



# Passenger representation on Bus Service Improvement Plans

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This best practice toolkit for local transport authorities sets out the role and benefits of passenger representation. This includes support for local representatives in performing this role. It is drawn from our experience of promoting the passenger interest in local bus partnerships, our evidence of passenger insight and our close links with local bodies representing public transport users.

## In summary



### Decide who you need to hear from.

- Consider potential passengers as well as existing passengers, geographical spread and equality and inclusion.



### Make full use of the information you already have available.

- This could include recent passenger research findings, responses to local consultation exercises and complaints data.



### Consider commissioning passenger research, for example focus groups, to quickly plug gaps in your data.



### Engage directly with passengers, community groups and local elected representatives.



### Think carefully about who is best placed to clearly and powerfully represent the passenger interest on boards or committees.

- Provide them with a clear brief and the information they need to do the job. Ask them what skills and knowledge they can contribute. Make sure you are not placing any barriers in the way of their participation.

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 Local transport authorities (LTAs) must consult their communities on their Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP). Baroness Vere, the buses minister, has explicitly acknowledged the role of Transport Focus in helping them to do so.
- 1.2 In developing their approach, LTAs firstly need to consider what they need to discuss and whose input they need on those matters.

## **2 What you need to discuss when developing your BSIP**

- 2.1 The National Bus Strategy lists the content which BSIPs must cover (see pages 41-42), including:
  - setting targets for journey times and reliability improvements and for passenger growth and customer satisfaction
  - identifying where bus priority measures are needed
  - setting out plans and costs for fares, ticketing and modal integration
  - considering the impact of roadside infrastructure (such as bus stops and shelters) on passenger safety, security and accessibility
  - considering how a coherent and integrated network should serve schools, health, social care, employment and other services
  - a commitment to a Passenger Charter (on which we will publish separate advice).
- 2.2 The guidance issued to local authorities and operators by the Department for Transport specifies that LTAs should work with passenger groups and others to understand what factors are currently holding back bus patronage and growth.

It highlights some areas which require attention, including:

- the need for evidence on:
  - barriers to bus use
  - main areas of opportunity, such as places or markets that are underserved
  - any specific local evidence of the benefits of improving bus services for example economic, environmental and social evidence
  - how, if possible, services in your area compare to the best in England (paragraph 47).
- an outline of how services will be made more frequent, faster and more reliable, cheaper, more comprehensive, easier to understand, easier to use, and better integrated with other modes and each other (paragraph 49)
- plans for improving information at bus stops (paragraph 96)

- the need to offer end-to-end accessibility and provide ample areas for pushchairs and luggage in addition to the wheelchair space, so that everybody can travel with confidence
- bus services should also offer audible and visible information, in addition to WIFI and charging as standard - allowing people to work and interact online whilst they travel and make better use of their time
- more buses, particularly in rural areas, should also carry cycles (paragraph 98)
- bus services should be safe and perceived to be safe by all:
  - walking routes to bus stops
  - the waiting environment
  - staffing and procedures
  - customer relations
  - information provision (paragraph 101).
- LTAs should consider the role of demand responsive transport (paragraph 102)
- bus services should meet the needs of passengers who do shift work (paragraph 103)
- particular consideration should be given to opening access to social and leisure services (paragraph 105).

2.3 The starting point for LTAs will be their key objectives set out in their local transport plans and other strategic documents. Discussions with passenger groups and others are an opportunity to agree passenger-focused objectives which sit below this. These can help to structure action plans to meet them.

### **3 Whose input do you need?**

3.1 A wide range of people will be affected by the BSIP. It is important that their interests are represented and their views heard as BSIPs are developed and, in due course, revised.

3.2 The guidance says that each LTA should have a forum for the free and frank exchange of views, data and ideas from its members on how to improve bus services in the BSIP's geographical area. Membership should include bus user groups and representatives of disabled people, and local business groups (paragraph 113).

3.3 The list of matters to be considered by BSIPs set out in the previous section suggests that a wide range of interests need to be included. You should consider how they can obtain the views of the following groups:

- **Existing bus passengers**

These can be defined in terms of the frequency with which they travel by bus, the times of day when they do so, and the purpose of their journeys. Some will be making multi-modal journeys.

- **Lapsed and potential passengers**

Significant falls in bus patronage during the Covid-19 pandemic have blurred the boundaries somewhat between users and non-users. Some of those who used buses before the pandemic are reluctant to do so now and may be hard to engage. There are lapsed users who may need some reassurance and incentives to return to the bus.

Some of those who did not use buses before the pandemic may be willing to try buses if they take them where they want to go. The bus industry needs to understand how best to attract non-users who have not rejected buses altogether.

Transport Focus has done extensive research [work](#) during the pandemic and more can be found [here](#) specifically in relation to getting passengers back on buses.

3.4 Bus passengers are not a homogenous group of people. They may have different experiences and needs based on their personal characteristics.

Consider the following:

- **Geography:** where are they travelling to and from?
- **Protected characteristics:** the Equality Act 2010 defines nine protected characteristics, including age, sex and disability.
- **Attitude to risk:** Transport Focus has produced some 'segmentation analysis'. This identified five categories of people based on their need to travel and their attitudes to their personal safety while using public transport.

## **4 Gathering the views of passengers and potential passengers**

4.1 Clearly, getting input into your BSIP from such a wide range of perspectives is a challenging task, particularly given the short time allowed for the development of the initial BSIP. Some LTAs will be able to draw on **recent**

**passenger research** or **consultation exercises** in their area to inform their plans.

National research, including our own surveys and focus groups, can also offer some useful, if less granular, insights. An analysis of the **complaints** received by local bus operators could offer some pointers to issues that may need to be addressed. All of this data can provide you with a starting point when considering the passenger interest.

- 4.2 There may be time to **commission passenger research**. For example, independently run focus groups of passengers can be recruited quite quickly, at relatively modest expense. These can allow you to check priorities and test proposals with exactly the people you need to hear from. A research agency will be able to put together groups which fit your specification, whether focused on the nature of their bus use, a specific geographical area or particular characteristics. This can be a useful way of hearing from interests that may otherwise be poorly represented, such as young people. The Market Research Society website lists agencies that follow industry good practice.
- 4.3 While there may not be time for a full public consultation on the BSIP, LTAs who have not recently done so may benefit from **engaging directly** with certain groups. They should do this towards the start of the exercise when seeking to understand priorities and issues (such as barriers to bus use or under-served areas) and subsequently when a draft BSIP is starting to take shape. Bus services should be as inclusive as possible.

The examples in the list below are purely illustrative:

- **user groups**: for example, Bus Users UK, Campaign for Better Transport
  - **geographical spread**: for example, ward councillors, parish councils, your local MP
  - **age**: for example, Age UK, Youth Parliament, the education sector
  - **disability**: for example, Transport for All, Disability Rights UK
  - **women**: for example, Townswomen's Guilds
  - **local businesses**: for example, Chambers of Commerce
  - **service providers**: for example, the education, health and leisure sectors.
- 4.4 Some LTAs will already have bodies which they can use as a sounding board, for example a local disability forum.

- 4.5 It may be possible to identify potential passenger representatives through this process, for example where particularly insightful representations are received, or by actively inviting expressions of interest.
- 4.6 Remember that the BSIPs are a continuous process. While there may be a limited time to consult passengers and research their views when preparing your first BSIP document, there may be more opportunities to do so in the run up to your first annual revision of the document on the back of your first six-monthly progress report.

## **5 Passenger representation**

- 5.1 The role of passenger representation needs to be understood in this wider context. A passenger representative on a committee or board cannot be expected to understand and articulate the views of such a diverse and disparate constituency.

The responsibility for gathering such information must lie with the LTA and local bus operators, who should then make it available to the passenger representative. Their role should then be as a passenger advocate, approaching questions from a passenger perspective, promoting the interests of all passengers, challenging your evidence and conclusions.

The quality of their advocacy will be largely determined by three factors:

- the clarity of their brief
- the information you provide
- their understanding of the passenger interest and the skills they have to analyse information and apply it to the brief.

### **The brief**

- 5.2 You need to be clear about what is required of the passenger representative, for example:
- the areas (such as punctuality, value for money, safety and security, passenger information) on which they will be invited to comment (but try to remain open to suggestions not strictly covered by your list)
  - when they will be asked for input
  - the information which you will give them
  - the access they will have to officers and the opportunity they will have to consult with their colleagues or any wider sources
  - any confidentiality obligations they will be asked to respect
  - how decisions about the final BSIP content will be taken.
- 5.3 It will also be important to be clear whether the role finishes with the publication of the initial BSIP or whether it continues into the monitoring and reporting of progress against BSIP targets and commitments and the future

revision of the BSIP. The Government guidance asks for targets to be set for 2025 and 2030 and requires reporting on progress twice a year.

### **The information which LTAs provide**

- 5.4 The National Bus Strategy and supporting guidance clarify what BSIPs need to cover. Information about all of these matters should be provided to passenger representatives. Proposals should always be accompanied by a rationale. For example, the reason for setting targets for passenger satisfaction or patronage growth at a particular level, the evidence behind identifying prime locations for bus priority measures, or the thinking behind specific changes to fares and ticketing.
- 5.5 It is important to start the conversation early – there is little point inviting challenge if there is no time to revisit and rework proposals. Papers should be circulated well in advance of meetings so as not to place those outside the bus industry at a disadvantage: remember that ‘information is power’. Feedback should be provided on passenger representatives’ suggestions, to enable them to judge their effectiveness.

### **Articulating the passenger interest**

- 5.6 As with any recruitment, you need to be clear about the skills and experience you are looking for in an effective passenger representative. While direct experience of local bus services is important, there is a risk that any one person’s views may be disproportionately influenced by their experience of the particular services they use and the time of day when they use them.

If they belong to a local group they may have access to a wider constituency of experience which they can use as a sounding board. They may even have conducted a local survey or have the resources to do so. Ultimately, it will be most valuable to find someone who is able to work with the data that you provide and ask the questions that any passenger would ask about your proposals.

- 5.7 Think about the practicalities of passenger representatives’ participation in meetings. During the Covid-19 pandemic, most meetings have been held remotely on platforms such as Zoom or Teams. Check that they have access.

With the final set of Covid-19 restrictions due to be lifted soon, some LTAs may start to return to face-to-face meetings. While there are obvious advantages to such an approach, remember that passenger representatives may have to allow extra time in their day and may incur costs getting to the meeting. Meeting rooms need to be accessible. Those who have caring responsibilities should not face additional barriers.



Transport Focus is the operating name of  
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