



Setting targets in Bus Service Improvement Plans

June 2021

This best practice guide covers setting targets for passenger growth, journey times, reliability improvements and customer satisfaction. It includes monitoring and reporting on performance against them.

In summary



Set reliability and journey-time targets for different times of the day and days of the week, as well as overall targets.



Set targets for improving your least-reliable and slowest services.



As well as an overall satisfaction target, measure satisfaction with the things that matter most to passengers and potential passengers.



Accompany your targets with a plan of action designed to help you to meet them.



Report dissatisfaction as well as satisfaction levels and provide comparisons to make it easier to interpret your performance.



Focus on individual routes or transport corridors, particularly when reporting on reliability and journey times.



When providing performance information to passengers keep it simple. Communicate at a time and a place when bus service performance matters most to them.



Provide a more detailed report for those who want it, such as passenger groups and Traffic Commissioners including, for example, detailed breakdowns, data collection methods and validation of figures.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The National Bus Strategy says that local transport authorities (LTAs) must set targets for journey times and reliability improvements in their largest cities and towns. They must also publish customer satisfaction targets. LTAs must publish six-monthly progress reports against all these targets.
- 1.2 Government guidance on Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) reminds LTAs that it is mandatory to seek and report the views of passengers and third parties on the merits and shortcomings of bus services locally. They must also seek views on how well the LTA and local operators are performing.

Bodies to survey include local transport users' groups, MPs, local services and business organisations. Passenger survey data, if any, should be reported (paragraph 48).

- 1.3 The guidance goes on to say that LTAs should set targets for journey time and reliability improvements for the LTA area as a whole and for each of the largest cities and towns, as well as for passenger growth and customer satisfaction. BSIPs should show what progress is expected towards these targets by 2025 and also 2030 (paragraph 65).

2 What to measure

- 2.1 Targets enable you to measure progress in improving your service. Reporting your performance against them also makes you more accountable and can help to build trust.
- 2.2 The first set of decisions concerns what activity you choose to measure. Setting targets has become increasingly popular among public sector providers over the last 30 years.

However, the emphasis on targets can be controversial. It can be perceived to draw attention to more marginal matters which are easy to measure, rather than to the core activity of a service, which can sometimes be more difficult to measure.

- 2.3 LTAs may find it helpful to set additional targets which can help them to focus their efforts on the things that matter most to passengers and potential passengers. Some LTAs may have robust data about passengers' priorities for improvement in their area.

Transport Focus carried out national research into [Bus Passengers' Priorities for Improvement](#).

Our most recent report, based on fieldwork from Spring 2019 (before the Covid-19 pandemic), found that bus passengers' top ten priorities were:

1. buses running more often
2. buses going to more places
3. more buses on time at the stop
4. better value for money
5. more journeys on time
6. more effort to tackle any antisocial behaviour
7. faster journey times
8. more bus stops with next-bus displays
9. better quality of information at bus stops
10. more space for wheelchairs and buggies.

2.4 Non-users' priorities for improving bus services were:

1. buses going to more places
2. buses running more often
3. better value for money
4. bus stops closer to home/destination
5. more bus services running on time
6. faster journey times
7. more effort to tackle antisocial behaviour
8. live bus times available on a smartphone
9. buses running earlier/later in the day
10. ability to pay by mobile/contactless card

2.5 Our new report [The route ahead: getting passengers back on buses](#) presents the results of a major survey of current and lapsed passengers, and non-users. It sets out the priorities for increased bus use among those who have stopped using the bus during the Covid-19 pandemic or are using it less frequently.

Passengers' top five 2019 priorities for improvement (see 2.3 above) were still in the top 10 of this refreshed research. However, the bottom half of the list was replaced by concerns which reflect the significance of the pandemic:

- inside of bus maintained and cleaned to high standard
- measures on board buses to help passengers keep a safe distance
- staff making sure passengers wear face coverings and keep a safe distance
- improved ventilation and temperature control
- hand sanitiser readily available on buses.

2.6 Non-users' top reasons for not using the bus continued to reflect traditional concerns about frequency, punctuality, journey times and value for money.

However they also highlighted concerns related to Covid-19. That said, by far the most significant reason for not choosing the bus is that travelling by another mode is viewed as more convenient.

- 2.7 BSIP targets should focus on longer-term improvements, rather than immediate recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. LTAs and operators should recognise that the value that passengers place on clean and hygienic buses is likely to continue.

Passenger growth

- 2.8 Forecasting what is going to happen to bus patronage is particularly difficult at the moment. On the one hand there is uncertainty surrounding the economy, employment, and public spending plans. On the other, there is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people's confidence to return to public transport and on commuting and shopping.
- 2.9 What is important is to present the rationale behind your forecast and to set out your plans for driving up patronage against this uncertain backdrop.
- 2.10 As with your other targets, a breakdown of patronage according to factors like demographics, journey purpose and ticket purchased can help you to understand the impact of your interventions. It could inform your approach going forward, enabling you to focus on specific market segments.

Improving journey times and reliability

- 2.11 Which journeys should you measure? You should start by creating an overall target, a total average journey time or average reliability from all of the journeys taking place across your area each week.
- 2.12 Complement this overall target with more granular targets for different times of day and days of the week, such as morning peak, inter-peak, afternoon peak, evening, and weekend services. This will help you to better understand when and where services are delayed and where interventions are required.

You could develop a sample of routes and measure the performance of a selection of services on each route at each of these times and days. This would tell you about the performance of a broad spectrum of services which may be seen as indicative of all journeys.

- 2.13 Another approach would be to set targets for the worst-performing routes at the worst times of day. These will often be some of your busiest services and thus those that are likely to be most in demand from potential passengers. So improving the journey times and reliability of these services is likely to benefit the most people.

- 2.14 Of course, improvements are unlikely to happen of their own accord, so target setting needs to be accompanied by a plan of actions designed to drive up performance.

While modifying timetables may help to improve reliability on certain routes, adding some extra minutes into the schedule will, conversely, extend journey times. The introduction of bus priority measures or the enforcement of parking restrictions could contribute to an improvement in both indicators.

Our 2014 report [What's The Hold-Up?](#) catalogued some of interventions available to both local authorities and operators seeking to address slow and unreliable services. These include speeding up boarding and alighting. Our report highlighted the value of analysing data to understand how best to tackle delays.

Customer satisfaction

- 2.15 Many of the same issues apply to setting targets for customer satisfaction. You should set an overall satisfaction target, supported by more specific ones. Satisfaction levels may vary between routes and across different times of the day and different days of the week.

If you are not going to measure satisfaction with every single service, you will have to select a sample of services to measure and a rationale to drive that selection.

- 2.16 There are two additional questions you should ask yourself: which customers' satisfaction are we measuring, and which elements of their satisfaction are we measuring?
- 2.17 Setting a single target for passenger satisfaction can give you a measure of progress, but on its own it will do little to explain why things are getting better or worse. Testing passengers' satisfaction with the things that matter most to them, in addition to an overall target, will give you pointers to where you need to focus your efforts.
- 2.18 Transport Focus has carried out an annual [Bus Passenger Survey](#) since 2009/10. This is based on a sample of local authority areas, in each of which we gather the views of a cross-section of users - some paying for their journeys, others travelling on concessionary passes.

We asked about satisfaction with a wide range of on-bus and off-bus factors. These include punctuality, journey time, value for money, personal security, cleanliness, and information.

- 2.19 This year is the first in which we did not publish an annual survey. The Covid-19 pandemic reduced patronage to such an extent in Autumn 2020 that it

would have rendered comparisons with previous years meaningless. Our research team would also have had challenges in getting on board buses to hand out questionnaires as in previous years.

- 2.20 We are keen to work with the Department for Transport and industry bodies to develop a new bus passenger survey that is:
- six-monthly, to tie in with the Government's reporting requirements
 - slimmed down with fewer questions
 - easier for passengers to complete
 - faster and simpler to analyse and report on.
- 2.21 We expect any new survey will be cheaper to run. We will encourage all LTAs to buy into it, as it will enable them to benchmark their performance against other, similar authorities.
- 2.22 We hope this new survey will be available soon. In the meantime, LTAs will have to carry out their own surveys of bus user satisfaction or rely on scores from previous Bus Passenger Surveys when benchmarking passenger satisfaction with their services.
- 2.23 As with journey times and reliability, passenger satisfaction targets must be supported by a plan of actions designed to drive up your performance. If you are seeking to improve your passenger satisfaction scores for personal security, for example, or value for money, you need to reflect on the likely impact on satisfaction of any measures you are planning to introduce.

Passenger Charter

- 2.24 We will shortly publish guidance on developing a Passenger Charter. A key characteristic of a good charter is that it should contain promises about the minimum acceptable level of performance. These should be directly linked to redress for the individual passenger wherever that promise is not kept.
- 2.25 The rail industry offers passengers refunds on their tickets if trains are late. Some bus operators make similar promises, although these can be conditional. Promises differ from targets. Promises are entitlements that are guaranteed to be delivered every time to each passenger. Targets aim to deliver a certain overall level of service or to satisfy a certain proportion of passengers. LTAs should develop both.

For example, your BSIP should set out your aspirations to improve your bus services. Your Passenger Charter should spell out individual entitlements and commit to redress where this is not delivered. This could mean financial compensation, an investigation and an explanation, a commitment to address a systematic failure or, in some cases, simply an apology.

3 Reporting your performance

- 3.1 There are a number of audiences when you report your performance. First, the LTA itself and local operators who need to use the data as management information to drive change.
- 3.2 Second, there is the Department for Transport. Its requirements are clearly spelt out in the guidance and do not need to be repeated here.
- 3.3 Third, there are other stakeholders such as other elected representatives and the Traffic Commissioner.
- 3.4 Last but not least, there are your passengers and potential passengers, and passenger groups. If you want to increase bus patronage in your area you should be looking to give them confidence that bus services are well-managed, that they are of good quality and improving, and that you are listening to them.
- 3.5 Satisfaction levels will be influenced by who you ask and when you ask them, as discussed above. That consideration apart, performance reporting is a relatively objective exercise. Most LTAs have chosen to combine 'very satisfied' and 'fairly satisfied' scores into a single headline figure, although the percentages who are dissatisfied can also be revealing. In the interests of full transparency we recommend publishing both.

Any figures are likely to be more meaningful if they can be contextualised, for example by comparison with previous years' figures or other similar areas, but only if the same methodology is adopted. We have not researched passengers' appetite for satisfaction data, but there is no reason to believe it is particularly significant. Nevertheless, it is right to make data on satisfaction levels available to those who wish to see it.

- 3.6 When it comes to reporting punctuality and reliability we have more evidence of passengers' views. In 2014 Transport Focus commissioned research into passengers' views on bus punctuality, which we published in [How Late Is Late? What passengers think about punctuality and timetables](#).
 - Passengers agreed that it was reasonable to regard an infrequent service running no more than five minutes late as being punctual.
 - The concept of 'excess wait time' in relation to frequent services was less readily understood. Passengers said they thought the standard 'within about five minutes on top of the service frequency' made more sense.

- Participants in the research were unlikely to actively seek information about the punctuality of buses in their area. However, they considered local information might be occasionally useful to the following two groups:
 - people considering moving location (either within an area or to a new area) who were reliant on public transport, particularly if making other transport connections
 - people considering purchasing a car as an alternative to public transport.
- There was also some mild interest in simple, headline information reaching passengers passively at points when they care about bus performance. This might be, for example, when they are waiting at a bus stop or when they are travelling on a bus.
- Specifically, passengers thought they would be interested in seeing headline figures for the numbers of buses arriving on time and numbers of cancellations.
- In all cases, passengers assumed that such information would only be useful or interesting if it linked to their own route in some way.
- Opinions varied on whether or not such information should be limited to peak-time travel or averaged across the day.
- Passengers only wanted to see headline statistics expressed as percentages or numbers out of ten. Participants were not interested in more detailed information provided in graph form or displaying trends as this was considered difficult to read at a glance.
- Even where they have no personal interest in viewing more detailed information, passengers felt that it would be important for this to be collected about bus performance by route (in terms of punctuality and cancellation). Specifically, they felt this would provide the essential data by which each operator could be assessed and therefore regulated.
- In light of this, there were some concerns about bus operators collecting this information without any validation or auditing from an independent party to ensure data integrity. In line with issues in other industries and sectors, passengers felt that it might be in bus operators' interests to report figures positively.

3.7 We recommend that you:

- report dissatisfaction as well as satisfaction levels and provide comparisons to make it easier to interpret your performance
- focus on individual routes or transport corridors, particularly when reporting on reliability and journey times

- keep it simple when reporting to passengers, and communicate at a time and a place when bus service performance matters most to them
- provide a more detailed report for those who want them, such as passenger groups and Traffic Commissioners including, for example, detailed breakdowns, data collection methods and validation of figures.



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