Keeping bus users happy – it can be done!
(So why doesn’t every bus company do it?)
Metro as market research

Bus passengers will be familiar with the free Metro newspaper that is available on many buses on weekdays. It’s always worth a read, and we hope that bus operators actually read it too because it will provide them with much useful – and free – market research about their passengers. The letters pages are often filled with moans about public transport like the grumpy drivers, the high fares, the late buses, the buses that don’t turn up – and about the behaviour of passengers – the seat-hoggers, the games of draughts (see page 18), the mums who are reluctant to fold their buggies to give a wheelchair user space.

We recently came across this list in Metro – a survey that listed the top ten public transport woes – with bad smells at number one, followed by crying babies, claustrophobia, delayed journeys, bad service, drunk people, loud phone calls, loud music, noisy passengers and humid conditions. OK, it was only a survey of 500 people, but it is an indicator of passenger feelings – and remember, Metro readers are almost inevitably public transport users.
Concern about rural bus cuts

Bus Users UK is concerned by the findings of an Age UK report into the effects of cuts to rural bus services on older people.

Despite having free bus travel, the report points to growing isolation among older people as services are reduced and in some cases cut completely. Many older people in rural areas rely entirely on bus services to access healthcare, social activities, community events and shops, as well as visiting friends and family.

Reduced services mean that many people now face a fairly long walk to their nearest bus stop. Delays, cancellations, long waiting times and cold bus shelters add to the problem and make bus travel for older people even more challenging.

Gillian Merron, Chair of Bus Users UK said: ‘Older people in rural areas face the double challenge of having many services and amenities centralised in towns and cities that they now can’t access because they simply can’t get to them. It undermines the whole idea of providing free bus travel when there’s no bus to travel on.’

The report calls for greater consultation on local services to ensure they meet local need. Gillian added: ‘Free bus travel for older people has been a great success and has enabled the millions who use the concession to lead active lives. Older and retired people make a huge contribution to society, undertaking volunteering and providing vital childcare support to family members who wouldn’t otherwise be able to return to work.

‘What this report proves is that when bus services are cut it isn’t just older people who suffer – we all suffer.’

Enhancing our town centres

Bus Users UK agrees with the assessment by Eric Pickles that the vitality of town centres and local shops needs to be protected.

However Chief Executive of Bus Users UK, Claire Walters, argues: “Car-friendly policies alone could make matters worse. We should be promoting excellent public transport and encouraging people to look at alternative ways of getting into town and city centres.

‘Increasing car use in these areas will create a less pleasant environment for shoppers and congestion can be just as great a deterrent as parking shortages and pricing.

‘One solution lies in the provision of better bus services that can get larger numbers of people into town centres without compromising air quality or clogging traffic. 1.4billion shopping trips are already made by bus each year, creating a retail spend in excess of £20billion.

‘Improving public transport and improving facilities for bus passengers will do more to enhance our town and city centres than helping motorists to find a parking space.’

Welcome for BSOG reforms

Bus Users UK has welcomed the announcement by Transport Minister Norman Baker of reforms to the Bus Service Operators’ Grant (BSOG).

The reforms follow confirmation in the Spending Review that Government support for bus services will be maintained until at least 2015/16, news that has been warmly welcomed by Gillian Merron, Chair of Bus Users UK: ‘We are extremely pleased that BSOG has survived the Spending Review and that funding for most commercial bus services will go direct to the bus companies.

‘It’s also vital that the funding which is to go to local authorities for tendered services has been ring-fenced, ensuring continued investment in improving bus services. We are very glad to see the Government responding so positively to our calls on behalf of the millions of people who rely on bus travel each year.’
A Critical Friend...

JAMES FREEMAN, now Chief Executive Officer of Reading Buses, recalls his first brush with what is now Bus Users UK

It is more than 25 years since I was appointed Managing Director of what was then the Provincial Bus Company Ltd, based in Fareham, Hants. I quickly realised that Caroline Cahm, now of course deservedly Life President of Bus Users UK, was very active in the area – being the power behind Portsmouth Buswatch and leading the emerging National Federation of Bus Users. I made it my business to contact her because I have always found that the best approach with consumer organisations is to try to work with them. It was with some trepidation that I welcomed Caroline to our offices at Hoeford …

I needn’t have worried: Caroline’s approach was straightforward, feisty but fair. I found, to my surprise, that she sought to work constructively with operators rather than indulge in orgies of destructive criticism. So at Provincial we started working with the local branch of NFBU – always going along to meetings when invited and listening carefully to what was said. We found that we could pick up on things that weren’t right for our customers – and do something to put them right! The power that getting good honest feedback from expert customers gives to operators is very significant. Caroline set out to forge good relations with operators large and small and she found that building trust with senior managers in the emerging big groups worked for consumer and operator alike.

Fast-forward to 2013 and I have the privilege these days of leading the team at Reading Buses. We have been working for more than five years to make the customer the centre of all we do and so naturally we are always looking to work with Bus Users UK as well as analysing all the customer feedback we get through emails, our website, Facebook and Twitter, not to mention in person and on the phone.

The value of Bus Users UK’s involvement is that it provides a good quality focus for users to provide their feedback and to pass it on in a constructive and usable way to us as operators. After all, we don’t set out to displease people, so if something isn’t working
James Freeman arranged for Bus Users UK CEO Claire Walters to drive her first bus at Reading recently.

Reading Buses provides first-class information for passengers at its city centre stops, including fares – other bus operators please copy!

for the customer then we want to know about it so that we can act to change things. The value of constructive criticism is that it provides material to work with yet doesn’t set out to demotivate the bus company. So when a few months ago Barclay Davies wrote a piece about his travel experiences in Reading, he included good and bad as appropriate. He pointed out things that we already knew, yet his writing them down sensibly and constructively was the catalyst for us to do something about them. For example, we have a fleet of generic buses that we can use on any route if one of the colour-branded buses is out of service for any reason. Barclay commented that the generic bus he travelled on did not have the necessary timetable leaflets on board – a problem that we have reacted to as a direct result of his observation. The value of such feedback is that sometimes users see things that, for one reason or another, have just passed the operator by.

Our drivers are the key to our success in delivering a customer-focused service and we have done a lot for them and with them to improve the way they feel about themselves and the job they do. They read Barclay’s article about his experiences in Reading with great interest. They appreciated the positive observations and could understand the points he made that explained why this or that did not work for him. They (that is to say we!) could learn from this in a relatively ‘safe’ environment – not uncritical but not unreasonably critical either.

Nobody really likes being criticised, whether the criticism is justified or not – and Bus Users UK’s knack is to be the critical friend – something that is enormously positive in getting change and which you are rather good at! It is very valuable work – keep it up, Bus Users UK!

A tale of two cities

Last month I had the opportunity to meet those running other bus user groups at the event in Birmingham, organised by Bus Users UK (writes Andrew Boag, Chair of Brighton Area Buswatch). It was good to talk to other groups and see how local issues vary around the country. Many groups were reporting cuts to services and were envious of the standard of bus service we enjoy.

In Birmingham, the largest UK city outside London, buses are forced to terminate on the edge of the central area so reaching another part of the city centre by bus is virtually impossible. Frequent cross-city centre links like those provided by Brighton & Hove routes 1 and 5 simply don’t exist – yet these are Brighton’s busiest bus services! Arriving at the partly redeveloped New Street station I was faced with a fair walk to the nearest bus stops. A tram line is being extended but it won’t open until 2015. There is only one all-night bus service (to the Airport) and very few bus lanes. The bus I took to our meeting in Selly Oak was old and looked shabby. New bus shelters had been erected in the city centre but they were tiny and didn’t shelter anyone properly. There were some good points but it was easy to see why bus use was in decline.

I lived in Birmingham briefly in the mid 1980s and I have fond memories of the city. Then it had a superb bus service and usage was increasing. I think Birmingham demonstrates how even the best bus services can spiral into decline. There are various reasons in this case, but it reminds me why we cannot take our excellent local buses for granted. Brighton Area Buswatch will do all it can to prevent a Birmingham type situation here.

One positive feature noted by the editor in Birmingham recently was this very simple and clear bus stop sign with route numbers that can be re-programmed when services change.
The table on page 13 shows that overall satisfaction with the bus services provided in the six metropolitan county areas in England was generally impressive in the recent Passenger Focus Bus Passenger Survey. The PTEs cover the major English conurbations outside London and bus services are run by a range of bus companies, from the major groups to smaller private operators.

We have been impressed by some of the initiatives taken by PTEs to involve passengers in changes that were being considered and in providing information about changes made. One of the frequent complaints from members and groups is that consultation with passengers is minimal or non-existent, and that changes – sometimes far-reaching changes – are made without much reference to passengers and introduced without much good information being readily available in advance. Some recent examples from PTE areas show an encouraging willingness to engage with passengers.

In Glasgow, First was planning a major revamp of its city services on 26 May – the biggest for some 40 years. As First is by far the main operator in Glasgow, carrying 114 million passengers annually, this would affect a large slice of the local populace and so the company launched a specially designed information bus which carried out a promotional tour of Glasgow in the weeks leading up to the launch of its brand new network, branded simpliCITY. First distributed more than 650,000 timetables, 50,000 network-wide maps and 50,000 simpliCITY information guides.

Staff on board the information bus answered questions about the new network and what it would mean for customers. First’s ‘street teams’, extra customer service staff, toured the network, helping customers (see above) and distributing the new timetables and maps.

Ahead of the simpliCITY launch the Glasgow company promoted the First Bus App – a free app designed to improve the convenience and availability of information to bus customers.
The app has been developed by First Glasgow’s parent company, First Bus, and is now available to download from app stores for Android and iPhone mobile users.

The new app is designed to make it easier for customers to plan their journeys while on the move. Every one of Great Britain’s 300,000 bus stops are included on the app’s map and thanks to the Global Positioning System (GPS), users can find local bus stops, bus route maps, service updates and real-time bus departure information, where it is available.

Users can save particular bus stops to a ‘Favourites’ list for journeys they make regularly, like going to work or visiting friends and relatives. The app also provides users with First Glasgow information such as the types of ticket available, any service disruptions, and updates relating to what is happening within the company.

The app’s timetable and live information, which includes all bus operators in Great Britain, is jointly provided by Traveline and First. For more information or to download the app, visit www.firstgroup.com/glasgow.

In a separate initiative, First Glasgow launched a new advertising campaign to deter antisocial behaviour and vandalism using new bus adverts fitted to the interior of First buses in Greater Glasgow to deter prospective vandals.

The strongly-worded ad has been designed to assure bus users that the company has zero tolerance to any kind of antisocial behaviour.

The initiative follows a court order in the bus company’s favour banning a teen vandal from First’s entire fleet for life after he caused damage to 26 windows. The graphics used in the design include the Daily Record’s attention-grabbing front page headlines when the story hit the news last month. The newspaper reported that the 17-year-old was given a 200-hour community payback order and the bus company was awarded £10,000 damages.

Alan Pert, security manager at First Glasgow (below) explained: ‘We take pride in our fleet and in delivering excellent customer service. The safety of our customers is of paramount importance to us and we have zero tolerance to any kind of antisocial behaviour affecting our customers and staff. This means that any vandal found causing damage to any of our buses can expect to face up to some serious consequences.

‘We have a close working relationship with Scotland Police and we will prosecute anyone found damaging our vehicles. CCTV is fitted to our buses and is helping to significantly reduce the number of incidents. In this case we took civil action to prevent this individual from travelling on our buses throughout Scotland and sought compensation for the damage caused.

‘Our new anti-vandalism campaign assures our customers that we do everything we can to deter antisocial behaviour and if something does happen we will deal with it accordingly.’
In Sheffield, South Yorkshire PTE (SYPTE) is working with the local bus operators, including First and Stagecoach, and with Sheffield City Council and Sheffield Community Transport, as the Sheffield Bus Partnership to bring improvements for bus passengers. Many believe that this is the best way forward for bus services in our large conurbations, allowing the various parties involved to contribute what they do best.

The Sheffield Bus Partnership aims to improve the city’s bus offer so that the number of people using it grows. It provides customers with a simpler bus network, coordinated timetables, a new range of tickets that can be used on buses or trams, more services on many routes, fewer changes to timetables, and more buses with low-floor access.

In recent months SYPTE has been listening to customer feedback and making direct improvements to Sheffield’s public transport network as a result. SYPTE says it has an ongoing commitment to put customers first by trying to make getting around by public transport easy, convenient and best suited to what people want and need.

SYPTE’s You Said, We Did initiative actively encourages customer feedback on what exactly is needed to make journeys even better. Where possible SYPTE turns customer comments into direct actions and improvements.

Examples of the latest changes that have been made through You Said, We Did in Sheffield include working with 835 Sheffield bus drivers so far on training to improve customer service, and upgrading Park & Ride ticket machines so that they take all bank notes.

SYPTE’s latest customer survey shows that satisfaction with the helpfulness of bus drivers across South Yorkshire has increased from 65% in May 2012 to 68% in May 2013.

Customer satisfaction with Sheffield’s bus network has also significantly improved since the launch of Sheffield Bus Partnership in October 2012, with 29% fewer customer comments as a result.

In August bus users in Sheffield were invited to have their say on proposals for changes to a number of the city’s bus routes in a public consultation by Sheffield Bus Partnership. The proposed changes take into account customer feedback the Partnership had already received, and aim to make sure Sheffield’s bus network continues to meet customer needs. Passengers were able to discuss their feedback personally and get more information by attending ‘drop-in sessions’ at Meadowhall Interchange and Sheffield Interchange. Customers were also encouraged to keep sending feedback and suggestions on South Yorkshire’s public transport network to You Said, We Did online at travelsouthyorkshire.com/yswd or by calling Traveline on 01709 51 51 51.

A summer initiative from the Partnership was the introduction of a new TravelMaster Citywide Day-Child ticket, offering unlimited bus and tram travel for just £2 a day during the school holidays.

The new ticket was available for 5-15 year olds to buy on board most buses and trams in Sheffield. When it was announced, SYPTE’s David Young said: ‘We are delighted to be able to trial this in Sheffield and help children and young people make the most of the summer and the city, and all the great things it has to offer by using public transport. If successful, we will look to work with our partners to consider introducing similar initiatives across other districts.’

Young people are of course the adult passengers of tomorrow and it is important that public transport remains affordable to them. Initiatives like this should encourage enough additional travel to prove it could be sustainable in the future and it is hoped that the summer trial will lead to further discussions to deliver cheaper fares for young people on a permanent basis.

The ground-breaking Sheffield Bus Partnership agreement is claimed to be the most complex and geographically far-reaching partnership of its kind in the UK. Travelling around the city has been made more simple, flexible and convenient with a new range of tickets that can be used on any bus and tram. It provides passengers with coordinated timetables, reduced fares, more services and improved punctuality. New, environmentally friendly low-floor buses have also been introduced.

David Young said: ‘Sheffield Bus Partnership is the people’s bus network, designed in consultation with them, for them. After nearly a year in operation, not only have customer satisfaction and punctuality of the services on the city’s bus network significantly improved, there are 5.8% more adult fare-paying passengers travelling than this time last year.

Paul Lynch, Stagecoach Yorkshire Managing
Director, said: ‘The Sheffield Bus Partnership has been a tremendous success since launching in October last year. What we are keen to do now is build on this by giving customers the opportunity to have their say on a number of routes within the partnership.

‘Passenger feedback is extremely important and we are keen to hear from as many people as possible so we can use their comments and suggestions to shape the network for the future so it best meets the needs of Sheffield people.’

Dave Alexander, First South Yorkshire Regional Managing Director, said: ‘We are very keen to hear the views of local people about their bus services. This will allow the Partnership to continually develop new and effective ways of making bus travel more effective for customers.’

Meanwhile in the West Yorkshire PTE area, Leeds City Council has become the first UK local authority to install a new mobile phone application that drivers in the community transport sector can use to communicate with their office system, providing all the information required on scheduled routes including real-time updates.

Trapeze’s DriverMate is intended to improve office to vehicle communications while also improving scheduling and delivering cost-savings – and of course customer service. The app makes it simple for office staff and drivers to exchange messages throughout the working day and also enables local authorities to adapt schedules during the day, which can improve passenger service and operational efficiency.

Dylan Owen of Leeds City Council said: ‘DriverMate has had a very positive impact on office communications both with our drivers and our passengers. Rather than calling drivers we can send messages through the app, and if a customer calls to ask where their vehicle is we can identify the location for them. The drivers like the app. It’s simple to use, easy to read and provides them with a lot of information, which they like.’

Bus Users UK welcomes any initiative that makes life easier for bus passengers, and hopes that other transport authorities will follow the examples quoted and pay more than lip service to customer consultation and involvement in bus service changes, to customer security on buses, and to initiatives that will attract younger people to discover the convenience of bus travel. If they don’t, we are sure that our members and local groups will nudge them into action!

 Catch them young!

Two photos from our friends in Wales illustrate the importance of encouraging and inspiring younger people to use buses. Barclay Davies, our Officer for Wales, sent us the delightful photo of his young son, Iestyn, trying the driver’s cab out for size, while Paul Harley spotted the high-chair scenario!
Are you satisfied?

The annual bus passenger satisfaction surveys conducted in England by Passenger Focus have become a valuable way to measure how good a deal – or not – bus passengers are getting from their local companies. With overall satisfaction ranging from just 73% to 92%, how did your local company do?

Until Passenger Focus came along, bus companies conducted their own satisfaction surveys and tended only to publish the results if these were favourable, and otherwise many of us had a good idea which companies were providing a good level of service but purely on the basis of what we could see for ourselves. The Passenger Focus surveys, based on their long-running rail surveys, adopted a much more scientific and statistically robust approach, with hundreds, even as many as a thousand, passengers providing the feedback.

The survey doesn’t cover all of England, but did cover the six metropolitan county authority areas, plus two transport authority area groups (in the north-east and south-west), several local transport...
authority areas – rural and urban – and the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems in Cambridgeshire and Hampshire.

So, where are all those happy passengers? Well, Nottingham City would be a good place to start. Over a range of measures the satisfaction score only occasionally dropped below 80%; the lowest scores in the survey, for Milton Keynes, struggled to reach 80%. The survey measures everything from satisfaction with value for money, with the bus stop, on the bus, and with the bus driver.

Overall satisfaction was highest among free pass holders – no surprise there, perhaps – as well as non-commuters and people with disabilities, and poorest among fare-payers and commuters.

Value for money is always an interesting one – and this is of course measured among passengers who actually pay a fare. The highest score – Nottingham City again – was just 70%, and the poorest – the Hampshire BRT system – was a disappointing 30%. We know that passenger perception of value for money can be affected by many things, like the economy of the local area and a history of high fares, but these low scores do suggest that bus companies could be losing or discouraging customers by setting fare levels too high. Certainly, travelling around the country I am often astounded by the amount I am sometimes asked to pay for what is a relatively short journey that might cost only half as much in other areas. In times of economic hardship, getting fare levels right is of vital importance.

Happiest with value for money were 35-59-year olds, with lower scores among younger passengers.

Punctuality is a subject that seriously concerns bus passengers and again there was a range of responses. The highest score (83%) was you-know-where in the East Midlands, with Hampshire BRT in hot
pursuit (81%) – interesting in view of the poor value for money score – right down to 57% at poor old Milton Keynes.

Like value for money, asking passengers how satisfied they are with the length of time their bus journey took does depend on perception and expectations, and perhaps a bit of history among passengers who remember faster journeys in the days before traffic congestion got its stranglehold in so many urban areas.

Hampshire BRT scored the greatest satisfaction (94%) with Nottingham City close behind, and the poorest was, interestingly, 78% for the Cambridgeshire BRT.

The factors that passengers said affected the length of their journey were (from highest to lowest score) congestion, the time it took for passengers to board, roadworks, down to poor weather conditions, buses waiting too long at stops, and the bus driver driving too slowly.

So, does satisfaction depend on where you live? Or the bus company that provides your local routes? The answers seem to be ‘yes’ and ‘yes’.

Setting Nottingham City aside, you are doing well if you live in Oxfordshire (91% overall satisfaction), Devon (90%), either of the BRT areas (Hampshire 89%, Cambridgeshire 87%), the Merseyside or Tyne & Wear PTE areas, Nottinghamshire, Tees Valley,
Thurrock or Warrington (87%) while at the other end of the scale Essex, Milton Keynes, Northumberland and West Midlands PTE scored less than 80%.

Individual operators that scored well (over 90%) were Nottingham City Transport and Reading Buses, while among the 'big four' groups Go-Ahead's Oxford Bus and Stagecoach Devon scored 90% or more, with other Stagecoach companies generally scoring better than those of their rival groups.

The Passenger Focus Bus Passenger Survey is a valuable indication of the state of the bus industry and, in particular, what its passengers think about the services they receive. If the results cause bus companies to look hard at what they're doing, and decide to respond positively to low scores, then the passengers will be the winners and bus companies will stand a better chance of attracting more passengers to use their buses.
It can be done!
So why doesn’t every bus company do it, asks GAVIN BOOTH after a day judging the UK’s best bus operators

The tagline for the UK Bus Awards logo is Recognising, Rewarding, Inspiring – and while these highly-regarded awards certainly recognise and reward bus operators who manage to get things pretty well right, how much do they inspire?

Claire Walters describes her first-time experience in the panel below, and I was involved in judging the various Top Operator categories, which also involve a lot of preparation before the judging panel meets, and although we reach conclusions, a lot depends on our small army of Mystery Travellers, who sample the operators’ services on the ground. Sometimes an operator that has impressed us with the material submitted in support of their entry can lose points if they don’t perform on the streets, which is judging the passenger experience. So at this stage we don’t know who has won, and won’t until the big presentation lunch in November – and even if we did know, I couldn’t tell you. We’ll know the finalists in time for Bus User 53

Claire Walters became one of many volunteer judges for five of these prestigious awards for the first time this year, along with Gavin Booth, and was very impressed by the amount of hard work that so many individuals, operators, voluntary organisations and local authorities put into their applications.

‘Just reading the applications was a mammoth task and ensured the burning of a fair bit of midnight oil,’ she said. ‘Some of the award panels required verbal presentations to be made by various passionate and well-prepared individuals and these were, without exception, of good quality, which was both a blessing and a curse as it’s going to make the final decisions very difficult…

‘I was particularly pleased to have been invited to help judge the awards for ‘Putting the Passenger First’ and ‘Making Buses a Better Option’ as these fit perfectly within our own plans and it was fascinating to see how so many organisations, private, public and non-profit, are approaching these issues.

‘We are all looking forward to seeing the shortlisted finalists at an event in London during September and will be sworn to secrecy about the results until the announcements take place in November.’
The UK Bus Awards recognise and reward bus companies for the practices that benefit passengers.

Or what about the company that provides a complimentary taxi for anyone in a wheelchair when a ramp is not available for any reason. Or the company that provides a designated space for wheelchairs and another for buggies. Then there are the bus companies using Facebook and Twitter to maintain contact with customers, hear what customers have to say, and keep them informed if there is disruption to services. Then there are the companies committed to providing high-quality information inside and outside their buses.

And several companies mention moves to attract younger people to buses by offering innovative fares, not just for children of school ages but for older teenagers too.

There is no doubt that there are many first-class bus companies out there, but sadly there also some that don’t achieve the same levels of service, and these are the ones that we hope will take note, and study the companies that win these awards and pick up some tips from them.

To help improve the level of service bus users should expect, we are revising our Bus Users Best Practice Guide, and this time we are asking members to contribute to this by letting us know what they feel bus companies throughout the UK should be providing. In the panel on the right are some headings that we hope will prove useful, and we look forward to hearing from you with your comments; we’ll incorporate these in our revised Guide and although we can’t force bus companies to adopt the best practice we recommend, we know some operators will take this on board and hope others will recognise that passengers are paying for a service and have a right to expect high standards in return for their fare.

**Bus Users BEST PRACTICE GUIDE**

We believe bus users deserve the highest possible standards in these areas:

**Information** – How this should be provided before a journey (at home and at bus stops and stations and other information points), on buses and from staff.

**Bus stops and stations** – Situation, environment, security, ease of use, real-time information.

**Buses** – Ease of identification, ease of use, cleanliness and general upkeep, heating and ventilation, driving standards, general comfort.

**Fares and tickets** – Knowledge of fares before boarding, exact fare systems, tickets to encourage bus use (day tickets, family tickets, tickets to encourage younger people).

**Punctuality and reliability** – Keeping passengers informed about delays and other problems, compensation for delays.

**Complaints and suggestions** – Need for prompt handling of complaints, appeals procedure for users unhappy with the way complaints are handled.

**Consultation** – The need for consultation with users on service and frequency changes that could seriously affect communities.

These are a few main headings, and if you have access to the internet you can read our current Good Practice Guide on our website, www.bususers.org. At a time when technology is moving quickly, we hope to include more on the ways this can help bus users.

Please send your comments and suggestions to Gavin Booth by email (gavin.booth@bususers.org) or by post to Gavin at Bus Users Scotland, Hopetoun Gate, 8b McDonald Road, Edinburgh EH7 4LZ.
Local Groups meeting at Birmingham

It’s been a while since we held our last local groups meeting and with our new website in development the time was right to get local group input about their requirements from the new site. At the same time we want to help to empower our groups and help them to be able to become more effective.

So representatives of some of our local groups met in Birmingham on 20 July for a training session on media and communications. Topics discussed included our strategy and recent progress, the features that groups need from our new website to help them function more effectively, communication between groups and with Bus Users UK centrally and discussion of a range of policy papers.

Our press and media consultant Vicki Pulman also led a seminar on dealing with media and gave groups a template press release to help them engage effectively with local press.

Groups made it clear that greater communication with each other would be very helpful, especially to help them gain expertise on issues that they face from other groups who have already faced the same issue. At present there isn’t a formal mechanism for that to happen. However one of the key aspects of our new website will be a means for groups to share best practice, and to give them access to helpful materials. Also clear was a need for website templates for local groups, something else we will be making available.

Policy papers are being developed covering a number of topics. These again will help local groups as well as our staff, suit particular local circumstances. Four provisional papers were made available to groups, on the Bus Service Operators’ Grant (BSOG), concessionary fares, safety and Quality Partnerships/Contracts, and useful feedback was given. There were also very helpful suggestions about other topics that could be covered and policy papers will be as they will contain a briefing on each topic and Bus Users UK’s position on each. These will help groups with local campaigns and inform them for press comment, enabling them to work in line with Bus Users UK overall policy. It was however made clear that production of papers would be a two-way process with local groups feeding back comments on how policies may need adapting to

Local Groups are essential to the success of Bus Users UK as the passengers’ champion, and we are keen to hear of local initiatives and successes that we can feature in the pages of Bus User. Send your news and photos to the editor (gavin.booth@bususers.org).
Picking up ideas

I am an inveterate bus leaflet picker-upper (writes Gavin Booth) and these not only give me the information I may seek about times or routes or (if I am lucky) fares, but also draw my attention to some clever things that bus operators are doing. Now I would never pretend that these are all brand-new ideas or that nobody else is doing these things, but they strike me as things that other bus companies could do well to pick up on.

Like this FirstBus initiative – a sheet of cards that are designed to be cut out and used with a concessionary pass or when buying a ticket from a driver. Passengers simply pop the card in a ticket wallet and show it to the driver to indicate what help is needed. The bottom card allows the passenger to complete the destination information.

Or a similar idea from National Express Dundee, where vulnerable passengers are able to show a cut-out card to the driver to request more time to find a seat. Passengers are asked to show the card to the driver before they scan their concession card or pay their fare.

We commend both of these schemes and hope that other operators may come up with something similar to help their passengers.

And if you know of something similar – or another local initiative that would benefit passengers in other parts of the country – email me on gavin.booth@bususers.org or drop me a note at Bus Users Scotland, Hopetoun Gate, 8b McDonald Road, Edinburgh EH7 4LZ. That way we can share good practice and ensure that all passengers get a good deal from their local bus company.
described a bus she had used in July as ‘a blast furnace’, with little fresh air coming in through the ‘little slitty windows’ to the extent that she was ‘a half-dead, poaching slob – dribbling sweat, clothes sodden, body pasted to the seat, difficulty breathing’. She described how her daughter was ‘almost cooked alive’ in a bus, which had ‘remained stationary and hermetically sealed, waiting ages for a replacement driver, who took his time, polishing his mirrors slowly, while the maddened, sweating passengers moaned and sweated within’.

We've all been there and realise that this does nothing to encourage bus travel, when even faithful regulars are uncomfortable and there seems little chance that newspaper articles such as these will encourage new users to try the bus. We make no apology about returning to this topic, with cooler days on the horizon. Must we wait for the prescribed date before the engineers turn the heating on or off, which doesn't take into account an Indian summer or a cold spring? Can buses not be specified with controls that allow the driver to regulate the temperature in the bus – after all, drivers have to suffer the extremes of temperature, unless they’re among the lucky ones with air conditioning for the cab area. We don't grudge them that – they are usually in the bus longer than we are – but please Mr Bus Company Manager, think about your poor passengers; they are what running buses is all about.

In spite of our best efforts to raise awareness of the problem, we are still hearing from Bus Users UK members about hot buses in the summer and cold buses in the winter. In previous years we have campaigned to highlight this problem and while some bus companies acknowledged the problem and set about solving it, others shrugged their shoulders and said they couldn’t do much about it – the engineers set the heating controls and heating went on in October and off in April, whatever the temperature outside, and drivers in many cases have no way of controlling the climate even when they and their passengers are slowly melting.

Now the July heatwave was an unexpected bonus, but we heard from passengers that they were cooler outside the bus than in, when temperatures hit the 30°C+ mark.

The much-heralded New Bus for London was described as a ‘cauldron on wheels’ with upper deck temperatures recorded at more than 30°C, some 7°C hotter than outside, with humidity at 77%, almost double that on the Tube and higher than countries like Malaysia. The Daily Mail reported that ‘heat levels on some of the buses were found to have exceeded the maximum allowed for transporting farm animals across Europe’. Transport for London admitted the buses had ‘teething problems’ with the air-chilling system and encouraged concerned passengers to complain.

But of course it’s not just a London problem and we know that passengers in other parts of Britain were suffering the discomfort of overheated or poorly-ventilated buses and coaches. Those of us who like a well-ventilated bus might well get irritated when passengers come aboard and noisily close all the ventilators, but, being British, we say nothing about it. A veritable game of draughts, in fact.

Michele Hanson, writing in The Guardian,
Now we’re into September, hopefully you are seeing a great improvement in your local bus drivers. As of 9 September anyone driving a bus carrying fare-paying passengers has to have a little blue card proving that they have had 35 hours of additional training. The scheme originates in the European Union and is a brave attempt to improve the skill levels and hopefully status of bus drivers, who now have to have a Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC). This is a slightly confusing term, as transport managers in the bus industry also have to have a Certificate of Professional Competence, but this is rather different. Bus drivers have to renew their licence every five years and now, to be able to do that, they have to have had 35 hours training, equivalent of one day each year.

This is an excellent opportunity to improve drivers’ skill levels, in turn hopefully improving their sense of well-being and professionalism. However we do in this country tend to take on anything originating in Europe in a grudging fashion, looking for every possible exemption and loophole, and applying the letter of the law rather than trying to see the spirit of it. As a result, the outcome of the driver CPC has not been as good as it could have been. There is for example no pass or fail: all a driver has to do is to turn up and sit through each seven-hour course. There is no obligation to engage with it or listen, you just have to be there. There is a whole range of topics that are covered by the course, but if you like you can do the same module five times over. It all smacks of ‘this is something Europe has obliged us to do, so we’ll do it’. Which is a shame as it is a really beneficial exercise if it’s taken seriously.

Some bus companies run their own courses and there are training companies around the country that offer the courses. Hopefully, despite grumbling about the cost, most bus companies have realised the benefit of having a better-trained workforce and have gone about it seriously. Courses include things like customer care, disability awareness and fuel-efficient driving, all things that benefit us as passengers – and hopefully bus companies as employers.
Although I’ve never worked in the bus industry as such, my previous existence required me to have a PCV (Passenger Carrying Vehicle) licence which I didn’t want to lose when the new regulations came in, so I’ve been going through the course for myself. It’s given me a useful insight into the issues bus drivers face every day, and as I’ve done most of it with Reading Buses it’s been interesting to see what one bus company’s drivers are being taught.

Reading Buses has a good reputation for its training – indeed it was one of the first companies to get all its drivers through the CPC course. It has a Training Academy that trains the company’s own drivers and offers courses to outsiders like me on a commercial basis.

Although I undertook a variety of modules, there was a lot of emphasis on customer care and disability awareness. Indeed I took my first module on a course offered by the Confederation of Passenger Transport rather than at Reading’s academy, and this was led by a tutor in a wheelchair whose firsthand experience, not to mention his knowledge of the Equality Act 2010, was invaluable. Despite his obvious disability the instructor went through many other aspects of the Equalities Act, and we talked at considerable length. He was keen to disabuse drivers of prejudices and make them aware of how hurtful a careless remark can be when you don’t know the circumstances of the individual getting on your bus.

Reading also came up trumps by getting a local lady who relies on a guide dog to address the course. She gave drivers very useful experience of finding out first-hand what it is like to be guided by a sighted person and use a white stick. It’s a lesson drivers on the course will not forget, though it was unfortunate that the driver of her bus into Reading had not been helpful to her. She relies on being able...
to tell where she is by the twists and turns in the bus route and the driver omitted to warn her that there was a lengthy diversion in place due to a bridge closure.

One of the Reading modules involved some practical work, designed to help drivers to drive in a more fuel-efficient manner. As things turned out I was the only person doing the driving on this particular occasion and while a morning driving a double-decker into the adjoining Hampshire countryside was all very enjoyable, the afternoon driving in the heart of Reading’s shopping centre and then out through very narrow housing estates just as a school was chucking out brought home very forcibly the stresses endured by drivers every day of the week. I was even let off when I clipped the kerb in three occasions, given the difficulty of the drive.

Drivers were encouraged to speak to passengers when things weren’t going right, to be prepared to apologise for delays and other things going wrong and to take their time to help people who needed it.

A lot of the course was about straightforward common sense and simply treating passengers as you would like to be treated. Drivers were encouraged to speak to passengers when things weren’t going right, to be prepared to apologise for delays and other things going wrong and to take their time to help people who needed it. It was refreshing to hear such things being taught to drivers, most of whom seemed accepting of them.

One issue that came up a lot was the issue of wheelchair areas being used by parents with pushchairs who then refuse to move out of the way to let a wheelchair user on board. Drivers do not have powers to insist on people vacating the wheelchair space. One instructor related an occasion when he was driving on a wet day and two pushchairs were in the wheelchair space. One of the ladies kindly got off the bus and walked the rest of the way, while the other flatly refused to move. The tactic used by the driver was to apologise very loudly and distinctly to the wheelchair user, explaining why unfortunately he couldn’t let him on the bus, hoping the sense of all the other passengers’ eyes boring into the pushchair owner might get her to fold it up and let the wheelchair on board: sadly, it didn’t.

What did however come over very strongly in all the sessions is how drivers have to take split-second decisions about all sorts of things, and often with conflicting factors. Do you make sure everyone is seated before you set off from the stop when you’re already 10 minutes late? Do you get out of the cab to help someone on board, possibly leaving the day’s takings unguarded? What do you do when a deaf person boards and thrusts a mobile phone at you to speak to someone who can tell them where they want to go, when to be caught using a phone at the wheel is a dismissable offence? How do you cope with someone with a speech impediment trying to communicate with you through an assault screen?

For me just coping with not clipping the kerb with my nice, empty bus when there were kids milling about and stacks of cars coming down the narrow road the other way was stressful enough, thank you.

"Drivers were encouraged to speak to passengers when things weren’t going right, to be prepared to apologise for delays and other things going wrong and to take their time to help people who needed it."
Have your say

What is ‘appropriate’?
In *Bus User* 50, Michael J Smith raises the interesting question of who has a duty to ensure that roadside timetable displays are complete. Sadly, the short answer is no-one.

Outside Greater London, bus companies’ obligations are limited to the very minimal requirement in paragraph 13(1)(a)(ii) of the Public Service Vehicle (Registration of Local Services) Regulations 1986 that a timetable shall be displayed, or available on request, on board each vehicle. Nothing obliges them to provide such information anywhere else. When challenged about this by Bus Users UK’s predecessor organisation, the government of the day argued that in a competitive market they would do so anyway.

Fourteen years and a change of government later, the naivety of this belief had become recognised, and the solution was placed in the hands of local transport authorities by sections 139 to 141 of the Transport Act 2000. After consulting the traffic commissioners and organisations representing bus users, authorities must decide what service information should be made available to the public, and how this should be done. They must then ascertain, from time to time, whether this is happening and, if it is not, make arrangements with bus operators for them to do so. If they are unable to make such arrangements with one or more operators, authorities must then make the information available themselves (or arrange for this to be done), and can recover the reasonable cost of doing so from the operator(s) concerned. In carrying out these functions, authorities must cooperate with each other, act in a non-discriminatory manner, and ‘have regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness’.

But it is entirely a matter for each authority to determine ‘the appropriate way’ of providing information, and there is no specific requirement for there to be displays at stops, however obvious this may seem (or, indeed, even for stops to be physically marked in any way). Equally, it is a matter for authorities’ discretion whether they provide printed maps or timetables, or run telephone enquiry lines, or operate text-messaging systems or provide on-line journey planners. In practice, they do all participate in the Traveline scheme, though what exactly the site offers varies from region to region.

Hence there are huge discrepancies from area to area in the quality of stops, what (if anything) is displayed there, and who provides it. Proponents of localism no doubt celebrate this diversity as evidence of local democracy in action. Bus users in both Derby and Derbyshire (to take Mr Smith’s example) may take a more jaundiced view.

But for those authorities that are minded to take this responsibility seriously, there is plenty of advice available. They may wish to start with Better information for bus passengers: a guide to good practice, published by the Department of Transport in 1996. More recently, this has been complemented by Printed information at bus stops: interim good practice at bus stops produced by the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers in 2004.

John Cartledge, Boreham Wood

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English National Concessionary Pass
My pass was issued by Merseytravel and while I have no problem using it in the Merseytravel area I have encountered problems in Transport for Greater Manchester. The card reader refused to accept my card. The driver looked at it and allowed me to continue my journey; he could have asked me to pay. The problem is that I used Arriva buses in Southport but the Arriva bus on my journey refused to accept my card.

I have just spent a two-hour round trip to check my card; it is fine. I was told it is a software problem. Other people on holiday in Cornwall have had the same problem.

I wonder how many people have had a similar problem. The smart cards have been around for years so why are they not bringing their software up to date? There would be an outcry if my credit card was accepted at Tesco but refused at Marks & Spencer.

B J Powell, Southport
**Better shelters or better buses?**

I would like to take up on the letter from Sheila Colbeck in BU51 with regard to bus shelters. I have spent a good deal of my time standing in various designs of shelter, loitering there with the intent of monitoring bus services as a public transport surveyor. I can honestly say that most shelters fall short of customer expectation, and the illustration used to accompany Sheila’s comments is a good example of this.

As nice and sleek as it may appear, all the long-side glazing is at the rear, leaving the intending passengers open to the elements. Very often the road surfaces at bus stops could do with resurfacing and as the bus approaches on a wet day, its wheels spray a shower of dirty water from puddles on to those waiting to board. So my first suggestion is that, apart from the exit opening, there should always be protective glazing on the kerb side.

The information displayed in shelters should be easy to understand, comfortably accessible as well as informative. No matter how nice the bus is, if people are put off by the inconvenience and difficulties in obtaining the information they require, they will be tempted to walk on or phone for a taxi. Take another look at the picture. It is very typical of the short-sightedness shelter manufacturers have taken in providing a user-friendly bus stop. Even allowing for perspective, the height of the timetable case is well above those who are standing there.

I am 6ft tall myself and find that even I have to strain my neck to see the uppermost information.

Next, and this beggars belief, the timetable panel is mounted directly above a seat, which makes it very intimidating for anyone sitting there and even more of a problem asking people to move so that one can read it. Not everyone co-operates willingly. This situation is made all the more ridiculous when the empty panel without a seat in front of it could easily accommodate the timetable.

After many years experiencing these problems and feeling sorry for people being so inconvenienced I would make the suggestion that manufacturers of shelters should rethink the layout with the user in mind. Not only do I think that the timetable case should never be above a seat, but also that it should be turned around landscape fashion. Instead of having a map above times (even that can be the reverse), the map should be placed beside the times, and the whole thing fastened at a standard height acceptable to the average person. I could expand on maps as well, but it would be so nice to at least get this bit right first.

**Robert Crawley, Sidmouth**

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**Customer service training**

Has any reader experience of customer service training for bus drivers? Arriva in Shropshire has agreed to Bus Users Shropshire contributing to drivers’ customer service training. We’d welcome contact from anyone with experience of designing or delivering customer services training in general, or of driver training more specifically, for ideas. Please contact Bus Users Shropshire on 07580 564458 or bususersshropshire@hotmail.co.uk.

**Peter Gilbert**

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**Rear-facing seats**

In the letter from John Cartledge (BU51) concerning buses with rear-facing seats over part of the rear axle of most current double-deck vehicles, I wish to add a further example from our experience.

Firstly, I fully agree over the desire of certain passengers to put their feet, with wet or dry footwear, on the facing seats. But secondly in my daily local bus travel is the factor that many passengers find it awkward to travel backwards because they do not see each time the bus is making a left-hand or right-hand turn and with a lack of a handpole or hand grips, experience being thrown from their seat or try to hold on to a fellow passenger.

For regular passengers these seats then become somewhat antisocial unless another front-facing seat can be found to make the journey safer and more comfortable.

**Don Vincent, Sandown**
Welcome
To new members
P D Carly, Blandford Forum; Gerald Cox, Bath; Robert Crawley, Colaton Raleigh; Sean Dunlevy, Peterborough; Michael Funn, Brackley; Larry Petterson, Cardiff; Leslie Potter, Wakefield; Simon Wyatt, Chatham.

To new group
West Cumbria Bus Users Group
David Andrews, 12 Longsdale Place, Whitehaven CA28 6DX
Tel 01946 695373

Bus Users UK LOCAL GROUPS
Age UK Colchester peter@ageconcern.org.uk
Association of Devizes Passengers
www.facebook.com/DevizesPassengers
BABUS (Bedford Area Bus User’s Society) www.babus.org.uk
BBUG (Bath Bus Users Group) chair@bath-bus-users.org.uk
Bradford & District Older People’s Alliance (BOPA)
www.bopabadford.org.uk
Brighton Area Buswatch brightonbuswatch@gmail.com
BUGS Bus Users Group Stevenage www.betterbuses.org.uk
Bus Users Shopshire bususersshopshire@hotmail.co.uk
Bus Users UK Northampton
13 Dryden Avenue, Daventry NN11 9DJ
Bus Users UK Oxford hughjaeger@hotmail.com
Bus Watch West Haringey c.barker@lineone.net
Campaign for Better Transport – Cambs
6 Hertford Street, Cambridge CB4 3AG
Campaign for Better Transport – West Yorkshire
rwilkes@blueyonder.co.uk
Cardiff People First cardiffpeople1st@btconnect.com
Christian Peoples Alliance Party (Northampton Branch)
colin.bricher@ntlworld.com
City of Hull & Humber Environment Forum
info@hullenvironmentforum.org.uk
Colchester Bus Users Support Group
peterkay.essex@btinternet.com
Dengie Hundred Bus Users’ Group (DBUG)
sarah@burnhamtowntcouncil.com
Ealing Passenger Transport Users Group www.eptug.org
Footprint Trust www.footprint-trust.co.uk
Friends of DalesBus www.friendsofdalesbus.org.uk
I.W. Bus & Rail Users Group iwbususers@fsmail.net
Kendal & District Bus Users (KADBUS) 01539 740761
Milton Keynes Bus Users Group
www.mkbug.co.uk
Norfolk Bus Forum fedsec@norfolkwi.org.uk
North Herts Bus Users Group (NHBUG)
marilyn.kirkland@north-herts.gov.uk
North Pembrokeshire Transport Forum www.nptf.co.uk
North West Surrey Bus Users Group
mjworley@btopenworld.com, www.facebook.com/nwsurreybug
Oxfordshire Unlimited daveholmes.home@btinternet.com
Pattishall Parish Council ann.atkin51@btinternet.com
Penllwyn Community Partnership Sian Woosnam,
c/o 12 Highmead, Penllwyn, Gwent NP12 2PE
The Pensioners & Fifty Plus Action Group
tomag42@hotmail.co.uk

LOCAL GROUPS continued
Radstock Public Transport Group
george@whitecsl.demon.co.uk
Railfuture www.railfuture.org.uk
Rame Peninsula Public Transport Users Group
j.cadwallader@btinternet.com
Rural East Lothian Bus Users www.relbus.org.uk
The Senior Council for Devon Transport
andrea@scfd.org.uk
Southend Area Bus User Group
donaldfraser17@btinternet.com
St Neots Area Bus Users Society info@snabus.org.uk
Swale Senior Forum 01795 424725
Swindon Climate Action Network
www.swindonclimate.org.uk
TravelWatch NorthWest
admin@travelwatch-northwest.org.uk
TravelWatch SouthWest www.travelwatchsouthwest.org
Tring Bus Users Group 01442 824508
Tyne and Wear Public Transport Users Group
ne11ee@fsmail.net
West Cumbria Bus Users Group
David Andrews, tel 01946 695373
West Leigh Residents Association
donaldfraser17@btinternet.com
Wirral Transport users Association
17 Poulton Road, Bebington, Wirral CH63 9LA

Joining Bus Users UK
We always welcome new members; membership is available to anyone who uses buses for whatever purpose. It doesn’t matter if you only use them occasionally. It’s also open to groups of bus users and organisations that share our concern for better public transport.

If you wish to join please write to us at Bus Users UK, Terminal House, Station Approach, Shepperton TW17 8AS, or visit our website, www.bususers.org to download a printable membership form or to join online using PayPal.

You can also subscribe using on-line banking; please email our financial administrator, Bill Wright, on bill.wright@bususers.org, who will provide the bank details to be used and a reference to quote. Members can pay by Direct Debit – forms accompany subscription renewal notices and can also be downloaded from www.bususers.org.

Annual subscriptions
£15 for individuals
£10 for senior citizens, under-18s and unwaged.
The subscription for local groups is £18.50.

Bus companies and local authorities that share our desire to improve communication with passengers and who support the Confederation of Passenger Transport’s Code of Good Practice can take out associate membership; please contact us for details at the Shepperton address or email enquiries@bususers.org.