

The experience of European passengers

Gavin Booth, Director Bus Users Scotland

Good morning. I am Director of Bus Users Scotland, and if our recent Referendum had gone the other way we might well be declaring independence from our colleagues in Bus Users UK, but fortunately that won't be necessary.

Bus Users exists to champion the interests of bus and coach users and to campaign for better bus and coach services, so my experience is of working with passengers in that little corner of Europe known as the United Kingdom, although I have managed to travel in many parts of Europe and, as I am sure most transport professionals do, I use public transport where I can and I am aware that it is not always easy to change modes – and if I find it difficult then I am sure other travellers must find it totally bewildering.

Bus Users deals with thousands of complaints from bus and coach passengers and the majority of complaints concern service reliability, buses failing to stop or show, driver/staff attitude and frequency of service. Problems with infrastructure are low on the list – just four percent of complaints received – which doesn't mean that there are no problems, just that passengers are unaware who they should complain to. If they find it difficult, even impossible, to continue their journey by another form of transport, then they could be lost to us for ever.

The bus and coach industry in Great Britain is deregulated, except for buses in London, so there is probably less opportunity for joined-up thinking when passengers require to change mode.

Looking at some major cities in Britain and how easy it is to change from train to coach or vice-versa, the situation could best be described as 'fair' with some notable exceptions. London, with at least six major mainline train stations, has one coach station, at Victoria, which is a 15-minute walk dragging suitcases from Victoria train station, and is not on the Underground.

Birmingham has a good new coach station that is a similar trek from New Street train station; Manchester's coach station is fairly near Piccadilly train station and the situation is similar in Edinburgh, Leeds, Liverpool and Newcastle. The closest connections are probably at Aberdeen with buses, coaches and trains now closely integrated, and Cardiff – although I understand that there are plans to move Cardiff's bus and coach station away from the train station in the future.

And it's a similar situation with Britain's major airports, where taxis and hire cars are often nearer the terminal building than buses and coaches. Heathrow has a central bus station serving Terminals 1-4, and a dedicated one at Terminal 5 which is at least integrated with the terminal building. Edinburgh and Glasgow are good, although offering a limited range of destinations and you need to travel to the city centre to get a more comprehensive choice. Birmingham, Edinburgh and Newcastle are at least linked to city centre coaches by light or heavy rail, with

the Metrolink light rail system in course of being extended to Manchester airport.

My travels in mainland Europe suggest that things here are similar – from good to fair to bad. I was travelling from Lisbon airport to the city's coach station a couple of weeks ago and experienced what every traveller attempting to make the same journey must encounter – a complete lack of information, not just about making this journey but about how to travel into Lisbon by public transport. There was information about the Airbus to the city centre and the bus station, but each of these runs every 40 minutes – hardly attractive. There appeared to be nothing to direct you to the nearby Metro station, which runs every few minutes. And even changing from the Metro to the coach station is an adventure for the unwary, involving the negotiation of an increasingly unsavoury multi-level underground shopping centre with several flights of stairs for luggage-laden passengers to negotiate, and non-working lifts and escalators.

So, as a coach passenger, what should we expect of multi-modal terminals? I would suggest that we expect, even deserve, facilities similar to those at airports and train stations, which tend to be improving as the people operating them realise that longer-distance passengers have higher expectations. Unfortunately the bus and coach elements of many intermodal terminals perpetuate the belief that bus and coach passengers are somehow inferior mortals who don't need the same level of facilities. Potential passengers, new to coach travel, could be discouraged by many of the stations that are provided, but fortunately there seems to be a move to provide buildings of a quality and standard that equal some of the best train stations, even airports.

Firstly, we need information, information, information. Not just about coach services, but about the station itself: where to book seats, where our service departs, where we can sit safely and securely, where we can get a snack or a meal, where the toilets are, how we can access WiFi.

And of course we need information about the destination choices available, in printed and electronic form, and there should be plenty of identifiable staff around if we need reassurance. Staff must be visible – I know from my Scottish Bus Group days that staff can become suddenly invisible when the going gets tough, the time we really need them, and staff must be polite, well-trained and knowledgeable.

If there are service disruptions, passengers need to know about them immediately through visible and audible announcements. If their services are affected, passengers need to know how long the disruption might last and what alternatives there might be. I have often known about disruptions on my mobile phone before coach and railway staff became aware, which seems very wrong and is perhaps down to the survival of operating practices that date back many years before the electronic age.

Transport for London is very good at advising passengers with electronic signs if there are problems on underground lines, and staff on suburban trains into London advise passengers en route to allow them to make alternative arrangements. Even something as low-tech as a whiteboard can be useful at bus and underground stations for that up-to-the-minute message.

Passengers in all parts of terminals should have up-to-date departure information, not just in

the main concourse but also in shops and cafés, for instance.

In Britain, in the event of disruption, it often seems to be down to local individuals to decide whether or not to hold connections in the event of disruption, so the practice can vary from location to location. There needs to be a mechanism that grades the degree of inconvenience and the availability of alternatives, if any, but with many privately-run train companies there is often little sign of joined-up thinking. As an aside, there is also the situation I encountered recently when a delayed middle-distance train was summarily terminated several stations short of the main destination, presumably to get it back to its scheduled times, leaving confused passengers at a small station to their own devices as to how to continue their journeys. Too often, operational requirements are placed above passenger care.

If coaches are working well and trains are disrupted, surely the coach and train operators can liaise to ensure that passengers face the minimum of inconvenience.

I know that you will shortly be hearing about passenger rights at bus terminals, but I should mention that Bus Users UK is now the nominated body for the UK outside London to handle complaints arising from the European Passenger Rights Regulation, and in terms of disruption or cancellation of longer-distance coach services – over 250km – some passengers will be offered the choice of a full refund and being returned free of charge to where their journey began, or to get to their destination by a different route, as soon as possible and at no extra cost. Passengers at terminals should be informed of delays and likely departure times no more than 30 minutes after the scheduled departure time. If the delay is more than 90 minutes on journeys scheduled to take three hours or more, refreshments should be provided. If the delay is overnight, then accommodation has to be provided, unless the delay is caused by extreme weather or natural disaster.

Of course we welcome this approach to delays and disruption, and hope that coach operators and coach terminal operators adhere to this new Regulation, as I doubt if many passengers are yet aware of their rights in this matter.

If you accept that many of the passengers using intermodal terminals are unfamiliar with the place, we must have more purpose-built terminals that make transfer between modes as seamless, painless – and even enjoyable – as possible. There seems to be a view that each mode is operating in its own silo and therefore seems unconcerned and uninvolved with anything that does not relate to its own mode of transport. In Britain, where the big transport groups operate both trains and buses, there is sometimes little or no information that would guide passengers from Operator A's to Operator A's buses, or vice-versa.

So, to sum up: passengers using all modes of transport deserve to know what options are available when they want to change modes, and they must be provided with attractive and well-furnished stations as an integral part of the whole journey experience.

They deserve nothing less.