

Transport Focus: passenger representation on Bus Service Improvement Plans

Summary of key issues discussed in Q&A session

Can you suggest practical ways of engaging with passengers and stakeholders to drive the content of Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP)?

We discussed recent examples of passenger engagement. One approach is to engage with parish councils but this is very much dependent on the resources available to Local Transport Authorities (LTAs). East Riding established a Parish Transport Champions network in 2016. Another example given was taking people out to bus stations and depots to help them understand more about the operation; a dedicated officer can act as a link. Transport Focus acts as a passenger representative on several partnership and alliance boards, and workstream groups that are helping to shape BSIP planning.

What level of public consultation is expected? Time is short and BSIP guidance could be clearer.

Think of it from the passenger point of view. What immediate difference will any measures included in your BSIP make to passengers? The more significant and potentially controversial the changes, the more in-depth the consultation is required. Government guidance (paragraph 5.2) suggests that an inclusive process of developing your BSIP and Enhanced Partnership (EP) Plan may reduce the time you need to spend on formal consultation later. Changing your EP Plan following formal consultation would mean reopening the objection process and that could add several weeks to the timescale. Therefore, it is in your interest to engage early and in sufficient depth.

When prioritising measures in your BSIP across urban and rural areas are there any examples of best practice? Obviously, each parish/town will want their area's needs taken into account - how do you balance competing demands and manage expectations?

It's not a simple numbers game – just because, say, 80 per cent of people in your area live in towns you can't forget about rural areas. Council policies should help to drive your objectives; to what extent measures which improve services in different parts of your area help to deliver on those objectives?

We are very interested in hearing what LTAs have to say on this. We will work with you to gather and share examples of best practice.

At a recent meeting a representative from the Department for Transport said there was no requirement to undertake a public consultation as the BSIP was not a statutory document. Any thoughts?

The statutory requirement of the Bus Services Act 2017 relates to Enhanced Partnerships. But the Enhanced Partnership plan is populated by the BSIP. Comprehensive stakeholder engagement on your BSIP reduces the need for a substantial consultation on your Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme/s.

Paragraph 48 of the BSIP guidance says that engagement is mandatory. Is engagement different to consultation?

Consultation has a statutory meaning (you can be judicially reviewed on your consultation process). Engagement tends to be a less formal process, potentially starting earlier in the development of something and seeking views rather than a formal proposal with a detailed plan and a certain timeframe to respond. Paragraph 48 is about 'seeking views' to inform your BSIP, not consultation.

Could Transport Focus provide an outline/draft survey/set of challenge questions that LTAs could perhaps use for pushing out to its local forums/channels? This would help especially as we all work to tight timelines. It would perhaps also promote consistency in approach, with LTAs free to apply the questions as they see fit.

There is nothing really in the guidance that points to a particular set of questions. It's mainly a question of working out what you want to find out and thinking through what you are going to do with the answers: there is no point in asking a question if you cannot do anything differently if respondents disagree with your proposals or make suggestions.

It also depends on where you are in the process. Are you engaging early on with a more or less blank sheet of paper or carrying out more focused consultation once you have defined proposals?

Given the wide range of scenarios it would be difficult for Transport Focus to propose half a dozen questions suitable for all circumstances but we would be happy to talk to individual LTAS about how to approach it.