



Passenger charters for Bus Service Improvement Plans

August 2021

This guide explains the purpose of your charter, what you should include in it, how to promote it and how to use it to improve local bus services.

In summary



Make it clear which local transport authorities (LTAs) and operators, as well as local bus services, your charter covers.



Involve passenger representatives in the development of your charter.



Keep your charter concise. Refer to other documents which spell out passengers' legal rights.



The main body of your charter should explain what every passenger can expect every time they travel. Try to focus on the things that matter most to passengers.



Encourage passengers to complain if their expectations are not met and explain how to do this and what you might do about this. Set out what every complainant can expect about the way their complaint will be handled.



Promote your charter by publicising it prominently on local authority and operator websites, on buses and at bus stops, transport interchanges and travel shops.



Ensure your charter is produced in formats that make it accessible to all.



Report regularly on your performance against charter commitments and discuss improvements with passenger representatives.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In this section we start by reminding you of what the Government has said about Bus Passenger Charters in the National Bus Strategy and supporting guidance. We then set out the Transport Focus position.

National Bus Strategy and Government guidance

- 1.2 The [National Bus Strategy](#) says (page 41): “We expect Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) to drive improvements for passengers by committing to a Bus Passenger Charter (BPC) that sets out what passengers can expect from bus operators delivering local bus services across their area. BPCs should include commitment on the accessibility of bus services.”
- 1.3 The [Government guidance](#) (paragraph 99) says: “BSIPs must include a passengers' charter giving bus users rights to certain standards of service, including punctuality, vehicle cleanliness, proportion of services operated, information and redress. There must be mechanisms for redress at a local level and means to ensure these standards are met, which could include forums such as establishing Bus Advisory Boards. This will be backed with action at national level as set out in the Strategy.” Elsewhere the guidance also highlights the need for standards relating to the accessibility of buses, and related infrastructure, to groups with protected characteristics.
- 1.4 It goes on to say (paragraph 100) that: “further guidance on establishing and maintaining a Bus Passenger Charter is set out in Annex C. It is not necessary to create a full charter as part of creating a BSIP, but BSIPs should commit to the creation of a charter and set out key provisions to be included.”
- 1.5 Bus operators should include safety in their marketing and customer charter - with clear and publicised procedures to deal with complaints or suggestions on how to improve passenger safety (paragraph 101).
- 1.6 Annex C of the Government guidance says: “We want to enable passengers to hold local authorities and operators to account for delivering against the BSIPs...The BPC should signpost passengers to routes for recourse, enabling passengers to provide feedback on how local transport authorities (LTAs) and operators are performing in meeting their commitments in the BSIPs.”
- 1.7 The Bus Passenger Charter would set out the commitment made between local authorities/bus operators and the passengers they serve to ensure certain standards are met for each journey. It translates the Bus Service Improvement Plan into a tangible set of outcomes that passengers should expect to see when taking a bus journey.
- 1.8 It should be made clear what the charter will set out and be explicit that it will not create any new legal relationship with the passengers.

- 1.9 It is expected that the LTA will develop its Bus Passenger Charter in collaboration with bus operators and passengers or passenger advocacy groups. There should also be a commitment to review the charter on a fixed basis and to consult on any revised versions.
- 1.10 In taking decisions authorities must ensure they comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). Charters provide a place to commit publicly to developing transport provision in a manner which eliminates unlawful discrimination and promotes equality of opportunity. They can help authorities to explain to passengers the steps they are taking to fulfil the duty and to support inclusive transport services.
- 1.11 The Bus Passenger Charter should be published on the local authority website and on the participating bus operators' websites too. There also needs to be consideration of the accessibility of the BPC and how non-digital guidance can be offered to passengers.
- 1.12 LTAs may also decide to use the BPC to communicate to passengers the tangible outcomes they should expect to see from BSIPs.

Transport Focus view on charters

- 1.13 Public service charters became widespread in the 1990s when the Government launched its Citizen's Charter initiative. The wide variety of Bus Passenger Charters we have seen indicates a lack of agreement on their purpose and content. The Government guidance is generally very helpful in seeking to create a consistent expectation of what they are for and what should be in them.
- 1.14 Fundamentally, charters are about passenger entitlements, operator commitments and redress. A charter should be a concise and crisply worded document. There is no need to repeat large quantities of material available in other documents and on your website when you can link to them instead.

2 Coverage

- 2.1 Your document should provide a short explanation of which LTAs and operators, and which local bus services, your charter applies to. Passengers appreciate simplicity, clarity and consistency. While we appreciate that under enhanced partnerships it is likely that bus services will continue to be provided by multiple operators in most areas, every effort should be made to present passengers with a single offer they can rely on no matter which bus they board within their LTA area.

- 2.2 Include the date of publication and a 'valid until' date, which will give confidence that they are looking at an up-to-date version

3 Developing your charter

- 3.1 In some areas, a high proportion of services cross local authority boundaries. In some instances individual routes can cross into as many as five local authority areas. Passengers are not always familiar with where one local authority area finishes and the next one starts and are likely to become confused if their entitlements change when they cross an invisible line. We recognise that getting agreement from all concerned can be challenging and there is a risk of settling for lowest common denominator standards. LTAs should engage with neighbouring authorities and their operators to maximise the consistency of their charter offer.
- 3.2 The major operating groups may have national charter templates. They may wish to maintain as much consistency as possible across their regional operations to help them to meet best practice while allowing for locally tailored content and local 'ownership'. We are keen to work with them at a national level to ensure that standards are set at the highest practical level.
- 3.3 As the Government's guidance makes clear, you should involve passenger representatives in the development of your charter as well as local bus operators. Our toolkit on [Passenger representation on Bus Service Improvement Plans](#) offers advice on how best to use a range of approaches to obtain passenger input, many of which may be used in charter development.

4 Purpose and contents

- 4.1 The concept of a passenger charter is not universally understood or appreciated. You should start your document by making clear the purpose of your charter and its role in promoting accountability to bus passengers and improving services. You should highlight the two principal components: what passengers can expect from their bus services and how to complain if their expectations are not met.
- 4.2 It is generally better to reference documents or websites which contain further detail than to seek to incorporate full details in your charter. This does create additional challenges when making hard copies of your charter available. At the very least, supporting documents need to be provided quickly, on request.
- 4.3 Make it clear that your charter does not create any new legal rights for passengers.

5 Passenger entitlements

- 5.1 Start by explaining that passengers have legal rights when travelling by bus and that these are not affected by your charter. Include links to conditions of carriage and other relevant documentation.
- 5.2 Your charter should then explain what every passenger can expect every time they travel.
- 5.3 It will also be helpful to refer to management targets in your charter, such as the percentage of buses on time or the percentage of passengers satisfied with local bus services. The best way of doing so may be to link your charter to your BSIP. While there is no link to redress where they are not met, targets do form an important part of your wider accountability to passengers. Obviously, there must be no contradiction between charter commitments and BSIP targets. Our advice on how to set targets and monitor and report performance against them is explained in our guidance on [Setting targets in Bus Service Improvement Plans](#).
- 5.4 When framing your charter offering to bus passengers it makes sense to highlight entitlements which reflect what matters most to them. Transport Focus has carried out several waves of national research into [bus passengers' priorities for improvement](#), the most recent of which was published in September 2020. We asked passengers who had used buses less during the Covid-19 pandemic, or stopped using them altogether, about their priorities for increased bus use. This was published as part of [The route ahead: getting passengers back on buses](#). Some operators and LTAs will also have relevant passenger research of their own.
- 5.5 Our most recent report, based on fieldwork from spring 2019 (before the Covid-19 pandemic), found that bus passengers' top ten priorities for improvement 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.

- 5.6 This is not an exhaustive list and does not reflect changes in some passengers' priorities during the Covid-19 pandemic some of which - such as cleaner and better maintained buses - may remain a high priority once the pandemic has subsided. Some LTAs may have robust data about passengers' priorities for improvement in their area.
- 5.7 Remember, your charter should cover the responsibilities of the LTA as well as those of local bus operators, particularly where they relate to passengers' top priorities for improvement.
- 5.8 Attention should be paid to the Government guidance: for example, the need to set out expectations of accessibility of buses and related infrastructure to groups with protected characteristics.
- 5.9 Consideration should be given to standards relating to modal integration such as the co-ordination of timetables and the availability of multi-modal ticketing.
- 5.10 Clearly set out any additional information specific to disabled passengers. For example, what to expect from staff, policy on allocation of wheelchair spaces on buses, assistance available, what 'kit' is on buses (such as kneeling buses¹ and visual/audio information systems). This is likely to be quite a dynamic area as improvements are rolled out onto new buses which go beyond minimum standards, so your charter may need to reflect this.
- 5.11 Standards for complaints handling and redress are discussed in the next section.
- 5.12 It is perhaps inevitable that some entitlements will be subjective such as a clean and well-maintained bus or a friendly and considerate driver.
- 5.13 Try to avoid qualifying your standards. Passengers may find it harder to understand what to expect where terms such as 'wherever possible' or 'except for circumstances beyond our control' are used. Some may conclude that small print will be used to wriggle out of commitments and thus reduce accountability and passenger trust.

6 Complaints and redress

- 6.1 The section of your charter on passenger expectations should be directly linked to the section on complaints and redress. Passengers who feel that the expectations set out in the charter have not been met should be encouraged to complain.

¹ Buses that lower themselves at a bus stop to make it easier for those with mobility impairments to get on and off.

- 6.2 Your charter should explain how to complain, to whom, and set out the channels available to make the complaint. You should invite comments and suggestions as well as complaints. Passenger input, properly handled, is likely to increase satisfaction with services.
- 6.3 It makes sense for complaints to be investigated in the first instance by the body responsible for the element of the service complained about, which will often (but not always) be the local bus operator. Some LTAs may wish to take responsibility for handling complaints about tendered services, although they will often need to work closely with the operator on a response. Make it easy for the passenger to complain to the right place and offer help if they are not sure.
- 6.4 You should clarify what complainants can expect, both in terms of the process and the outcome. Where the service has been below the standard passengers are entitled to expect, you should apologise. Where necessary you should investigate what has happened and be prepared to review your systems and how they are being operated in practice. You should provide the complainant with an explanation and commit to action to address the problem and prevent a recurrence.
- 6.5 Do not assume that all complainants are seeking financial compensation; research indicates otherwise. However, there may be circumstances where financial compensation may be appropriate, in particular on grounds of equity. This can be seen where two passengers are paying for the same service but one is receiving a significantly worse service, either on a specific single journey or consistently over the period covered by their ticket. Your charter should explain when passengers are entitled to money back and from whom (see examples in Appendix A).
- 6.6 Complaints handling should be regarded as a service and should be designed accordingly. Your charter should set passenger entitlements in respect of complaints handling such as what every complainant can expect, every time. This could include commitments to clarify the nature of the complaint, ask what redress is being sought by the complainant, investigate what has happened and reply within a maximum timeframe. While promising to respond promptly to complaints is appropriate in principle this can create perverse incentives to respond quickly but badly so it needs to be done thoughtfully, reflecting the differing nature of some complaints. A promise to acknowledge more complex complaints and keep the complainant informed of delays in providing a full response may be appropriate.
- 6.7 While the charter itself is your principal public-facing document on complaints and redress, there is likely to be further work to do to meet your commitments here and to derive the full benefit from effective complaints handling. Transport Focus's research in 2009 on [Handling complaints and appeals from](#)

[bus passengers](#) suggested that the bus industry needed to raise its game and made a number of recommendations to help it to do so.

- 6.8 Separately (not in the charters themselves), you should set management targets for complaints handling, report performance against them and develop action plans to improve it. The focus should be on seeking to satisfy the complainant with all aspects of the process (accepting that for some complainants this will be challenging). Transport Focus has many years of experience handling appeals from rail passengers and asks complainants how satisfied they are with the process and the outcome (see Appendix B).
- 6.9 An analysis of complaints data can be viewed as a free 'dissatisfaction survey', especially when looked at alongside opinion research results. Information on who complained about what is vital feedback for operators and the LTA in helping them to monitor how they are performing against passenger expectations and provide a better service in future. Such data should be shared as widely as possible by operators and LTAs.

7 Promoting your charter

- 7.1 Every opportunity should be taken to let passengers know about your charter. If it sits in a drawer and is not used it will do nothing to increase your accountability. As the Government guidance says, your charter should be published prominently on the local authority website and on the participating bus operators' websites too. However, this is the bare minimum. It should also be publicised on buses and at bus stops, and at transport interchanges and travel shops.
- 7.2 Your charter will be used only if passengers recognise the relevance and clarity of the commitments it contains. They will only continue to use it if their experience of your complaints procedure is a positive one.
- 7.3 This is even more true of disabled passengers. Charter commitments need to be communicated in an accessible format to visually impaired and other disabled passengers. There is no point making commitments to them if they are inaccessible. Use Plain English and consider employing simple graphics where they can make things easier to understand. Hard copies of your charter and the supporting documents it references should be available at key locations and on request.

8 Using your charter to improve local bus services

- 8.1 Under the National Bus Strategy LTAs are expected to report publicly at least twice a year on their performance against Bus Service Improvement Plan

targets for passenger growth and customer satisfaction. You could use the same exercise to report on performance against your charter commitments. For example the number (as a proportion of overall passengers) and nature of complaints received by the LTA and operators, the principal actions taken to address concerns and your performance against your complaints handling targets.

- 8.2 These reports should be discussed locally, not simply published and forgotten about. Government guidance suggests establishing forums such as Bus Advisory Boards to ensure standards are met and complaints learnt from. You should seek to engage with local passenger representatives.
- 8.3 As the Government guidance says, you should also give a commitment to review your charter periodically and to consult on any revised versions.

Appendix A

Examples from charters

Explicit linking of standards and complaints

First Cymru Customer Charter

“If we fail to meet any part of these commitments, please let us know.”

Money-back guarantees

West Yorkshire Bus Alliance Customer Promise

“If you are not happy with your bus journey, you can claim a free travel voucher from either:

First, Arriva or Transdev.”

Warrington’s Own Buses Customer Charter

“As part of our money-back guarantee we offer full refunds for problems within our control.”

First Cymru Customer Charter

“Our Commitment to you is that when things do occasionally go wrong, we will recompense you for your inconvenience with free travel.”

Norwich Bus Charter

“If your bus is more than 15 minutes late and it was within the bus company’s control we will refund your bus fare.”

Putting things right

Vectare Passenger Charter

“We know that delays and cancellations are frustrating, and we also want our customers to be able to rely on our services 100%. As a result, we’ve put in place a number of alternative options to keep you on the move in the event of disruption.

“If your bus has not arrived within 10 minutes of the scheduled arrival time, please telephone us on 0115 777 3187. If the bus you wish to catch has departed early, been cancelled or is significantly delayed, we may:

1. Advise alternative bus service(s) that you could use to complete your journey, and refund any additional fares you have to pay if these services are not operated by us
2. Send an alternative Vectare vehicle to collect you and take you to your destination, at no cost to you
3. Book a taxi to collect you and take you to your destination, at no cost to you (using an authorised taxi operator, with a booking on our account, so no money needs to be paid to the driver)

“We will take one of the above steps if it was our fault that you were not able to catch your bus, the total delay to your journey will be 30 minutes or more (compared to waiting for the next bus) and the alternative transport will collect you sooner than waiting for the next bus.

“We will never, ever leave you stranded due to early running, delays or cancellations - wait at the bus stop, contact our Service Delivery Centre and we will keep you on the move. This includes situations where a problem with our service causes you to miss a connection onto another one of our services.”

Complaints handling standards

First Cymru Customer Charter

“You will receive an initial acknowledgement within 5 working days and a full written response within 12 working days (except where a return telephone call has been requested). In the event that our investigation requires more than 12 working days, we will update you on a regular basis.”

Vectare Passenger Charter

“We recognise that you will want us to investigate your comments thoroughly and appreciate you will want a prompt response. We will acknowledge all complaints within 24-48 hours, and aim to provide a full response within five days. If we cannot provide a response within five days, you will receive an update within this timescale to advise you of this.”

Appendix B

Transport Focus satisfaction survey for rail passenger complainants

Transport Focus Satisfaction Survey



Thank you for contacting Transport Focus.

We are interested in your experience of using our service, and would appreciate your feedback. We continually review our performance and feedback to ensure we are providing the best possible service.

1. How did you contact Transport Focus?

Website form

Letter

Email

Telephone

2. How did you first hear about Transport Focus?

Referred by Train Company

Transport Focus publication

Internet search

Media e.g. TV/radio/press

At the station

Other (please state below)

On the train

3. Please tell us how much you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know/NA
1. It was easy to contact Transport Focus						
2. I received sufficient contact from Transport Focus throughout						
3. The advisor's approach was polite, professional and courteous						
4. The advisor empathised and understood my complaint						
5. The advisor showed an interest in my complaint						
6. The advisor was helpful						
7. The advisor had the knowledge to deal with the complaint						
8. My complaint was dealt with in a reasonable time						

4. How satisfied were you with the outcome of your particular complaint?

Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. Overall, how satisfied were you with the way Transport Focus handled your complaint?

Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Fairly dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Would you recommend Transport Focus to a friend?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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7. Has your opinion of the train company with which you had the original complaint changed?

Improved	<input type="checkbox"/>	Worsened	<input type="checkbox"/>
No change	<input type="checkbox"/>	Don't know/Not applicable	<input type="checkbox"/>

8. Do you have any other comments regarding the way in which Transport Focus handled your complaint?

Important: Please complete the following in block capitals

YOUR NAME: _____

CASE REFERENCE: TFO- _____

Thank you

Appendix C

Bus Passenger Charter template

Title of charter.

Geographical area, LTA, bus operators and service types covered.

Date of charter and 'valid until' date.

Statement about purpose of charter: what passengers can expect from their bus services and how to complain if their expectations are not met.

Statement that charter does not affect your legal rights.

Link to documents which spell out your legal rights such as conditions of carriage.

Passenger entitlements: what every passenger can expect, every time they travel, reflecting passenger priorities, expectations of disabled passengers and including matters for which LTAs are responsible.

Link to BSIP commitments expressed as targets such as reliability and journey time, passenger satisfaction.

Statement encouraging complaints where expectations are not met.

How to complain, including channels available to make complaints and offer suggestions.

Redress available such as putting things right in future, money-back guarantees.

Standards for complaints handling.

Link to targets for improving complaints handling.

Where to find reports on performance against charter.

How to get the charter in other formats.



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