

Transport Focus: passenger charter for Bus Service Improvement Plans

Summary of key issues discussed in Q&A session

What practical experience do we have working with others?

We've been working particularly closely with three authorities. We've suggested building a 'straw man' based on top passenger priorities and forming those into a sentence explaining the commitment. Interesting the extent to which it's been a useful agenda-setting exercise.

For example, in one session, there was discussion around the provision of printed timetables at bus stops. The final commitment in the draft charter was to provide these only at major interchanges, but there was an acceptance that this wasn't good enough in the longer term, so there is scope for a future agenda item on this to be addressed in a revised BSIP. We have a recent example of one small operator that put timetables at each stop they served and got 114 new passengers in a week. This shows that positively marketing your services can lead to passenger growth.

How have other organisations measured that charters are a success?

In the main, this question is best answered by others in the audience.

From our perspective, one key factor could be to monitor complaints – there is a temptation to think that receiving no complaints means you are doing well, but this could be misleading if it is the result of passengers feeling their complaints are not taken seriously, so they don't bother complaining, which we found when we researched this issue previously. However, by setting targets about the way complaints are handled you can see whether you have satisfied complainants, which would be a good indicator.

You could also try mystery shopping to test how your bus services are delivering on their commitments.

You should also measure performance against your commitments. A lot will relate to the commitments made in your BSIP. This should be complimentary to your passenger charter and part of an expanded process to see how you're doing.

Basically, you could say that your charter is successful if more people are using buses, and more are making complaints, but that people are satisfied with how their complaints are handled. We are happy to talk to any individuals about the detail.

Do you have any further information about the concept of Bus Advisory Boards which DfT has indicated there will be consultation on?

No, not really. If you have arrangements in place to look at your BSIP/EP more generally then they could oversee your charter. It doesn't seem like you'd need to set up something separate or additional for the charter.

Has Transport Focus any 'best practice' advice for publicising charters to non-bus users?

If you write a document for passengers, it is likely to have relevance to non-users as their needs and priorities are very similar. You can find ways to advertise this in places where non-users will see it, which in physical terms could be on the sides of buses, at bus stops and in the council newspaper. It could also be via other channels such as local authority and bus operator websites, apps and social media.

The West Midlands charter was put into travel shops and on posters. Wherever people will see it. It's time to reach out to those non-users. Charters are a good way of showing people that you care about the service they receive.

Another example of finding ways to attract non-users is real-time information screens. While the business case for having these at certain stops can be marginal, actually they present a positive image of buses, and they will be seen by non-users if positioned strategically. Don't underestimate the power of bus stops on non-users – a well maintained one can create a positive image for bus travel, while a neglected one will do the opposite. Charters are part of the overall marketing initiative.

Collaboration with operators will be important but is it advisable to approach operators with a draft, rather than a blank sheet of paper? The range of operator size and capability will be an issue.

Yes, starting with a draft could be helpful. In one of our own examples of working on this, we wrote an initial list that was sent to an authority, who then sent it on to the major local operator and this formed the basis of a valuable three-way discussion. The subsequent updated list was then shared with smaller local operators to check if it would work for them. In one example, a major operator was working across 10 different local authority areas. Once they have worked up a charter in one area, it is suggested that this operator promptly circulates it to the other nine areas, which should save them work and, by providing a starting point for the development of their charters, encourage maximum consistency, which is important for passengers travelling across local authority boundaries.

We have seen one national operator's charter template, which is a useful document, but isn't a passenger charter, instead being more of a management document. The passenger charter should say 'you can expect a clean bus', while the management document that sits behind that can talk about how to do it. The operator needs that management document to make sure it can make the commitment in the charter, but the passenger doesn't need to see that.

Consultation is a requirement of BSIPs. Would it make sense for the charter to be influenced by the findings of this?

This depends on what you are consulting on and timings. First you need to be clear about the relationship between BSIP targets (accountability to all passengers) and charter commitments (accountability to individual passengers). A specific consultation on charters would be a rather technical exercise and risks raising expectations which you may not be able to deliver immediately; it may be better to use data from your BSIP surveys. If your local research is better than our national research and gives you a representative cross-section of opinions, then use that.

Consultation responses can be dominated sometimes by an imbalanced profile of respondents.

I struggle with the logic of a charter making commitments on frequency and service types as given the range of networks in some areas how can you make a promise. For example in one town we run one route twice a day, another every 10 minutes!

There may be some high-level principles about your network and service frequencies and what they are trying to achieve that are worth including. You can encourage people who want to read more about the detail and challenges to do so through supplementary information, although, in reality, most people won't do so.

How do commitments to fare levels work?

This should be high level and it's more about marketing than fare structures. The commitment could be to offer a range of value for money fares and passes and potentially features like flat fares or multi-operator tickets. Remember the charter is supposed to be for your partnership, across multiple operators in a competitive market, who will each have their own approaches. The charter is highlighting the basics and is not the place to list all the different fares and any discounts available.

Should complainants always have to fill in a form, as some operators insist, rather than accepting a social media message? How can LTAs influence this?

We'll hopefully do some more research on complaints and complaint handling in the near future and will share this when we have results.

We want to encourage people to complain and make it easy to do so, but when it comes to the channels for doing so you need to think through whether you'll be able to handle the volume of complaints and put in place the processes to respond to them.

If people complain on social media for instance, make sure you are set up to reply promptly. Most people's complaints are likely to be made to the bus driver, but these won't be recorded because the driver needs to concentrate on driving the bus. You may have different levels of complaints, and different levels of process and response required for them. If you want to be able to capture everything, it probably isn't appropriate to exclude people who don't complain through the official form process. However, there are different expectations for people jotting down a few angry words. We're happy to work out the best solution for you.

It will be useful to hear from others how they are dealing with this. Where, for example, they are using different channels to make complaining easy for all.

In our guidance document – in the appendices - we give examples of different complaints handling processes; this includes appeals and follow-up questionnaires sent out to assess how the process worked. The third appendix provides a quick checklist that includes questions, headings and points that need to be addressed, which you could use to help develop your passenger charter.

Surely it's for the operators to define their charter... it's their customers. Are the Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT) getting involved as an industry body?

We circulated our draft guidance in advance to stakeholders, including the CPT and the major operating groups, who made points that we incorporated before issuing the final version. They were largely very supportive of the guidance. Charters are not just about the operators but also about LTAs and what they're offering and while operators do have a big influence, it's a partnership and not a manifesto. So yes, operators need to be involved. Also, an operator can have its own charter, in addition to the partnership one, but the partnership charter must involve all the parties in its development.

Should the term 'customer charter' be updated to make it more appealing to customers? Maybe "our commitment to you..."?

The public relations side is going to matter less than the commitments inside. The marketing links to the agenda-setting, for example, "this element of our offer isn't good enough and this is what we're doing about it". It may be surprising to passengers that they are being offered certain or new things. It's usually the basic elements of the service that count. It is a marketing opportunity, but what is being offered to people needs to be attractive.

What penalties would be available if an operator breaches its charter? Would an LTA fine an operator?

We're talking about a partnership, so fines and penalties aren't ideal. What's important is knowing when the passenger is receiving an unreasonable service, for example, if the service is consistently poor or if there's a breakdown on a particular day. Any redress should go to the passenger rather than to the local authority, as it is the passenger who has not got what they expected. It is a point of general fairness – are people getting what they expected and if not why? Is passenger 'A' getting the same value for money service as passenger 'B'?

It probably wouldn't be appropriate to have penalties for each commitment. That's something to negotiate and agree upon as part of the partnership, but this is not valuable to passengers and wouldn't form part of the passenger charter.

Over 90 per cent of our network is commercially operated, but the public are likely to see Charters as being a commitment made by local authorities. A lot may depend on actual funding allocations from April 22 and how that affects the balance of commercial versus supported services. We have an excellent relationship with our main operator, so for us it's not a major problem, but for other LTAs/partnerships it could well be. EPs are not a fully re-regulated environment.

There is an opportunity in the charter to explain the environment you're working in and explain the role of the LTA and its responsibilities. There is also an opportunity to introduce the partnership and to explain any challenges it faces around resources as well as the impact of the pandemic and congestion. These are all good to refer to

in the charter (a couple of lines only) but to expand upon in the BSIP to make yourself accountable to passengers.

Has anyone made any commitments on interchange opportunities? ie when two buses are timed to connect? What happens when the connection fails? Ticket refunded or replacement service provided. Likely to be an issue in rural areas, or in cases where DRT meets conventional services.

The issue is what can you say about what passengers should expect? Next question is to what extent we can offer that – what are the things you need to do to deliver on that commitment? At least if you have the measures in place to make that commitment then you can include it in your charter and then you can use complaints data to illustrate whether it is working. This then starts a conversation. Don't put it into your charter if performance will be consistently poor, but instead add it into the agenda of how to solve the problem, so you're able to make that commitment in future.

We are looking at the reliability of real time information at bus stops in the charter... do you have any research that could inform charter standards?

Passengers may use real-time information (RTI) when making the decision to wait for the bus and in those situations when the countdown display shows a reducing time to the bus arrival, only to have it disappear when due, is infuriating and worse than if they hadn't had that information in the first place.

The information system needs to work the majority of the time. You shouldn't make commitments to deliver RTI if you think that in many circumstances it won't work. Where the RTI screen reverts to displaying static timetable information this can be misleading for the passenger as there is an expectation that it is showing real-time information. Others can let us know if they have research about an effective way to deliver real-time information in the right way, and we will pass that on.

Wrap-up

Trust is important and fundamentals are important. Commitments show you want to have that relationship with people and to have those services improved. Passenger charters are part of your marketing tools.

Transport Focus is a statutory consultee. Please get in touch with Mike to talk about that in more detail.