

Coach Passenger Needs and Experiences

Independent national passenger watchdog

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What passengers want

Passengerfocus
putting passengers first

Background and methodology

In 2010, Passenger Focus's remit was extended to include bus, coach and tram passenger representation in England, outside London. As part of this new role in March 2011, Passenger Focus wanted to get a better understanding of coach passenger needs and experiences, so it commissioned this preliminary research. This included identifying any improvements which could be made and how complaints were handled.

Focus groups and depth interviews were undertaken with users of National Express, megabus.com, Oxford Tube and Oxford Express coach services. This work was carried out with the full cooperation of the coach operators involved. Participants included commuter and leisure travellers, and frequent and infrequent users.

Why passengers use the coach

Participants used the coach because it was significantly cheaper than other modes. Train journeys were generally considered to be expensive, particularly if advance tickets were not purchased, and car travel could work out expensive once petrol costs and parking charges were

factored in. Participants also mentioned other advantages of travelling by coach: getting a seat is always guaranteed; the seats can be comfortable; coach travel can be a stress-free and relaxing experience; and the time can be used to work or read.

"There's more hustle and bustle on the train; a coach is quieter and more relaxing."

[Birmingham, infrequent user, 50+ age group]

This combination of cheaper travel costs and the provision of a good service made participants feel they received excellent value for money.

However coach travel is not without its disadvantages:

participants talked about longer journey times when compared to other modes; the possibility of delays and breakdowns; food or drink could not be purchased on board; toilets can be unpleasant; and there were concerns about losing luggage.

"I once travelled with a bag and I was so paranoid the whole journey, I wanted to get off at every stop and check it was still there."

[Manchester, infrequent user, 18-25 age group]





The research showed there were two main groups of people using the coach. Although all participants chose the coach because of cost, younger participants and students tended to view the coach as a short-term option and envisaged taking the train once their financial circumstances improved. Older participants and commuters had made a more proactive decision to use coaches; they were generally more positive about travelling by coach and intended to continue using coaches in the same way.

Why passengers commute by coach

Many participants who commuted had not considered using the coach before, most preferring to use the train instead. Coach commuting was often recommended by friends or colleagues making the same journey. Some participants had seen advertising for coach fares and others had seen coaches driving into city centres at peak times and investigated online. Many participants had not been on a coach for a number of years and had a poor perception of coach travel, but when they tried out the coach they were pleasantly surprised. They used the coach a few times to commute first, before committing to regular coach travel.

Planning and booking the journey

Most participants, travelling for leisure purposes, approached each journey afresh for planning and booking. Exceptions to this were participants who regularly made the same journey; they had usually given up on exploring train prices and knew the coach would be cheaper. Some participants also disliked travelling by train; therefore coach travel would be investigated first, and then the train if the coach was not suitable. For commuters, minimal consideration was given to the journey planning process; they had already been through the thought process when the decision to commute by coach was taken.

Participants felt there was little to differentiate one coach operator from another.

“The first time I went to London I got Megabus, so I just get that one now.”

[Manchester, infrequent user, 18-25 age group]





Experiences of coach stations and coach stops

Many participants used coach stations because it was convenient. Some also felt that by catching the coach at its departure station, they were less likely to miss it, unlike at a coach stop where there were fears of the coach not stopping. Some female participants had safety concerns about using coach stops at night.

“I think if you’re a woman travelling alone at night, a coach station is probably better because there’s more people around.”

[London, infrequent user, 50+ age group]

If given a choice, participants would travel with the operator that had the best price and timetable for their journey.

Nearly all participants booked their seat in advance, even if only booking on the day of travel, to ensure they were able to get a seat. However, some commuters on the Oxford Tube and Oxford Express services felt that as coaches were so frequent, there was no need to book. Those travelling on off-peak services were also less likely to book a ticket in advance, particularly if they had made the journey before and knew it would be quiet.

“If you book in advance, you know you’re on, you don’t have to wait for the next one.”

[Birmingham, infrequent user, 50+ age group]

Many participants used the internet when booking or enquiring about tickets, saying it was quick, convenient and they felt confident the information would be accurate. Some participants thought it would be useful to have a centralised booking service, similar to that of rail.

Participants were somewhat sceptical about the idea of ‘flexible tickets’ which may be slightly more expensive, but would allow an open-ended journey date. The certainty of getting a seat was the main reason for booking in advance, and participants were concerned that they would not get on the coach with a flexible ticket.

“I’d do it on the train, but not on the coach. I’d be worried I’d get there and there wouldn’t be any seats.”

[Birmingham, frequent user, 18-25 age group]

However, participants felt a supplement for changing their ticket would be useful, rather than having to buy a new ticket.

Of those participants that did use coach stops, this was down to convenience, such as the stop being closer to their home.

Some participants felt that coach stations were better than they used to be, particularly in Birmingham and Manchester, but still compared negatively with train stations which were generally thought to have better facilities and policing.

“In the train station there’s always people wandering around you can ask for information, but I’ve never seen that in a coach station.”

[Birmingham, frequent user, 18-25 age group]

Participants described their ideal coach station as clean, spacious and safe. The station should also have clear information about departures, staff available to ask for information, seating, police or security, shops and cafes and clean toilets which were available at all times of the day.

Participants felt that coach stops could be improved by having real-time information about arrivals and delays, thereby allaying fears they had missed their coach, and sufficient shelter.

“I’d be afraid it would just drive past me, and I’d be left there.”

[Manchester, commuter, 26-49 age group]

Boarding the coach

Participants found boarding the coach generally stress-free, although commuter services were felt to be busy at times. Some participants said the driver was helpful in assisting with putting their luggage in the hold. However, some did worry about other passengers taking their luggage. They felt that a luggage identification system, for example a tag or ticket, would help in this situation.

On board the coach

There were four key factors which contributed to the on-board experience:

- **Seat comfort:** Seats were considered comfortable if they had sufficient width and adequate leg room. Participants preferred leather seats rather than fabric as they were felt to be more hygienic, and some said they would prefer seats which reclined more.
- **Temperature:** Participants felt it was important to have a moderate on-board temperature so they felt comfortable. Some felt that the air conditioning/ personal air vents were ineffective and should be improved.
- **Toilets:** Using the toilet on board was usually avoided; participants felt they were too small and cramped and some feared being locked in. They expressed concerns about the cleanliness of the toilets.
- **Cleanliness:** Generally participants thought that coaches were clean when they boarded. Some mentioned the amount of litter in seat pockets, which could be addressed by providing bins or plastic bags for rubbish on long journeys.

“I think bins would be quite useful or at least somewhere to put rubbish because I’ve never noticed anywhere to put litter.”

[London, commuter, 26-49 age group]

Other factors were mentioned which also affected the onboard experience:

- **Free Wi-Fi and plug sockets:** Participants who had access to these facilities on board were very positive about them. They felt they could work or pass the time on their laptop or smartphone. Participants who did not have these facilities on their service would also like to see them introduced.
- **Other passengers’ behaviour:** Participants talked about irritating behaviour from other passengers such as music being played loudly through headphones, loud mobile phone conversations, eating smelly food and passengers who infringed their personal space. It was felt that signage or



“The drivers are always very courteous and nice. They seem to make a special effort to welcome you on; you almost feel like you’re getting into a taxi or something.”

“If I ask them a question and they answer me like I’m a div, I think that’s wrong. It’s their job to help me.”

announcements about respecting fellow passengers would discourage some of this negative behaviour.

- TV and newspapers were not felt to be a necessity; TV could not be catered to suit everyone and newspapers were ‘nice to have’, but could create litter.
- Tables were generally felt to be too small to be useful and participants would rarely use them as they would cut into their personal space. Participants thought cup holders would be more useful, both functional and space saving.

The coach driver

The driver was considered a critical part of the overall coach experience. An uncomfortable on-board experience could be alleviated by a friendly driver, but a positive on-board experience could be spoiled by a rude or unhelpful driver. The majority of participants had positive experiences of drivers, saying they were friendly, smart, professional and helpful.

“The drivers are always very courteous and nice. They seem to make a special effort to welcome you on; you almost feel like you’re getting into a taxi or something.”

[London, infrequent user, 50+ age group]

However many younger participants and students were more negative towards drivers, spontaneously describing them as rude and unhelpful.

“If I ask them a question and they answer me like I’m a div, I think that’s wrong. It’s their job to help me.”

[Birmingham, frequent user, 18-25 age group]

The coach journey

Participants felt that coach journeys were usually smooth, but some were frustrated that routes had too many stops, which added to the overall journey time. Some suggested having more direct or express routes, particularly for longer journeys.

Most participants said they would consider coach journeys of around four to five hours duration; after this the train became a more viable option and the inability to stretch or walk around became a serious disadvantage.

Value for money perceptions

Many participants felt they received good value for money on coach, but this could be further improved by speedier journeys, fewer stops and some enhancements to the onboard experience. However, poor punctuality and rising prices would have a detrimental effect on value for money and the coach would then become less competitive than the train.

The complaints process

Complaints appeared to be triggered by situations that impacted on participants' personal time (delays due to driver error, the coach leaves earlier than expected); on them emotionally (the driver was particularly rude or unhelpful, or driving badly); financially (issues with ticket price) or a combination of these.

The complaints process differed between participants; however some examples of good practice emerged from coach operators:

- The complaint was acknowledged
- The coach operator responded quickly
- They used a polite and sympathetic tone
- They apologised for the situation encountered
- Participants received an acceptable outcome (such as an apology or financial compensation).

Satisfaction with complaints handling varied between participants, but if participants got a satisfactory outcome,

they were less concerned about a slow process or lack of politeness from customer service staff. However, if participants did not receive an acceptable result, how the rest of the complaint was dealt with became irrelevant. Some participants were happy to receive just a polite response, whereas others wanted more, such as an apology, refund and compensation.

“What makes a satisfying outcome? Getting what you want. You don't normally complain unless you want something, do you?”

[London, commuter, 26-49 age group]

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Recommendations

- **Promote coach travel**

Most participants spoke positively about their coach travel experiences and felt the coach offered them excellent value for money. Some participants had also discovered the benefits of coach by 'accident'. This presents a good opportunity to promote coach travel further and encourage others to discover its benefits.



Some participants knew who to complain to, whereas others said it took them some time to find the right person to contact.

None of the participants were aware of any coach-specific bodies such as the Bus Appeals Body and Bus Users UK who could handle appeals. A few said they would have taken their complaint further if they had known about them. Those who were dissatisfied with their complaint outcome gave up at the initial round of complaining, saying it was not worth the hassle.

For some, the coach journey was not considered expensive enough to justify a prolonged complaints process.

“For me an apology wasn't really sufficient; there was no explanation, no passion or effort to keep my custom and make it better. It was just ‘we're sorry’ and that was it.”

[London, frequent user, 26-49 age group]

Contact us

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- **One place to compare and book tickets**

A centralised booking system which allows comparison between different coach operators would enable passengers to make an informed decision when planning and booking a journey. A facility which enabled coach and rail services to be compared would have additional benefits.

- **More visible staff and police presence**

Some participants felt unsafe using coach stations, particularly at night. A greater presence of police or security staff could help address this.

- **Improve coach stations**

The coach station environment could be improved by having more comfortable seating and toilets which are available at all times.

- **Real-time information and shelters at coach stops**

Coach stops could be improved by having real-time information about arrivals and delays, therefore allaying fears about missing the coach. A well-publicised free phone number that can be called or texted from mobiles to find out the whereabouts of the coach could also address this. Coach stops could also be enhanced by having sufficient shelter.

- **Allay concerns about lost luggage**

There were concerns about lost or stolen luggage and some felt that a luggage identification or tagging system would help.

- **Improve journey times**

Journey times can be longer than expected because of unforeseen delays and traffic. Better communications between the driver and base could address this in certain circumstances where the driver could be warned of delays and take appropriate diversions. Having more direct services with fewer or no stops would also help address concerns about longer journey times.

- **Enhance the onboard experience**

The onboard experience could be improved by having reclining seats, better air conditioning systems and drinks and snacks available to buy. Other enhancements include announcements about respecting other passengers, and plugs and Wi-Fi on all services.

- **Improve the process for complaints**

Some improvements could be made to the existing complaints process. Passengers need clearer communication about who to complain to and how. Coach operators also need to respond in a timely manner. The role of bodies, such as Bus Users UK and the Bus Appeals Body should be publicised more, so that passengers are able to take their complaint further if they have not received a satisfactory response.