

What bus passengers think: how our passenger insight is used to improve services

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Background

Each year around 50,000 passengers across England, Scotland and Wales share their experiences of their most recent bus journey. The results are presented in the Bus Passenger Survey, providing a comprehensive picture of satisfaction with bus travel. The results play a key part in how Transport Focus works with various bus operators, transport authorities and established bus partnerships and alliances across England.

Beneath the headline figure of overall satisfaction, the survey provides a wealth of data on every aspect of bus passenger experience. Transport Focus works with the industry to interpret that information and ensure it is used to improve services. In early 2019 Transport Focus took the results out across England and Scotland, holding a publication event in Bristol and more than 90 meetings with operating groups, bus operating companies, local authorities and governments.

This report summarises what we learnt from those meetings and provides examples of how the results are used to drive improvements for bus passengers.

BPS insight drives improvements

There are some great examples of bus companies using Transport Focus's BPS as a tool to underpin their planning and decision-making

Making the most of the BPS in Reading

Reading Buses' management team and training academy act on the BPS results as part of its annual planning cycle. It assesses what needs to improve and what action is needed right across the business. It might focus on the experience of drivers, the bus stop environment or reliability of the service. As a customer-focused business, the results guide a wide range of decisions believing that everything affects the passenger experience.

It cascades the results and the action throughout the organisation using a leaflet *What our customers are saying about us*. As a result, Reading Buses increased overall passenger satisfaction by six percentage points to 94 per cent in 2018. But this does not mean it rests on its laurels: it wants to do even better.

Passengers' interaction with the driver is one of the most important aspects of their journey experience. The priority in Reading is to recruit drivers who are excellent at customer care - bus driving is a skill which can be taught. Satisfaction with journey time increased by seven percentage points which Reading Buses believes is partly down to the introduction of contactless and app tickets, with a 14 per cent decline in the use of cash.

There has, however, been a decline of seven percentage points in satisfaction with the driver. This could be down to greater use of contactless and app tickets as there

is less personal interaction between the driver and the passenger. The company is now encouraging its drivers – and other customer-facing staff – to greet customers with some words and a smile: a ‘good’ journey should become a ‘great’ one.

To something more practical. One of the top six measurements that can make a journey ‘great’ rather than ‘good’, is the cleanliness of the bus. It has seen a two percentage point reduction in satisfaction with cleanliness on the outside of the bus and one percentage point on the inside. So Reading Buses is working with its night supervisors to increase the number of quality checks being made.

Passengers rated value for money more highly than before, up five percentage points. This could be the result of increasing the range of tickets, particularly to students, and also promoting the better-value 7-day fare scheme. Reading Buses has also responded to changing customer expectations, with more vehicles fitted with USB charging and other creature comforts to improve the customer experience. It has realised that shift workers need buses so has introduced more 24-hour services.

Using BPS to understand passengers in Blackpool

Blackpool Transport wanted to gain fresh perspective from a detailed understanding of its passengers’ experience. It looked at the results of the survey from the last four years.

As well as considering the percentage of passengers who overall were satisfied with their journey, Blackpool Transport also analysed the changes in levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with each key aspect of the journey. Instead of just looking at overall trends, they were able to use BPS to consider the shift between levels of satisfaction – so between ‘fairly’ and ‘very’ satisfied or neither/nor; and between ‘fairly’ and ‘very’ dissatisfied, across the four years they were looking at.

Looking at factors where satisfaction had changed, the operator reviewed any operational changes such as new buses, route changes or fare changes to see if these had had an impact. Then it used the information to identify the key priorities.

The spotlight for Blackpool Transport is now on value for money and its July Board meeting particularly explored fares for young people. The graphs showed how passengers under 35 years old had falling satisfaction levels with value for money, but those over 35 had a growing level of satisfaction. This has been used to design the 2020 fares, product and marketing strategy.

Finance and Commercial Director, James Carney, said: “This approach has turned data into knowledge and led to active consideration of our options and plans for improvement.”

Using BPS to embed the passenger voice in bus partnerships

Transport Focus works in partnership with several city regions to articulate the passenger voice in local investment and operational decision-making about future bus services. The BPS is often crucial to these partnerships both in terms of choosing where to focus resource and then in measuring the impact.

- For the **West Yorkshire** Bus Alliance the BPS is the key indicator when assessing customer satisfaction. This is one of its key measures of success and integral to the work of the Alliance.
- In the **West Midlands** the Alliance has a clear objective to maintain bus passenger satisfaction, as measured by BPS, at 85 per cent. This is being achieved. There is a customer satisfaction ‘task and finish’ group that uses BPS results to focus priorities. This group meets regularly, is attended by Transport Focus and feeds into the Bus Alliance Board.
- In **Liverpool City Region** the Alliance members use BPS to track the impact of investment in new fleets of buses; how the addition of Wi-Fi and at-seat charging, and changes to fare and ticket deals, are received by passengers. There are specific indicators within the Alliance to drive up ratings for overall passenger satisfaction and satisfaction with value for money.

Operators using BPS results to motivate their own staff

Many bus operators make great use of BPS results to focus the workforce on the things that matters to customers.

There are lots of examples of BPS featuring in staff newsletters, articles circulated internally and posters on staffroom doors. These techniques help senior management teams reach a large workforce that are based in widespread locations. This can highlight areas where the business is struggling and wants to improve but can also celebrate success.

Operators are working hard to show bus drivers the vital role they play in delivering a great journey experience for passengers.

For example, **Trent Barton** let its drivers know how proud it was of them in [this article](#) that featured on its website and in a printed newsletter.

In the case of **Stagecoach South Yorkshire** and **Warrington’s Own Buses** they’ve followed our discussions by sharing the results with staff and then in some cases giving small rewards to thank them for their efforts, (from free hot drinks and even Easter eggs) to show appreciation for their vital contribution to customer journeys.

Transport Focus has seen examples of BPS used in this way by operators across the country and believes it plays a part in inspiring drivers to offer the best service they can.

BPS meetings influence change

Meetings with operators allow Transport Focus colleagues the opportunity to help interpret the results and discuss potential changes that could benefit passengers.

Small changes make for a clearer ticket

On the back of presenting the Bus Passenger Survey results to **Stagecoach East** (operating in Bedford, Cambridge, Peterborough and their hinterlands), Transport Focus took the opportunity to raise lack of clarity about child ages in relation to family all day tickets. Taking Peterborough for example: it wasn't clear (to passengers or bus drivers) that the Peterborough Family DayRider, £5.50, was valid for one adult and 2 children under 12, while the Cambridgeshire Family DayRider Plus, £7.80, is valid for one adult and 2 children under 16. Stagecoach listened to this, and the detail is now printed on the ticket itself.

Identifying an issue is the first step to resolving it

Passengers don't necessarily realise when the ticket/pass they have can be used on multiple operators' buses. This came up in a meeting with **Brighton & Hove Buses**, when BPS results showed the proportion of passengers who said that their day pass/longer pass was valid across bus companies. This was somewhat less than 100 per cent and yet all of its passes could be used in this way.

Having highlighted the issue the meeting provided an opportunity to discuss why this might be (possibly because the pass is branded as Brighton & Hove, or simply because many passengers may catch the same bus run by Brighton & Hove all the time) and to consider some options to help passengers understand the full benefits of these tickets.

Highlighting and improving personal safety

BPS meetings with **Merseytravel** in previous years highlighted antisocial behaviour as an area where improvements could benefit passengers. The TravelSafe Partnership has used the survey findings to help prioritise its work to tackle antisocial behaviour and is now seeing real benefits. The most recent results saw an increase in satisfaction with personal safety at the bus stop and less passengers saying they were worried about things like rowdy behaviour on board or feet on seats.

BPS meetings uncover challenges and share best practice

Travelling around the country and meeting representatives from across the bus industry is a great way for Transport Focus to keep in touch with what's happening. It highlights the challenges the industry is facing and informs our wider thinking. It's no

surprise to hear that tight budgets are causing difficulties for authorities right across the country. It can also be useful to hear about new initiatives or examples of best practice that can then be shared more widely.

Cuts in budgets prompt difficult decisions

A BPS meeting with **SWESTRANS (Dumfries & Galloway)** outlined the difficulties in making improvements based on cuts in budgets. For example, a particular challenge during the first part of 2018/19 was the replacement of the 101/102 local bus service from Dumfries to Edinburgh.

Due to a reduction in funding by Scottish Borders Council (previous contribution was £135K per year), retaining the current level of service was unaffordable. Following a procurement process it was reluctantly agreed to go with the best value alternative, which provided a reduced level of service. The service provided from August 2018 now finishes earlier in the evening and the number of through journeys between Dumfries and Edinburgh reduced from six to four each day.

When budgets are tight prioritisation is key

Kent County Council shared an example. It has had to prioritise spending valuable budget on keeping services running rather than installing new real-time information at bus stops. A parish shelter grant fund allows for bus shelters in more rural areas. The council also aims to be as efficient as possible, for example, whenever any civil works are carried out around/at bus stops, it makes sure to address anything required for compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act at the same time.

A trial worth keeping an eye on

While meeting **First Group South (Southampton, Solent)** we heard about an initiative to monitor road surface quality. The scheme had been introduced six months earlier working with Balfour Beatty.

A selection of buses were fitted with devices that can monitor how even the road surface is, the depth of potholes and other road surface features. This information then feeds into a database to show which roads have issues that need dealing with. This should enable better prioritisation of work by the council.

At the time of the meeting, First Group hadn't yet followed up with Balfour Beatty to see what impact the scheme has had on improvements to road surface quality. However, Transport Focus encouraged it to and will watch with interest to see if this scheme could be of benefit elsewhere.

The industry's view of BPS

The BPS isn't just a set of numbers – it must be useful and well-used by the industry. Transport Focus regularly checks that the survey is delivering as it should to allow the industry to use it as a robust, reliable tool on which to base decisions. Here are a few of examples of what the industry thinks about BPS.

Simon Day, Contracts and Services Manager, Integrated Passenger Transport, Durham County Council:

"What we at Durham most value is the way the Bus Passenger Survey results provide an independent and statistically sound account of the perceptions of bus passengers' priorities and concerns, that either reinforces or challenges the understandings that we have acquired through our ordinary work."

Martijn Gilbert, Managing Director, Go North East:

"The Bus Passenger Survey is an important part of how we both embed and celebrate success, as well as drive improvements across our company. This year, for example, the results have led us to undertake a major fares review designed to give better value for money options for passengers, plus undertake a whole separate deeper dive research workstream on our offer and journey experience for young people so we can do even better at attracting and retaining our long term customers of the future."

Julian Ridge, Programme Manager, City of York Council:

"York Quality Bus Partnership have commissioned Transport Focus to undertake the Bus Passenger Survey on York's bus services since 2013, and are about to see our seventh set of survey results. We find the data invaluable in a number of ways. It allows us to track progress from year to year, and compare ourselves to other areas. Most importantly, though, is that the data allows us to identify priorities from year to year. For instance, the first set of surveys identified that the information at bus stops in York was perceived as being very poor, so a new system was implemented and both the satisfaction score and bus patronage increased. Current focuses are on improving punctuality and the condition of some of our bus shelters – again, informed by the Bus Passenger Survey".

James Freeman, Managing Director, First West of England:

"I think the Bus Passenger Survey remains the most relevant and well-thumbed feedback on passenger experience in the bus industry today. We rely on it to provide good quality data and analysis, which is why we come back to be part of it year after year after year. Even when (perhaps indeed especially when) it does not have good news to impart, it remains a really vital tool for bus managers who want to make their services appeal to users of all types. Here in the West of England we fall on it when it arrives and trawl through it for insights that can direct us to future improvement. We're hoping this year that they have done just that!"

Adam Rideout, Head of Customer Experience, National Express Bus:

“A customer’s journey with us is not just the time they spend on the bus, it is so much more and the annual Bus Passenger Survey is one of the many tools we use to understand and learn first hand what it is our customers think of us. We want more happy customers and using insight from the survey allows us to focus our efforts in achieving this goal.”

Robin Riley, Nottinghamshire Transport & Travel Services, Nottinghamshire County Council:

“Nottinghamshire County Council have participated in the Bus Passenger Survey each year since 2013 and note that the survey and report has become increasingly established and respected across the industry, covering all aspects of bus passenger satisfaction. The data hub is also an important resource. The Council has used it to support the production of bespoke reports, including annual reports to the Council’s Committee covering passenger satisfaction. The reports have highlighted achievements and areas for development, including addressing the perception of value for money for young people, which has consistently ranked lower for satisfaction than other measures in the survey. It is also useful to be able to benchmark passenger satisfaction across the range of measures against other local authorities. We have found the local bus operators to be very supportive, and they also place value on the results, with any successes widely promoted, which also helps to drive continuous improvement in delivery of their services.

The Council recognises the survey methodology as being robust, the process is professionally managed, and the leadership of Transport Focus helps with maintaining the national profile of the survey with industry stakeholders and the media.”

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