, 2016 <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/bus-passengers-have-their-say/>

Key findings

General views on bus

Reflecting what Transport Focus finds through its annual Bus Passenger Survey, those who use the bus are generally very positive about the experience.

Across all bus passengers involved in this research, including those making journeys for leisure and for commuting purposes, the bus is often used in preference to driving. This is generally because it is seen as being more convenient than the car.

Passengers told us that they use the bus to avoid sitting in the car in traffic and so they do not have to find a place to park in crowded town centres. Moreover, participants in the research said that it is usually cheaper to use the bus, particularly when compared with all the costs associated with driving. This echoes other Transport Focus research showing that convenience and cost are generally at the heart of these decisions.

When buses are working well, passengers appreciate the comfort of the surroundings and the ability to enjoy the journey at their leisure. They also appreciate the additional features which may be available, such as free Wi-Fi and charging points, the ease of buying tickets and of finding timetable information. Participants also stated that they see their use of the bus as a social good, the mode being a more efficient and environmentally friendly way of transporting large numbers of people.

While bus passengers recognise that existing priority measures help buses avoid the worst congestion at some locations, congestion is nevertheless the issue of greatest concern to bus passengers in Bristol and Brighton. Congestion is unpredictable and has considerable impact on the day-to-day lives of those who use buses. Passengers must

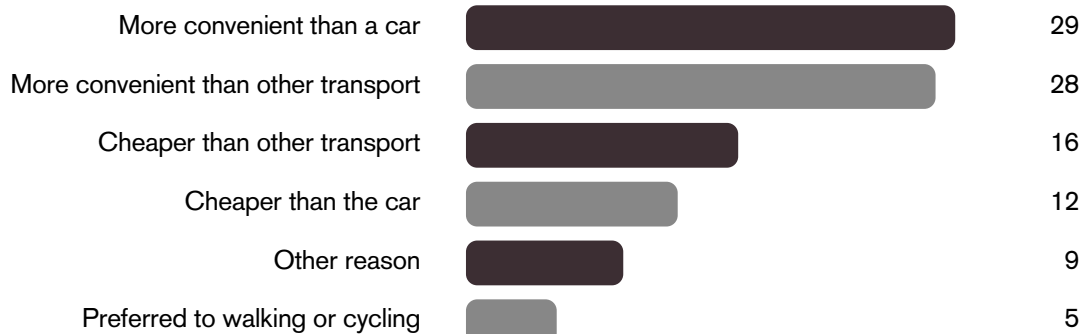
often plan around potential delays, leaving home well before they theoretically need to so as to mitigate against possible traffic jams.

In terms of how their bus routes operate on Highways England's roads, the bus passengers involved in the research viewed this part of their journey as being generally fast moving and smooth. However, they discussed in some detail specific issues related to the way operation of the network impacts on buses. These are covered in more detail below, though notably bus users indicated specific locations on the M32 and A27 where the buses they use are delayed in traffic.

Bus passengers were very supportive of any measures which gave buses priority and allowed them to continue their journey with ease. Bus lanes are top of mind when passengers think about priority measures, though they were also supportive of other measures, such as 'smart' traffic lights which would favour buses over other traffic. While bus users were generally supportive of measures that gave buses priority over other vehicles, this was particularly the case at times of disruption.

The local stakeholders who were involved in this study largely agreed with the views of the bus passengers. They generally recognised that at some locations and at particular times of the day congestion impacted negatively on operation of the bus routes. In relation to this, stakeholders were supportive of measures that gave buses priority over other vehicles as a way to improve bus journey times and reliability.

Main reason for selecting the bus %



Area Case Studies Bristol

Research in Bristol concentrated on the M3 and Y1 routes which run between the city centre and Emerson's Green and Yate respectively. The research looked at that part of these routes which are on or go across the M32 at junction 1 or do both.

The M3 MetroBus Service has operated in Bristol since May 2018. The MetroBus routes were introduced as part of a package of infrastructure improvements in the local area, and they benefit from many additional features such as advance ticketing and digital information displays. In relation to interaction with Highways England's network, the route runs along the M32 leaving and joining the carriageway near the University of the West of England at Begbrook with buses travelling across the motorway at junction 1 and along the A4174.

The Y1 is a standard commercial route which has benefited from some of the improvements made to serve the MetroBus. Most notably the bus has been re-routed to travel along the M32 between junction 1 at the A4174 and the city centre, rather than travelling on the local roads that it used previously.

In general bus users are satisfied with their experience of using both the M3 and the Y1 in terms of the journey time and the way that the routes compare with others in the local area. The M3 is particularly well regarded in terms of the latter.

While users of the M3 and Y1 are generally happy, they recognise that the operation of these buses can be impacted by congestion in Bristol, particularly at peak times. Congestion where the buses approach, travel along, or exit the M32 are mentioned specifically by many passengers, with delays due to traffic occurring where M3 buses meet the A4174, and along the motorway at Frenchay.

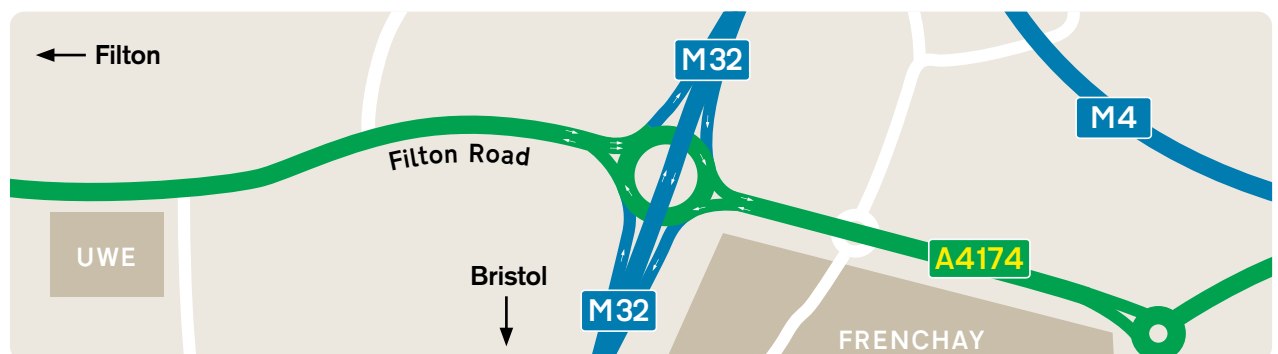
To allow buses to run more smoothly approaching and along Highways England's network, users of the Y1 and the M3 frequently mentioned the desirability

of having dedicated bus lanes. It was felt that current bus lanes in the area are piecemeal and not long enough, in terms of continuity, to provide significant advantages. Alongside bus lanes, bus passengers were generally positive regarding traffic lights which give buses priority over other traffic.

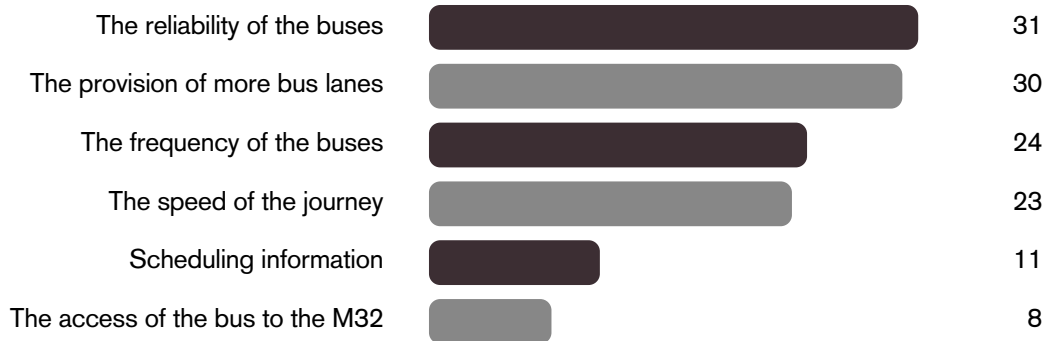
Users of the Y1 and the M3 recognised that there is currently a high occupancy vehicle lane on the A4174 approaching junction 1 of the M32 which is available for buses to use. Perhaps because of a lack of familiarity with the use of this lane, bus users were much less positive about this as a way to give buses priority in the area.

In general bus passengers were happier with measures which would benefit operation of the bus without requiring overly stringent enforcement. Passengers preferred bus-specific lanes, rather than high occupancy vehicle lanes which buses can also use, because they felt they are less open to misuse, deliberate or otherwise. Park and ride schemes were generally viewed positively; especially if they made the whole journey quicker, more convenient and more cost effective than driving all the way into Bristol and then having to find a parking space.

Findings from the consultation with stakeholders in Bristol reflect those from the passenger and driver research. Like bus passengers, stakeholders also felt that congestion at junction 1 of the M32 was an issue and that the introduction of measures which improve journey-time reliability for buses should be prioritised. In particular, stakeholders were supportive of measures which would give buses priority over other vehicles, and they also felt that the introduction of park and ride would have a positive impact.



Which one or two of the following is the most important thing to improve? %



% fairly/very satisfied with journey time



Area Case Studies Brighton

Research in Brighton concentrated on routes 28 and 29, branded the Regency Routes, between the city centre and Tunbridge Wells, with particular focus on experiences between Falmer and Lewes, where the 28 and 29 run along Highways England's A27 dual carriageway.

Passengers using the 28 and 29 are generally happy with the routes in terms of the time it takes to make their journeys, and they say that the routes are on a par with others in the local area in terms of overall quality.

As with passengers we spoke to in Bristol, users of the 28 and 29 mention that congestion on the route can be an issue. Locations on the A27 at Falmer and at the roundabout where the A27 meets the A277 Brighton Road outside Lewes were specifically mentioned in this respect. In relation to Falmer, congestion was felt to be a problem generally at peak times, though specific events, such as football matches at the American Express Stadium, also cause issues.

Drivers of 28 and 29 buses also mentioned congestion and delay on the route. However, unlike the passengers involved in the research they were also keen to talk about some of the bus stops on the A27. Bus drivers said some of the stops were poorly designed, making it difficult for them to see passengers waiting and to pull off and back onto the carriageway safely.

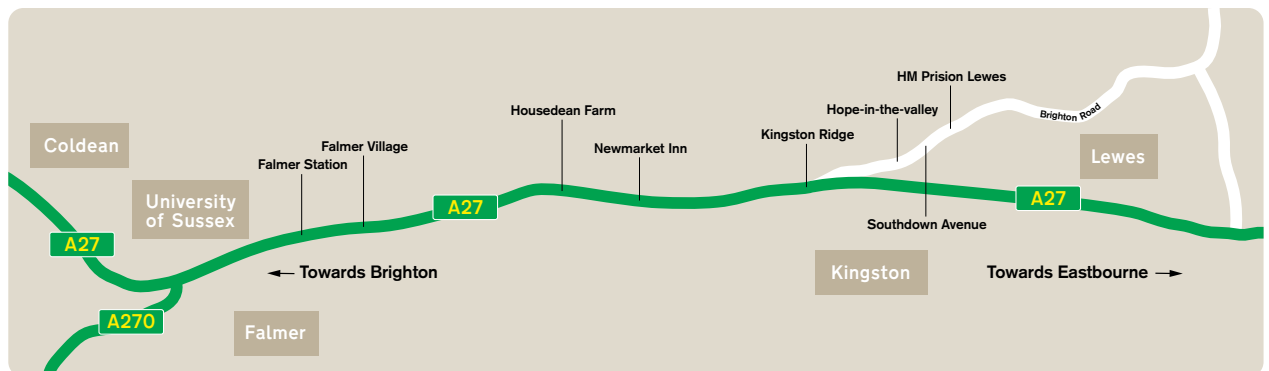
Bus passengers involved in the research were less likely to recognise bus stops on the A27 as a problem. However, this is in large part because those we spoke to were travelling the whole way from Brighton to Lewes without getting off. Nevertheless, users of the 28 and 29 buses felt that bus stops should meet a minimum standard/ have a minimum level of facilities, and that many of the bus stops on the A27 fell well short of this.

As in Bristol, the bus users in Brighton mentioned that additional and extended bus lanes could be used on the routes to protect buses from congestion on the A27. Passengers felt that this would be most effective in locations where congestion is known to be an issue, such as near Falmer.

Part of the issue in Falmer was felt to be the flow of traffic at peak times along the B2123 as it crosses the A27. This causes delay to the 28 and 29 buses as they head out of Falmer towards Lewes. Here, there was general support for any measures which would keep traffic moving freely and enable buses to get across the roundabout onto the northern side of the dual carriageway more easily.

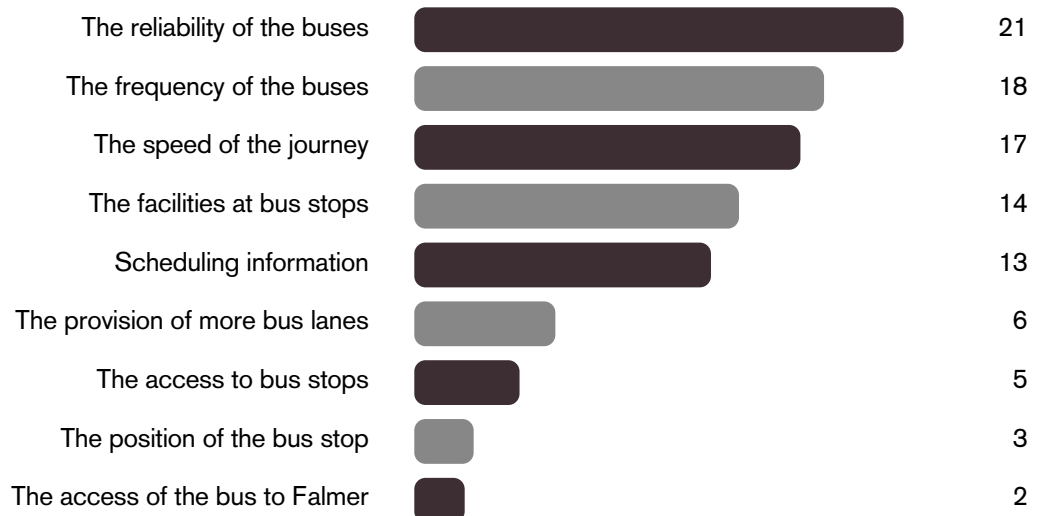
Unlike those in Bristol, bus passengers in the Brighton research were less positive about the addition of places to park near bus stops along the 28 and 29 routes. This was largely because they could not see how this would impact positively on their journeys, which tended to be from the centre of Brighton to the centre of Lewes.

Like bus passengers, local stakeholders in Brighton recognised the impact of congestion on the operation of buses and were supportive of measures which would give buses priority over other vehicles. Stakeholders felt more strongly that bus stops on the A27 required improvement, particularly in terms of their visibility. Stakeholders felt that action should be taken to reduce the speed of traffic on the A27 and that this would favour the operation of the buses on the carriageway. However, this was not a view generally shared by bus passengers, who were unclear how this would help them.





Which one or two of the following is the most important thing to improve? %



Transport Focus recommendations

In light of the Bristol and Brighton studies and our wider understanding of what matters most to bus passengers, Transport Focus makes the following recommendations.

Transport Focus recognises that actions to improve the services Highways England provides to one group of its customers may have a detrimental impact on another. A balanced approach will be required where that is the case.

While these studies looked at scheduled bus services on Highways England's roads, it is likely that some recommendations are also relevant to coach passengers and coach companies.

1. Highways England should implement a range of improvements which help bus companies run punctual, reliable services which passengers can trust. This should include:

- measures to help buses get on and off the SRN with minimum delay and maximum journey time predictability
- measures to reduce the impact on buses of congestion which occurs on the SRN itself.

It is worth noting that bus passengers value bus lanes and see how they can help buses avoid congestion, both on the SRN and approaching it. Passengers also recognise the benefits of traffic lights giving buses priority over other vehicles.



2. Highways England should develop a minimum standard of provision for bus stops on its roads, upgrading those not meeting that standard as quickly as practicable.

Passengers and bus drivers recognise that bus stop infrastructure is generally of poor quality on the A27 between Brighton and Lewes. This section would be a good candidate for early implementation of a new minimum standard, providing instant improvement for passengers and bus drivers. Improving the usability and safety of the Newmarket Inn stop on the A27 should be an early priority.

3. Highways England should, in day to day operations, strive to minimise impact on timetables during disruption, whether caused by planned roadworks, an event or an accident. This should include:

- taking account of 'first and last' bus times when deciding when to close roads for overnight maintenance and other works
- examining whether there are limited circumstances in which buses could use a road that is closed to other traffic, where it is safe to do so and it would avoid significant inconvenience to passengers.

Highways England should consider the impact on bus operators and passengers if there is a diversion, whether planned or otherwise. In limited circumstances, could scheduled buses be allowed through a set of roadworks to avoid a diversion that would prevent them getting to key bus stops? Could temporary priority be given to scheduled buses when an event takes place which causes extra congestion?

4. Highways England should strengthen its relationships with bus companies running scheduled services on its roads; with councils managing adjacent highway networks; and with sub-national transport bodies.

The greater Highways England's understanding of bus companies' particular needs, priorities and challenges, the more likely it is that the needs of these key customers are met.

Passengers have strong awareness of the broader road network's impact on bus services and want everybody to work together to tackle congestion.

Thinking about the road network in a given area as a whole could help to improve the experience of all road users. Common understanding of how strategic roads impact on local roads and vice versa should lead to better, more collaborative ways of tackling congestion and allow proposals to achieve the four 'Rs' (retime, reroute, remode, reduce) to be developed.



5. Highways England should consider partnering with bus companies, local authorities and others to pilot ‘try the bus’ initiatives, with the objective that some current car users choose bus for some or all of their trips in future.

Passengers suggested that as part of this Highways England and others could fund complimentary tickets for current non-users.

6. Highways England should consider how capacity on the SRN should be defined in future.

Should success be defined in future as moving the largest number of people rather than the largest number of vehicles? This could incentivise Highways England to facilitate greater use of bus and coach, potentially to the advantage of all road users.

Other findings

Highways England should be aware that in general bus passengers:

- Can see the sense of giving buses priority over cars because they can carry a large number of people through congested locations.
- Think that bus use should be made an 'obvious choice', in other words be made more convenient, cheaper, quicker and more reliable than using cars.
- Don't see 'information campaigns' as effective at changing people's choice of mode. Rather, they think that people should be actively encouraged to try out the bus. For example, the passengers we spoke to suggested that people should be encouraged by being offered free tickets for a return journey on a 'try the bus' day.
- May not notice improvements intended for their benefit (for example if it is not visible or a problem simply goes away) or may be sceptical if their journey does not seemingly benefit from the improvements being made (for example a better bus stop on a Highways England road at which fewer people get on and off in comparison with 'end to end' usage). Where this is the case Highways England should engage locally and communicate why the improvements are being made.
- Would like to see the introduction of measures which give buses priority at times of disruption, including special events or roadworks.

How we carried out the research

Transport Focus held focus groups with users of the M3 and Y1 bus routes in Bristol and users of the 28 and 29 bus routes in Brighton. These groups included a spread of types of bus user by age, reason for making a journey, and frequency of bus use. The groups explored why people choose to use bus in general, the nature of the routes which were of interest to this research, and what improvements might be made to the way they operate, specifically the sections on Highways England's roads.

- In-depth interviews were carried out with drivers working on the relevant bus routes in each of the areas. These gave an expert perspective on the way the buses run on Highways England's roads and about improvements that might be made to help them to better serve passengers.
- A survey of users of each of the bus routes in the two areas was carried out to measure satisfaction with the current service offered and to explore the priorities for improvement. We interviewed bus users as they travelled on the routes in question.

Campaign for Better Transport led the engagement with stakeholders on behalf of Transport Focus. This included:

- Contacting a wide range of local stakeholders in both case study areas and inviting them to participate in a workshop. At the workshops, participants were asked to identify key issues for bus operations and bus passengers, prioritise these issues, and then help identify priority locations and potential interventions to address problems.
- CBT also collected stakeholder views through a bespoke online survey, emails and interviews.



Contact Transport Focus

Any enquiries about this research should be addressed to:

Guy Dangerfield
Head of Strategy

Guy.Dangerfield@transportfocus.org.uk
www.transportfocus.org.uk

Fleetbank House
2-6 Salisbury Square
London
EC4Y 8JX

Transport Focus is the operating name of the Passengers' Council

Transport Focus is the independent consumer organisation representing 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