

Bus Services Act 2017: consultation on accessible information policy proposals

AIR01. Do you agree that the Core Proposal is an appropriate response to the need for change identified in this document?

We campaigned, with Guide Dogs, for the amendment to the Bus Services Act which requires audio-visual information about the journey to be installed on buses.

A lack of visual information can make a journey inconvenient at best and, in an emergency situation, potentially dangerous at worst. Our recent survey of people with hearing loss (<https://bit.ly/2O51UqI>) showed that due to a lack of visual information on buses:

- two in five (42%) respondents have ended up at the wrong destination;
- over a quarter (28%) respondents have been late for or missed a medical appointment; and
- over a quarter (27%) of respondents have not known what to do in an emergency situation.

We therefore welcome the proposal that audio-visual information be required on board buses. However, the suggested regulations as they stand need to be revised to ensure that this information is accessible for the 11 million people with hearing loss in the UK. We expand on this point throughout our response.

Our response

Throughout our response, we use results from our recent survey. Further information, along with all the results, is here: <https://bit.ly/2O51UqI>

We use the term 'people with hearing loss' to refer to people with all levels of hearing loss, including people who are profoundly deaf.

AIR02. Do you agree that the proposed list of required information is an appropriate use of the powers available?

In our survey, we asked people with hearing loss what visual information would be most useful. The figures below outline the percentage of respondents who said that certain types of information would be helpful:

- Next stop announcements: 87%
- Information about delays to the journey: 65%
- Information about diversions to the journey: 52%
- The final destination of the bus service: 47%
- Information about connecting local services: 29%
- Information about emergencies and what action to take: 27%

Direction of travel, stopping places, and diversions, were all popular and therefore we agree that the information proposed should be provided audibly and visually. As "connecting to local services" was one of the least popular options, we agree with the position that this is not made a requirement.

However, the second most popular type of information chosen by our respondents was about delays. This finding echoes research conducted by Transport Focus (<https://bit.ly/2Cr979I>), which showed that passengers in general (not only those with a health condition or disability) want more information about delays on buses. Visual

information about delays is, however, even more crucial for people with hearing loss as they cannot depend on information given by a driver over a tannoy.

Information about delays, then, should be a requirement. To ask operators to give exact timings would be disproportionate but information informing passengers of a change in the usual journey should be required. For example, as Transport Focus recommends, information should say whether the bus is stuck in unusually heavy traffic.

AIR03: Do you agree that the proposed information timing requirements are appropriate?

We broadly agree with the timings outlined in the consultation. It is important that announcements are timed so that passengers are given the time to alight if they choose.

However, more thought has to be given to the timing route announcements. To be effective, the information must be available for a sufficient amount of time to allow a passenger to board a bus, find a seat, and see the information.

AIR04: Do you agree that the proposed use of a Specimen Person is the most appropriate way to ensure information provision is of an adequate quality to be useful to passengers?

The Specimen Person is broadly a sensible idea and we welcome requirements that a wheelchair user should be able to view visual announcements. We urge DfT to also include requirements that visual information is visible from all priority seating. We have had reports from our beneficiaries that visual announcements are not always visible from priority seating, due to the location of the screen. For example, the audio-visual screen is behind the priority seating. Seven in 10 (71%) over-70-year-olds have hearing loss (<https://bit.ly/2GUdZkG>) and therefore the likelihood of older people needing priority seating who have a hearing loss, is high.

Further, if people with impaired vision and/or hearing might only be able to access information near the source, rather than from all the seats on a bus, then priority seating must be designated near the source. Therefore, new priority seating might need to be allocated, then. For example, it is uncommon for the top deck of the bus, near a display screen, to have priority seating. The public will also likely have to be educated (via signs next to the seating) to understand that priority seating is not only those with mobility issues but those who need to be able to be near the screen.

Lastly, the specimen person test needs to be conducted in real-life situations, not on an empty bus for example. In our survey, half (49%) of our respondents said that the number of people on the bus had impacted their ability to use the screens. The inability to see screens due to overcrowding on buses was also a common response to the open questions in the survey:

"Buses are always crowded and there is only one display notice, so I cannot always see it."
Survey respondent

Passengers with hearing loss should be able to see a screen, even if the bus is crowded.

AIR05: Do you agree that the regulations should require that a person using a hearing aid in conjunction with an audible induction loop system should be able to discern audible information?

We welcome this inclusion. Our beneficiaries tell us that hearing loops are not always installed or working and that this impacts their ability to communicate on a bus: over two-in-five (43%) of our survey respondents said that a lack of a working loop system has affected their ability to communicate with bus drivers.

It is important, though, that the requirement: "audible information is discernible to a person using a hearing aid in conjunction with an induction loop system", is regulated effectively. For example, this regulation should not only mean that a loop system is installed. Our recent work with Brighton Buses, Contacta (loop manufacturers), and Wrightbus (vehicle manufacturers) demonstrated that loop systems need to be carefully positioned on buses so that vehicle noise doesn't cause interference (<https://bit.ly/2NPSXaP>).

Clear signage also needs to be implemented so that passengers are aware of the location of the loops. There should also be priority seating by the loop systems, so that passengers who need them are able to use them. Finally, hearing loops should be regularly checked and maintained.

AIR06. Do you agree that it would currently be inappropriate to require passengers to purchase or possess smart devices in order to access required information?

Yes. First, not everyone has a smart phone; particularly older people (only 1 in 5 over-55-year-olds have a smart phone). Considering hearing loss prevalence increases with age (71% over-70-year-olds have hearing loss), it is therefore likely that people who need visual announcements will not have a smart phone by which to access them.

Second, current mobile coverage is not widespread enough for smart phone devices to be the only solution. Only 43% of the country has 4G coverage (<https://bit.ly/2Bt8ESt>). Therefore, to be effective, either mobile coverage would have to drastically improve across the country or Wifi would have to be available on every vehicle.

AIR07. Do you agree that vehicles operated under Section 19 and 22 permits should be exempt from the requirements in full?

We understand that for some companies, such as community transport operators, it would be disproportionate to enforce the same requirements. We therefore accept that these vehicles should be exempt.

AIR08: Do you agree that vehicles carrying fewer than seventeen passengers should be exempt from the requirements in full?

We accept this response. It is more important that larger vehicles are regulated and we accept that the issues presented through a lack of audio and visual information would be mitigated by the fact that passengers are much more likely to communicate with drivers.

AIR09: Do you agree that tour services, as defined in the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations 2000 (PSVAR) should be exempt from the requirements in full?

We accept this proposal – it is more important that buses used from travel, not solely tours, are regulated.

AIR10: Do you agree that heritage vehicles should be exempt from the requirement to provide visible information; and heritage vehicles should be defined as those first used before 1st January 1973.

We do not have enough evidence in order to answer this question.

AIR11: Do you agree that the proposed implementation option indicated above is the most appropriate of the three options identified?

We do not have enough evidence in order to answer this question.

AIR12: Do you agree with our proposal to define “small operators” as those operating 20 or fewer vehicles?

We do not have enough evidence in order to answer this question.

AIR13: Do you agree with our analysis of the costs and benefits of the preferred option, as indicated in the consultation-stage Impact Assessment?

We do not have enough evidence in order to answer this question.

AIR14a: We are aware of at least one operator which has subsidised the ongoing costs of providing audible and visible information by using visible information displays to show advertisements. Please explain how effective you think such an approach could be in mitigating the costs of providing audible and visible information for other operators?

We understand advertising can help with the cost of these screens. However, it should be clear in the legislation that the primary purpose of audio-visual equipment is the provision of travel information. Like our response to AIR03, the timing of visual information, including adverts, needs to be carefully considered. For example, an advertising message should not be shown until a passenger has had time to find their seat and to see the destination of the bus. It should also be clear that adverts should not be played during announcements about delays, diversions, or emergency announcements.

Advertising on screens, in addition to travel information, may also contribute to a sensory overload for some passengers, as highlighted in paragraph 1.3 in the consultation document.

AIR14b: We also understand that the cost of installing systems to provide accessible information can vary depending upon the vehicle and method of installation. Please comment on the difference in cost between procuring new buses with systems to provide audible and visible information already installed, and retrofitting related equipment.

We do not have enough evidence in order to answer this question.

AIR15. Do you agree with our proposed content for the guidance? Please explain your answer, providing examples of potential content where appropriate.

We broadly agree with the proposed content. Beyond the proposed we recommend the following:

- Two guidance documents should be made: one for bus operators and one for passengers. Operators and passengers are two different audiences and the guidance documents need to be designed accordingly.

- So that passengers are aware of their rights, including how to complain, the passenger guidance should be available on buses and at stations. It should not only be an online resource, as this is not accessible for everyone. For example, 4.2 million people over the age of 55 have never been online (<https://bit.ly/2NtiCcJ>).
- We agree with the proposal that support should be given to operators to understand and apply the information provision quality requirements. Included in the guide should be guidance on installing hearing loops. It is not enough for operators to simply install hearing loops on buses. It is important that the hearing loops are situated in the right areas of the bus so that they can work most effectively. Priority seating should be installed beside these loops and clear signage should be implemented so passengers know where the loops are. The loops should also be regularly tested.
- Like recommendation 52 in the Scottish Government's BSL National Plan sets out, guidance for passengers should be accessible for those who use BSL (<https://bit.ly/2M0t8TS>). For example the guidance could be in BSL format.

AIR16: Do you agree with our proposed enforcement principles? Please explain your response.

It is vital that there is an adequate system of enforcement. We welcome the suggestion that an independent body could collate alleged non-compliance. However, we do not support any assertion that charities, such as Action on Hearing Loss, should be responsible for collating responses. Even as the UK's largest charity representing people with deafness and hearing loss, we do not have the resources available to collate complaints.

Further, by dispersing complaint collection among several organisations, this would prevent effective identification of systematic issues. Rather, one organisation, should both escalate individual complaints and identify systematic failings. This organisation should have the resources, funded if necessary by government, to carry out this task. A mechanism must also be in place for these systematic failings to be reported to Government policy makers.

AIR17. Do you agree that the Accessible Information Regulations should apply consistently across England, Scotland and Wales?

Yes, we agree with this.

AIR18: Do you agree with our analysis of the costs and benefits of the preferred option, as indicated in the consultation-stage Impact Assessment?

We do not have enough evidence in order to answer this question.

AIR19a: We are aware of at least one operator which has subsidised the ongoing costs of providing audible and visible information by using visible information displays to show advertisements. Please explain how effective you think such an approach could be in mitigating the costs of providing audible and visible information for other operators?

We do not have enough evidence in order to answer this question.

AIR19b: We also understand that the cost of installing systems to provide accessible information can vary depending upon the vehicle and method of installation. Please comment on the difference in cost between procuring new buses with systems to

provide audible and visible information already installed, and retrofitting related equipment.

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