## Transport Focus: setting targets in Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP)

*Summary of key issues discussed in Q&A session*

**What are Transport Focus' plans for measuring satisfaction?**

The annual Bus Passenger Survey (BPS) ran until autumn 2019. It covered at least two thirds of bus passengers in England outside of London. Transport Focus contributed about a third of the funding with operators and authorities contributing the rest and boosting sample sizes to provide a robust local picture. BPS was halted due to Covid-19 as it relied on handing paper questionnaires to passengers on buses.

Transport Focus is currently testing alternative approaches to carry out a passenger satisfaction survey. This is being piloted in a small number of areas with a view to having a new survey ready to roll out in early 2022. Expected to be scalable, initially rolled out to a few areas with a view to expanding. Transport Focus will not be able to fund a national survey and local results proved to more useful than a national figure in previous years of BPS. The survey in future would be more responsive, turn results around quicker and aim to ask the right level of questions in a scalable way. We are setting up a small industry steering group of operators, authorities and the Department for Transport (DfT) to help us develop a useful product.

Transport Focus asks when Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) will want to start measuring customer satisfaction – at the beginning of the Enhanced Partnership (EP) or six months in? How much would you value a standard approach - would a national measure be more useful than a patchwork approach?

**Do we have a template for an action plan for operators/LTAs to set and measure targets and improve services?**

We don't have a template as such, there is such a wide range of actions that could be under consideration. The first thing is to work out what you are aiming to improve. That could be across all your services or it could be on specific routes. For example, are you trying to improve satisfaction across all passengers with a specific element such as journey time or are you going to focus on particular routes or particular passengers? Work out what you want to improve, how you plan to measure that and develop an action plan linked to a way of measuring that performance.

**How do you get the balance right on bus passenger surveys between making comparisons on a national and regional level while at the same time being locally relevant? For example, in Southend, where they have local residents but also a lot of visitors to the area that use bus services particularly in summer.**

Offering a local boost was always a feature of BPS, allowing LTAs to focus on things they particularly wanted to. We hope to provide that flexibility again by developing a 'basic' survey with a standard set of satisfaction questions that could be built on locally in terms of both the sample size and range of questions asked. Traditionally, we have conducted our surveys in the autumn (and avoided the atypical months of July and August). In future we may need to consider carrying it out twice a year to align with the requirements of BSIPs to measure feedback at least every six months. We can however see the point of doing work to explore customer satisfaction with the tourist market in some areas of the country, particularly seaside areas.

**Bus operators have their own passenger satisfaction surveys, how should these be integrated with a central survey? Also, how do you avoid passenger fatigue when there are multi-source surveys?**

This is a good question and one we have grappled with over the years. An independent survey carries some weight with passengers and stakeholders. We've found over the years that our work complements what operators have done.

**Would a regular national survey just cover current passengers or include lapsed / non-users as your recent bus research did?**

That's something we will look at as part of our internal review process.

**Does Transport Focus interface into other sources of data for your surveys? Such as ticket machine or real time systems?**

We haven't but in some areas we've worked with they've done this and it has thrown up interesting results. For example, if new fares initiatives have been tried out by an operator or transport authority, what impact has this had on passenger opinions on value for money? We have found the Bus Passenger Survey results at a local level to be sensitive to initiatives that have been put in place.

**You mention a core set of satisfaction measures (that local areas could build upon), has DfT already specified what these might be?**

Not yet but we are looking to work with the steering group to establish this. It is a concern that there could be 20 or 30 different approaches and measures across the country.

**What is DfT looking for with reporting journey time? The target will depend on route length and surely also upon passenger miles. On a route-by-route basis this could be a mountain of work to derive some meaningless stats as it is all about context for each individual passenger. Is it a TfL measure cut and pasted into the NBS?**

This is really an issue for the DfT to answer. From the passenger perspective our research demonstrates that when performance is route specific value is added by reporting on a route-by-route basis. There is an issue about managing the volume of data and how you report that back in a useful way. A lot of the point of measuring performance is to inform you and help you work out where to focus your efforts to improve journey time. What you report on to passengers, to regulators, to the department is an issue of judgement.

**How do you deal with lack of historical data on surveys, some areas have not used Transport Focus to carry out surveys in the past? I understand historical data is to be included in BSIP for 2018 and 2019.**

If you haven't got the data you can't present it. There is also a risk if the methodology for collecting any previous data has changed. This presents an issue about how you set a benchmark. The ideal would be to be in a position to be able to accurately measure performance at the time the BSIP is published, then to publish comparable data in 12 months' time. The reality is that this isn't going to be the case. It would be sensible to make that clear in whatever you publish and state your ambition to move on to something more reliable in the future.

**Any plans to continue with the passenger segmentation approach used in your recent covid / return to public transport research?**

We know the ability to segment has proved helpful when thinking about targeting messages and initiatives. We'll consider this as part of our development plans.

**How do you develop targets on growing patronage?**

Very important and obviously an action plan is needed. At the moment we're focussing on trying to restore to pre-pandemic levels. This is about granularity, about identifying your target markets, working out how you split your patrons by journey purpose, ticket type, demographics. Think about where you realistically need to grow patronage to meet the objectives of the authority. Be clear where the primary effort is going in.

**Should a survey be completed before the EP starts?**

Ideally yes but there are challenges in doing that. The ideal is to benchmark with the same methodology you will use to measure your performance in future. Unless you are going to go your own way and already have that methodology in place then it may be a bit messy to start.

Transport Focus is interested to know whether authorities want to do something in the build up to the EP or get yourself six months in and then take a benchmark. What would the preferred model be? Because of Covid we have to be careful we aren't setting a benchmark related to the unique circumstances of the pandemic.

**Given changes in working practices/agile working/increases in home working etc. is it realistic to aim for peak bus patronage recovery to pre-Covid levels? Do networks need to adjust to lower levels of peak patronage?**

From our discussions with operators and authorities, we know that patronage recovery levels vary considerably across the country ranging in some areas from more than 70% of pre-Covid levels to around 50% in others. Ideally, you would make any changes or set targets when you have some stability.

Ultimately you have to satisfy DfT in this area. Think of the BSIP as a process, which will change over time. In our view it would be legitimate and useful to outline in your BSIP the situation, constraints and challenges you face (and update them over time) and how this then affects your performance against targets. BSIPs are about accountability to passengers and explanations are arguably an essential part of that accountability – it's not just about statistics.

**Given the current Traffic Commissioner requirement of 95% of services arriving on time or up to five minutes late, is there an expectation that this is the minimum level set within BSIPs with respect to reliability... or do we think there is an acceptance that LTAs will need to set lower targets initially to match the reality in some cases on the ground?**

Transport Focus will share this question with DfT. We understand that the guidance suggested that punctuality monitoring should be done at peak times.

Historically, when we looked at punctuality statistics over a number of years, few areas were meeting the 95% target, and some were below 80%. From a passenger perspective measuring every service across your area and reporting on punctuality at that level can even things out in a way that is unhelpful. Focus on the things that matters most to passengers, the services and times of day when they are likely to be most dissatisfied with punctuality and what can be done to improve this. This is more important than meeting a headline figure on punctuality won't necessarily match the passengers' experiences or help you to address problems.

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