Transition Tavistock – Bus Users' Survey Summer 2024

Introduction

Transition Tavistock's Travel Action Group encourages inclusive, sustainable local transport, and sees buses as a vital part of this. For more details, and to get our newsletter, see www.transitiontavistock.org.uk/travel.

This report, of a survey conducted at Tavistock Bus Station between 27th May and 7th June 2024, follows up our October 2023 findings, published here, which we drew to the attention of relevant Councils and bus companies[1]. The scope again covers both the bus station facilities[2] and bus service, but with some changes to the questions. See Appendix A for the survey method. Thanks are due to the 7 volunteer interviewers and 96 passengers who took time to share their views.

Main conclusions

As before, users of the bus station valued the facility, but many pointed out how it could be improved. The recent installation of a live display of bus departures was widely welcomed. (The survey was conducted before the August improvements to the display of paper timetables.) Shelter from the wind and rain, restoration of a kiosk/café and full toilet facilities remained common concerns.

Having a choice of ways to get information about bus routes and timetables remains important to people. Websites or phone apps are the most common source, but some have flaws, and a significant minority of passengers cannot access them directly. Printed information for advance planning and at stop remains important. As many regular passengers "just know" the times, proactive communication of both planned changes and significant delays is important.

As before, some users had gained and some lost from the 86/89 route change, which had occurred the month before our previous survey. Planned service changes were less of an issue this time, but there was frustration at delays due to bus breakdown and roadworks. There was good awareness of and support for the £2 single fare cap, with over half the respondents saying it had made a difference to them.

The majority of passengers rated local bus services as good or satisfactory, with timeliness the main concern, and staff generally well regarded. As before, users would like to see additional services, particularly in evenings and Sundays.

Next steps

The Travel Action Group plans to discuss these findings with the relevant Council representatives and encourage action to address concerns and encourage bus use.

[1] Responsibility for bus services is complicated, and likely to change further. Transition Tavistock is represented on Devon BUS Forum, run by Devon County Council, which brings bus companies and user groups together. We engage constructively with councillors at town, district and county level but do not endorse any political party.

[2] West Devon Borough Council owns the bus station and adjacent property.

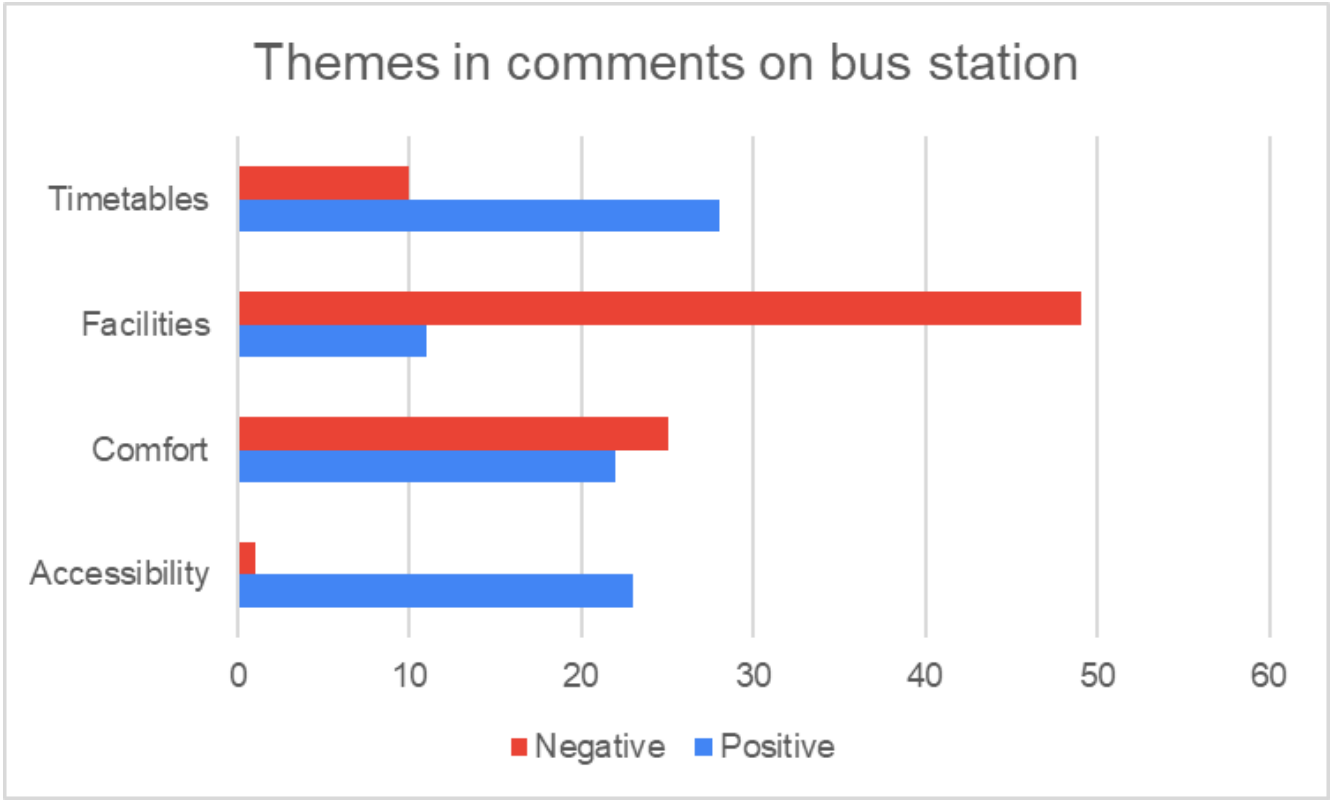
Tavistock Bus Station

Compared to the October survey, passenger views of the bus station, while remaining mixed, were more evenly balanced. As before, there was general approval for the location, and for the provision of seating and partial shelter. There were however several comments that the number of seats is insufficient for busy times. Key concerns about facilities and comfort were, as before:

- lack of protection from wind blowing through the seating area
- inadequacy of toilet provision (and cleanliness); and
- the absence of a place to get a drink or snack.

There was a clear welcome for the live times display panel, which had been in for a couple of months at the time of the survey, and (consequently?) fewer comments about the presentation of the printed timetable. The survey was conducted before the installation (in August) of a larger print timetable board at a convenient height: a key recommendation from our previous report.

The two visitors who compared it to their facilities at home thought Tavistock's bus station better.



The chart shows the number of comments coded as positive (85) or negative (84) on key themes. In total 87 people expressed a view, many covering several topics.

Sample comments on the bus station

"Liked the map of the area on Plymouth Road"

"Easy to get to from town, , It's safe, it's good, Need kiosk back,"

"Adequate in summer, rubbish in winter. More shelter from the elements and open the snack bar again."

"Good that there is sheltered area, but could be more enclosed. More comfortable than at bus stops. The live display is helpful."

"More WCs needed - having to queue as only 1 open"

"Improve the toilets, sometimes they aren't in a great state"

"Should be a barrier behind seats to stop rain driving through - eg 'wire glass'"

"Comfortable, likes electronic timetable, needs kiosk"

"First time visit. Accessible and well located - overlooked so feels safe. Shelter. Useful to have overhead screen & WCs."

"Could do with more seats - sometimes full. Good that is possible to get under shelter."

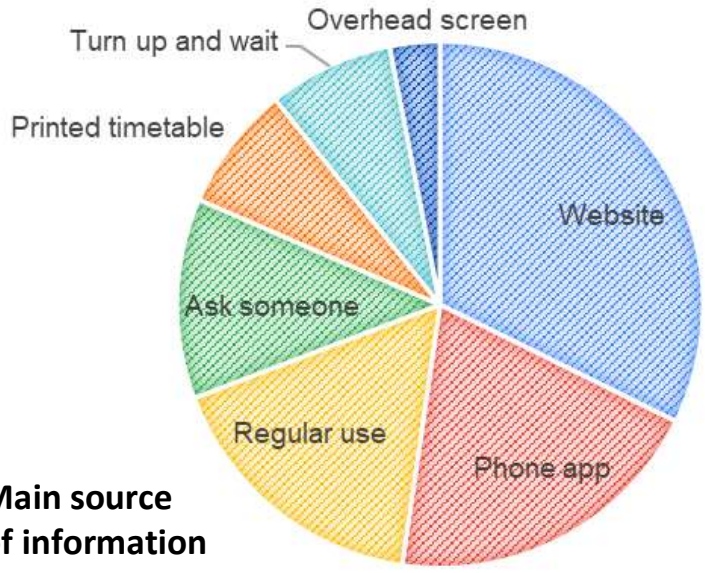
"Would like better lighting at night, especially in winter as it can be quite unnerving."

"Timetables too small to read and too high on metal posts."

"Likes overhead display. Would like cafe and lock-up for bikes."

"Compares well with Newton Abbot bus station which is larger but does not have WCs or overhead screen and in area which feels unsafe at night."

Ways people find information on bus routes and times



Main source of information (locals)

As in the previous survey, just over half used online information as the primary source.[3]

A quarter either said they knew times from regular use, or just turned up to wait.

One in eight asked someone else, most often a relative or driver. The printed timetable was the key source for 8% (vs 13% in October).

While the overhead screen was welcomed, only two respondents used it as a primary source: understandable as it only shows the next hour's departures.

[3] Chart is based on 65 of the 88 local respondents who identified a main means. The 8 visitors also used a range of methods.

Passengers often use more than one source, for reassurance or convenience. Several mentioned concerns about unreliable phone signal, so might avoid dependence on that by printing out a website timetable or photographing one displayed at a stop. Others found particular phone apps awkward to use or unreliable.

Sample comments on information:

"I track them on an app."

"Just turn up as regularly use service. Don't use online services as don't have smartphone."

"Easy. Stagecoach, Dartline and bustimes.org"

"App doesn't always update, and the display board is not always accurate. Uses the website very occasionally. Accuracy is important as if a bus is running late she is late for work. As a young person, working in her first proper job in hospitality it is very important to her that she gets into work on time."

"Regular use, but I carry bus timetable booklets."

"Uses website as it is more accurate than the phone app. Checks on website and regularly use. (Interviewee uses 2 buses a day to get from St Ann's Chapel to Tavistock and onto Plymouth where she works.)"

"Rely on family to access the internet"

"Asked in person at Plymouth tourist information office - very helpful and printed relevant timetables out for him." (visitor)

"Difficult to know the name of some stops, eg if road name. #89 route is confusing."

Impact of service changes

When asked whether they had been affected by any recent changes to bus services, 39% said yes – slightly lower than last year (44%). Our October survey was a few weeks after the controversial changes to route 86/89 (looped routes within Tavistock). These routes were still those most frequently mentioned as having changed, with, as before, this having inconvenienced some people and helped others. Some comments referred to frustration at delays due to a bus breaking down or rerouting due to roadworks, rather than planned timetable or route changes. The only interviewee using new cross-moor service 172 was very pleased with it.

Sample comments on service changes:

"Local bus #89 now runs slightly later by a couple of minutes. This can result in missed connection and a further 20 minutes wait"

"No 86 doesn't got to Morrison's in the afternoon."

"Positive change with the 89 now finishes at 7pm (was 4:30pm)"

"Scheduled bus has broken down and they do not know when next bus is due or whether it will take her home to Bere Ferrers or terminate in Bere Alston."

"118 - change of route and delays due to road works."

The £2 single fare cap

Of those asked about the fare cap 93% were aware of it. Half said it had made a difference to them. A quarter said it made no difference because they were passholders, though some

remarked that it was a good idea. A few of the remainder saw it as having increased the fares they paid. (That should not be the case, suggesting that some bus drivers may be using the system incorrectly, eg by selling 2 singles rather than a return.) While the prospects of this scheme continuing past the announced end date of December 2024 seem low, these findings illustrate the benefit of affordable fares, particularly for young or low paid commuters in rural areas.

Sample comments on fare cap:

"Enjoys bus travel so would use anyway, but finds that friends his age (20s??) are more willing to accompany in travelling that way now fares are capped."

"Has made a lot of difference and its now much cheaper for her to get to work."

"It has increased passenger numbers" (passholder)

"This has made a massive difference, especially as she goes home when on a split shift."

"Pass holder but thinks the cap will encourage families to use buses."

"For local trips return is 50p cheaper than the cap"

"Not aware of it - sounds good."

"Shorter routes are now more expensive."

"Visiting relative who does pay has found that bus driver will not sell Albaston - Tavistock return, which would be less than the 2 single fares, so disadvantaged."

"Lot better – uses buses more"

"Much cheaper for interviewee to get to work, used to buy a weekly ticket but now uses daily fares"

Passenger views of bus services

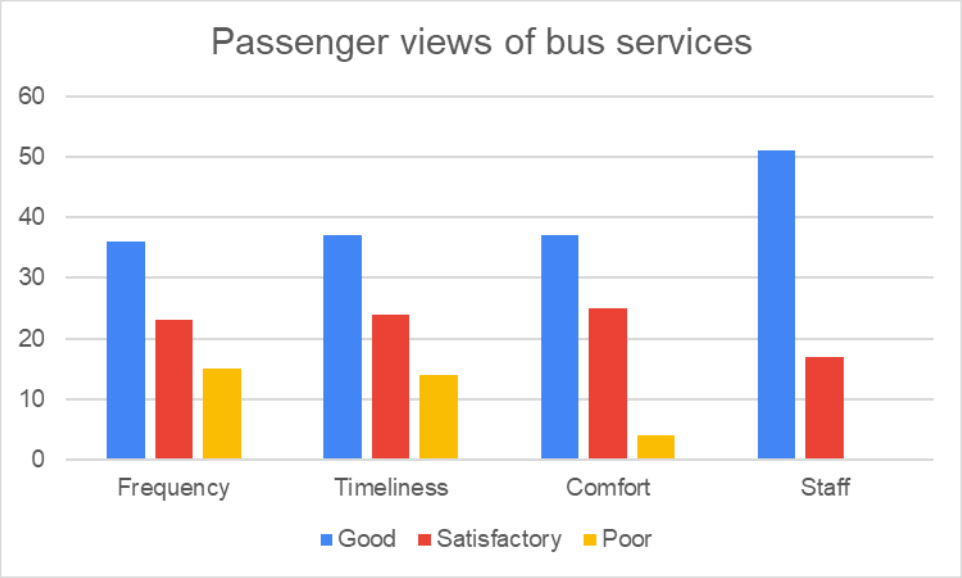
As last year, many passengers were content, if not enthusiastic, about the service they received from bus operators, expressing views like "Overall a good service" or "No concerns". As before, negative responses mainly concerned reliability and communication about delays, and there was a desire for more frequent services including evenings and Sundays.

The issue raised last time of poor connections between timetables did not arise, but, with a later finish to the interviews, picked up a concern from several respondents about service 98 to Princetown changing to a small "Hoppa" bus at the end of the day.[4]

"The 17:40 #98 to Princetown is the last bus of the day, so bus company should ensure everyone waiting is able to board. Thinks there is a policy on this, but not observed. Several recent occasions when it has been full - eg at one point 6 people turned away. Driver response varies - sometimes comes back for the rest, sometimes not. Alternative for passengers is £16 taxi ride - even if taxi available at that time."

"Not just at bus station - can be full on arrival at Greenlands from Princetown, eg campers coming in."

[4] Problems with substituting this style of bus have been raised with us separately regarding service 89, in relation to it being more difficult for a passenger with mobility difficulties to get on and off at a roadside stop.



The numbers were too small to compare routes. However the 87/87A had a noticeably higher proportion of “poor” ratings for both frequency and timeliness.

Sample comments on bus frequency and timeliness:

“Feels most of the time the service works well and buses turn up. If there are roadworks he gets an earlier bus so he is not late for school.”

“Main problem is traffic - buses do fine considering that. Satisfied with Tavistock / Plymouth service.”

“There is only a bus every hour to Bere Alston, buses all seem to be older ones that are prone to breakdown.”

“Would like some way of knowing when buses are cancelled (overhead display does not tell you)”

“Good overall - normally on time. Would like more frequent buses on #85 route.”

“There is a gap in services (86) between 2and 5pm.”

“Would like (87) buses on Sundays and after 6pm, as she couldn't go to a concert in Tavistock”

“Would use bus more if reliable and more frequent, uses car otherwise”

Sample comments on bus comfort and staff:

“Not enough legroom on buses”

“Better bus suspensions to cope with the potholes.”

“Very good bus driving on Devon's narrow lanes!”

“Some drivers don't give enough time for passengers to sit down”

“My gran uses the bus and the drivers are super friendly and helpful.”

“Some drivers are great; others are horrible.”

Appendix A: Survey method

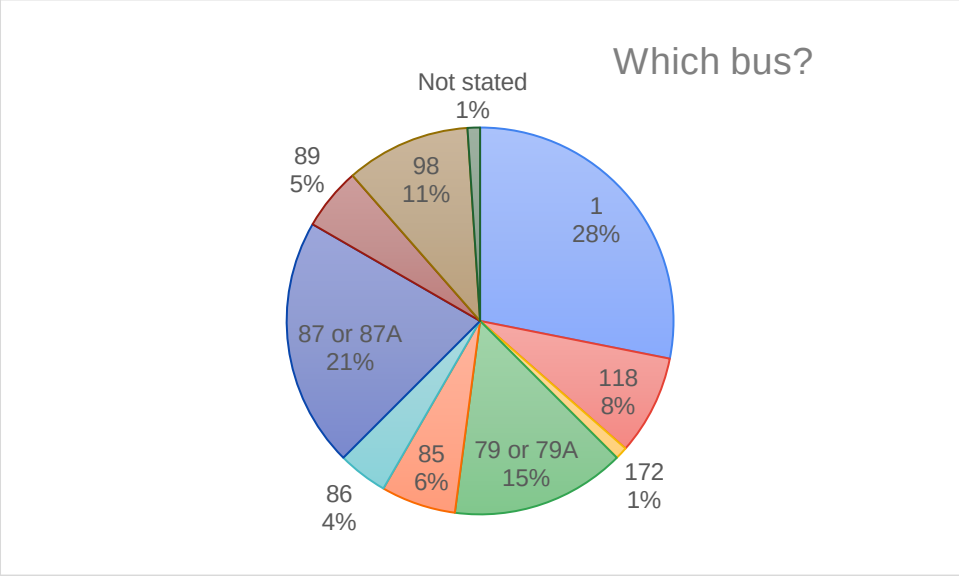
Volunteers conducted face-to-face interviews with 96 people waiting at Tavistock bus station on weekdays and a Saturday, at a range of times between 10am and 6pm. The period was chosen to include summer half-term. As far as practical, volunteers aimed to invite everyone waiting at the bus station to offer views. Demographic details were not recorded, as this would have been intrusive in the context. Eight respondents said they were visiting the area: of these 2 were on day trips and 2 staying locally with family.

Question topics were similar to the previous survey, but with wording varied for those "local to the area" and visitors, and a new question on the £2 single fare cap. The style was conversational, exploring points raised by the passenger more fully where time allowed.

- Which bus are you waiting for?[5]
- Looking at this bus station, what do you like or not like about it?
- If local:
  - How do you usually find out about bus routes and times?
  - Have there been any recent changes to bus services which have affected you? How?
- If visiting:
  - How did you find out about the buses to use during your visit?
  - How do the bus station and services here compare with those in your home area?
- Has the £2 capped fare made a difference to you?
- Do you feel you receive a good service from bus companies?
- Are there any other points you'd like to make about buses in this area?

Where quotations are given, these are from interviewers' notes, and are not verbatim but convey the gist of the point made.

Almost all the daily bus services from Tavistock were represented, this time with more coverage of route 87/87A (to Bere Alston) and less of route 1 (to Plymouth).



[5] For a few interviewees this was the service they had just arrived on, or most often used.