

Transition Tavistock – Bus Users’ Survey, October 2023

Introduction

Transition Tavistock’s Travel Action Group encourages inclusive, sustainable local transport, and sees buses as a vital part of this. It is one of the user groups represented on Devon BUS Forum. For more details, and to get our newsletter, see www.transitiontavistock.org.uk/travel.

The aim of this survey, conducted at Tavistock Bus Station over the last 2 weeks of October 2023, was to get a fuller understanding of the experience of people using buses in Tavistock. The focus was on how passengers access timetable information; how they had been affected by recent service changes; and views about Tavistock’s bus station. See Appendix A for the survey method. Thanks are due to the volunteer interviewers and the 93 passengers who took time to share their views.

Main conclusions

Bus services are important to those who use them, and users would like to see additional services, including for evenings and Sundays, and more attention to connections between different routes. Overall, local passengers appreciate the quality of service they get, and find drivers helpful. Delays are a concern, but recognized as affected by wider factors. Communication on delays and cancellations could be better.

Timetable changes affect lives. Just under half the respondents had been affected by a timetable change in the past few years, across a range of routes, with adverse effects three times as likely as positive ones. Some users of Route 1 to Plymouth regretted the drop from 4 to 3 per hour, or reported difficulties since a slight change to evening times. Passengers from villages cited problems caused by gaps of 2 hours between buses. Within the small number of interviewees directly impacted by recent changes to buses 86/89 (Tavistock circular), there were as many who had gained a new or better service as had lost out (from the gap in afternoon buses to Whitchurch). However, there was wider concern about lack of clear information on these routes.

While half the passengers used online search or an app to find bus times, this leaves many who prefer, or have to use, traditional forms of communication (newspapers, paper timetables, word of mouth). Some rely on family members to find the information they need. There appears to be a digital divide that bus operators are not fully recognizing. This was particularly the case with route and timetable changes, where passengers need warning that change is coming to prompt them to check the details.

Users of the bus station valued the facility, but most pointed out how it could be improved. Better shelter from the wind and rain, restoration of a kiosk/café and full toilet facilities were frequent comments. The absence of a real-time passenger information system was cited, as was difficulty reading displayed timetables either because of their height (something that should be easy to fix) or small print.

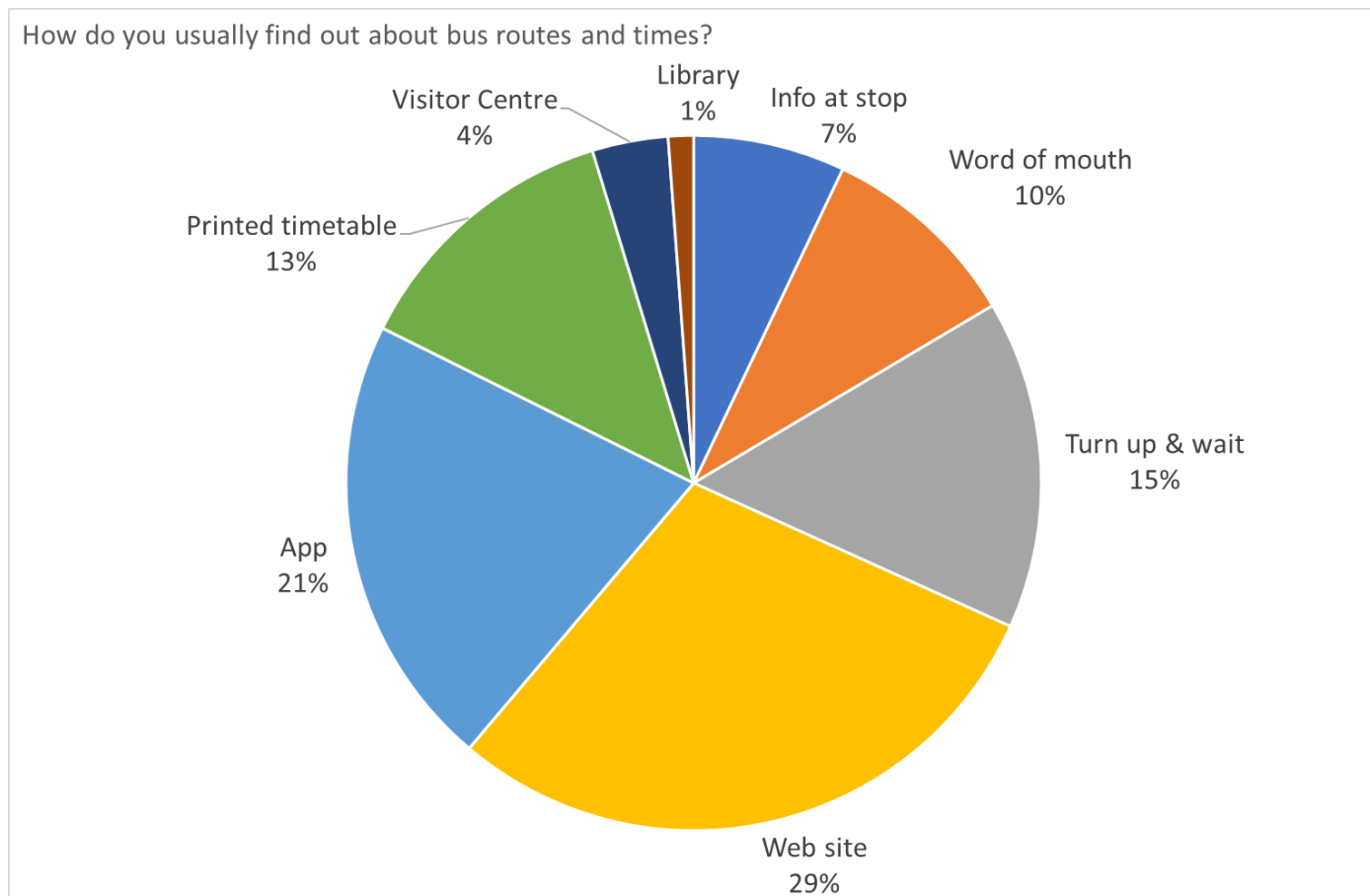
Next steps

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

Ways people find information on bus routes and times

Of the 85 passengers who gave their primary means of finding timetable information, half used online methods – either a bus company app or web search. One in five looked at a print timetable at home or a bus stop. The remaining 30% either asked someone else, or just waited for a bus to arrive.

The chart below shows the primary means. A number of respondents use more than one, for reassurance or convenience.



Sample comments:

“Online, website - find them pretty clear”

“Google on phone. Also refer to timetable in village (Bere Alston). Have Stagecoach app.”

“I generally get a timetable. I prefer not to use the app.”

“Able to look up on phone using Google, but normally just turn up and wait for bus. This works OK as buses on route (#1) come quite often.”

“Use timetable booklet, which does not always tally with online”

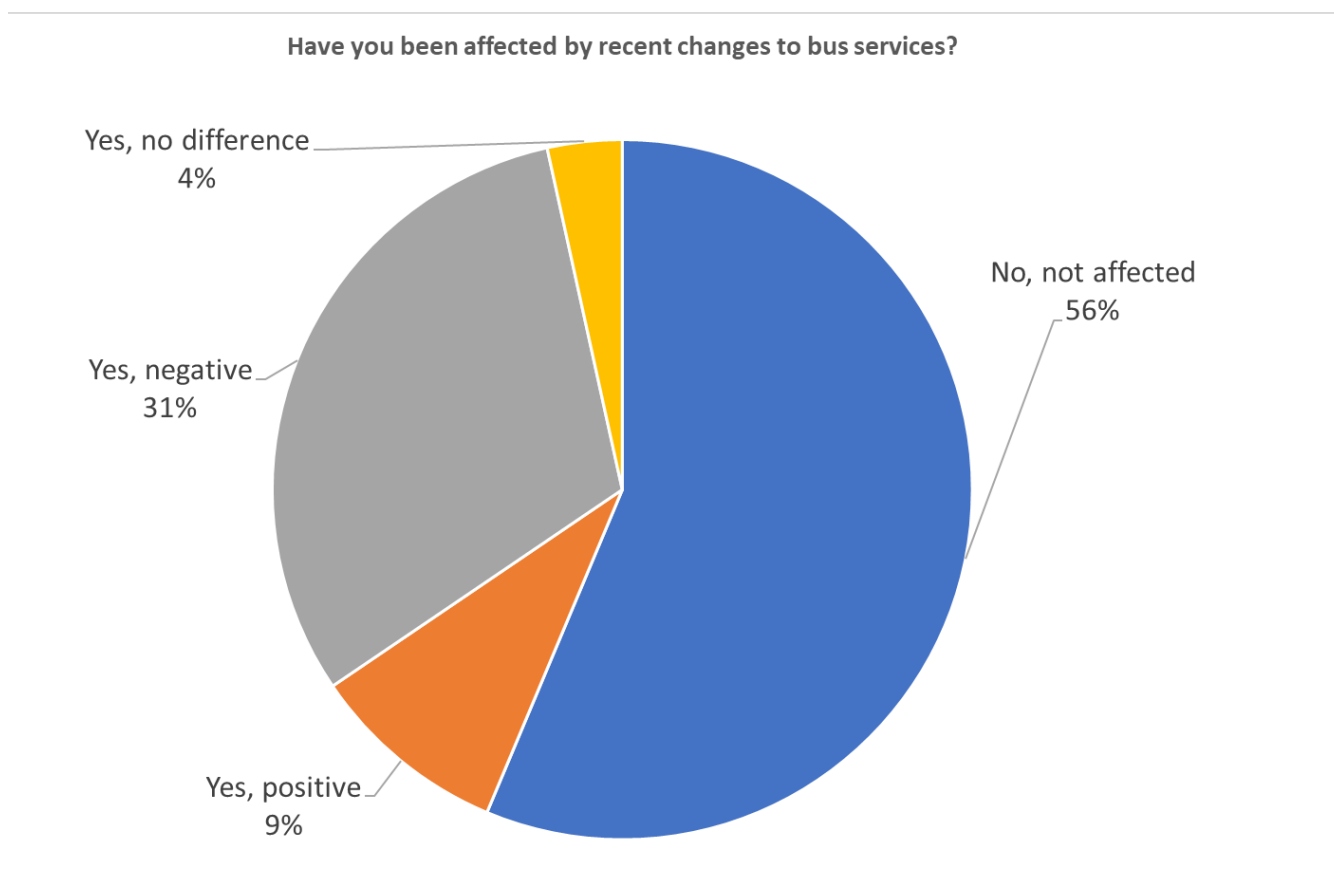
“Published/paper timetables. (Need magnifying glass to read)”

“Ask son who has a smart phone”

Impact of service changes

Significant changes to the “circular” 89 bus service in Tavistock at the start of September 2023 (6 weeks before the start of the survey), resulted in part of the former route becoming new route 86, with a reduced timetable, and a redesigned 89 route reaching new estates which previously had no buses. While only 10 interviewees awaited one of these services, many others responded to the questions about “recent changes” with comments on earlier changes to other routes, mainly #1 to Plymouth and #79 to Gunnislake.¹ The charts below cover all responses (71).

Overall, a quarter had been adversely affected by timetable or route changes, and only 1 in 10 saw improvement. For some, changes affected access to work or healthcare, or increased their car use. Passengers found out about changes in a variety of ways, sometimes while en route. Several commented on “confusion” particularly in relation to the 86/89 change.²



Sample comments:

'Now every 20 minutes, was every 15.' (route 1)

'Last bus on Sunday too early leaving now.' (route 1)

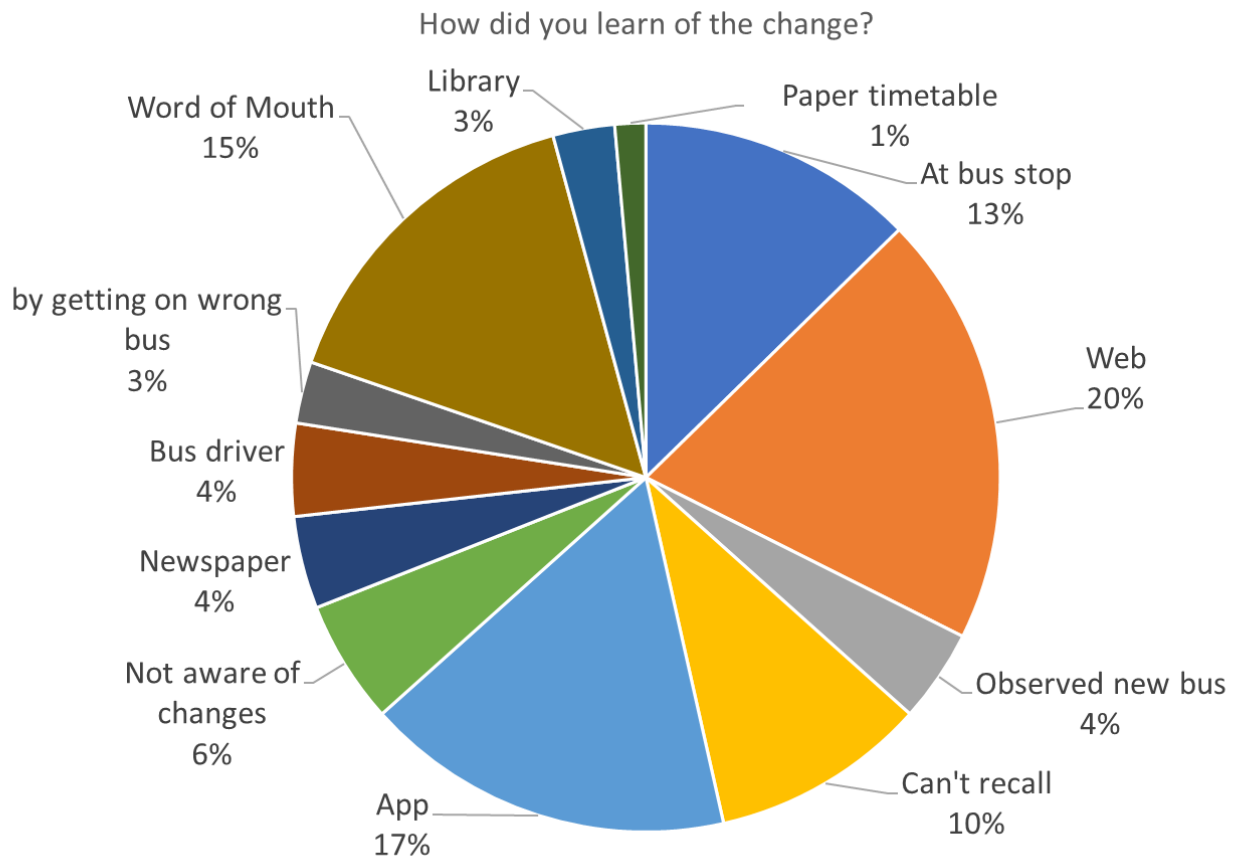
'Buses every hour, but 2 hourly on Saturdays and has changed to 2 hourly for Calstock and Harrowbarrow on a daily basis.' (route 79)

'Not easy to get between Harrowbarrow and Tavistock Tesco's without help from car driver' (route 79)

'Last year's changes to #1 timetable were an improvement.'

¹ Changes referred to in this question were not always to the bus the passenger was waiting for.

² An interviewer noted that a town centre resident who reported negative impact would in fact have benefited, but uncertainty about new times and routes meant he now gets a relative to drive him to the supermarket.



In relation to the 86/89:

'Changes to 89 good. But no details available about change.'

'Fine as gives shorter trip.'

'Can now get from home (Monksmead) to Morrisons on single bus - game changing.'

'#89 has changed to #86 to Whitchurch and Morrisons, none in afternoon, 3 hour gap, very awkward'

'Not sure which bus goes to Tavistock hospital since changes'

'Inconvenient. Neither serve Morrisons in late afternoon – preferred shopping time. Parents like to go there after primary school pick up.'

'I have stopped using the bus for my activities in the afternoon and would say I make at least 7 extra return car journeys per month' [Whitchurch resident].

Tavistock Bus Station

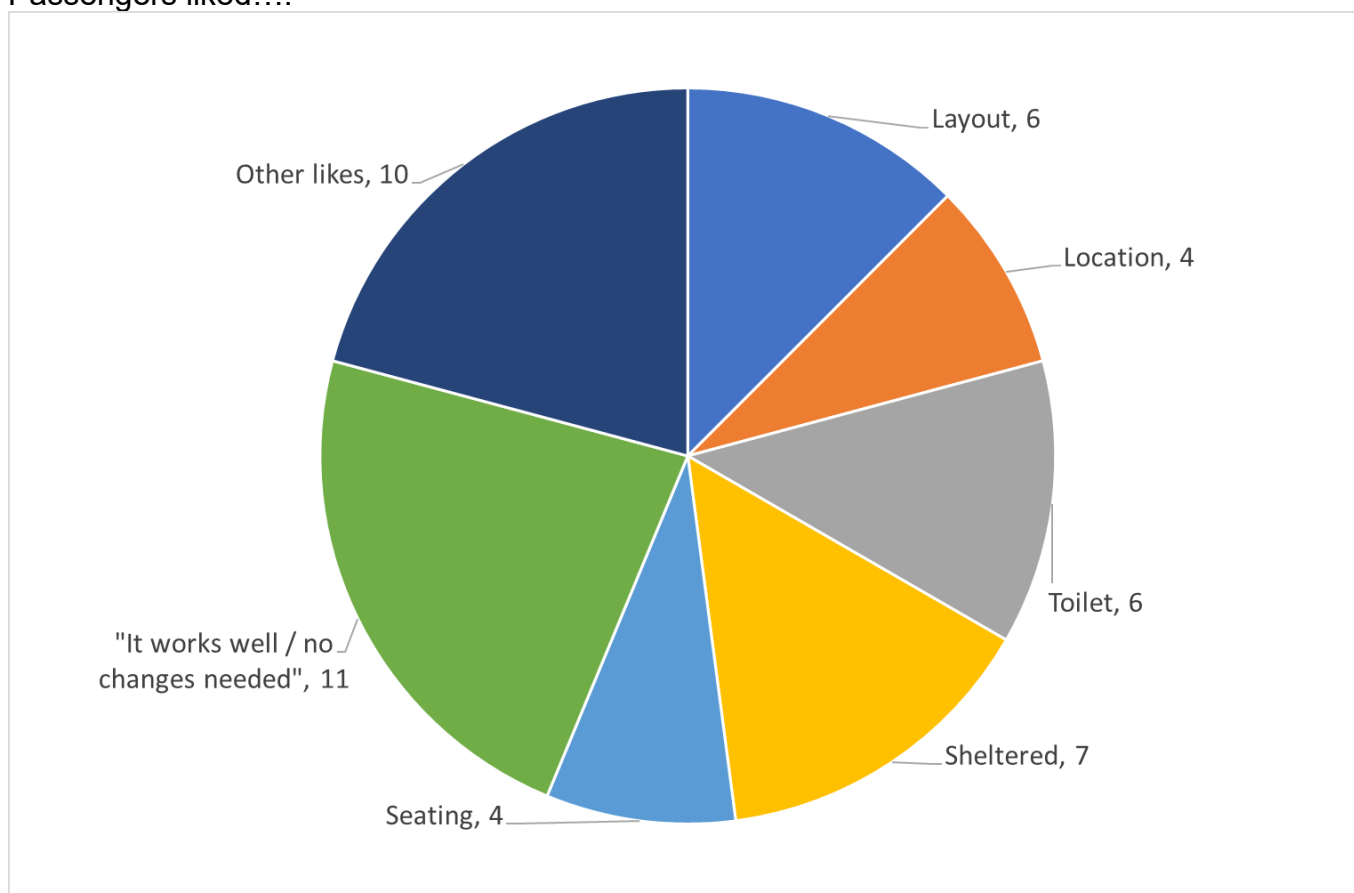
Passengers had mixed views of the bus station: generally positive about having one at that location, but identifying gaps in the facilities. Key issues raised were:

- inadequate protection from bad weather in the seating area
- the limited toilet provision³, and
- the absence of a place to get a drink or snack.

A further theme was the absence of an electronic timetable display and difficulty reading the onsite printed timetables (on unlabeled display frames on separate pillars)⁴, and in reading them due to the height and font size.

The charts below show the split of themes among comments coded as positive (37) or negative (77). In total 85 people expressed a view, some making several points.

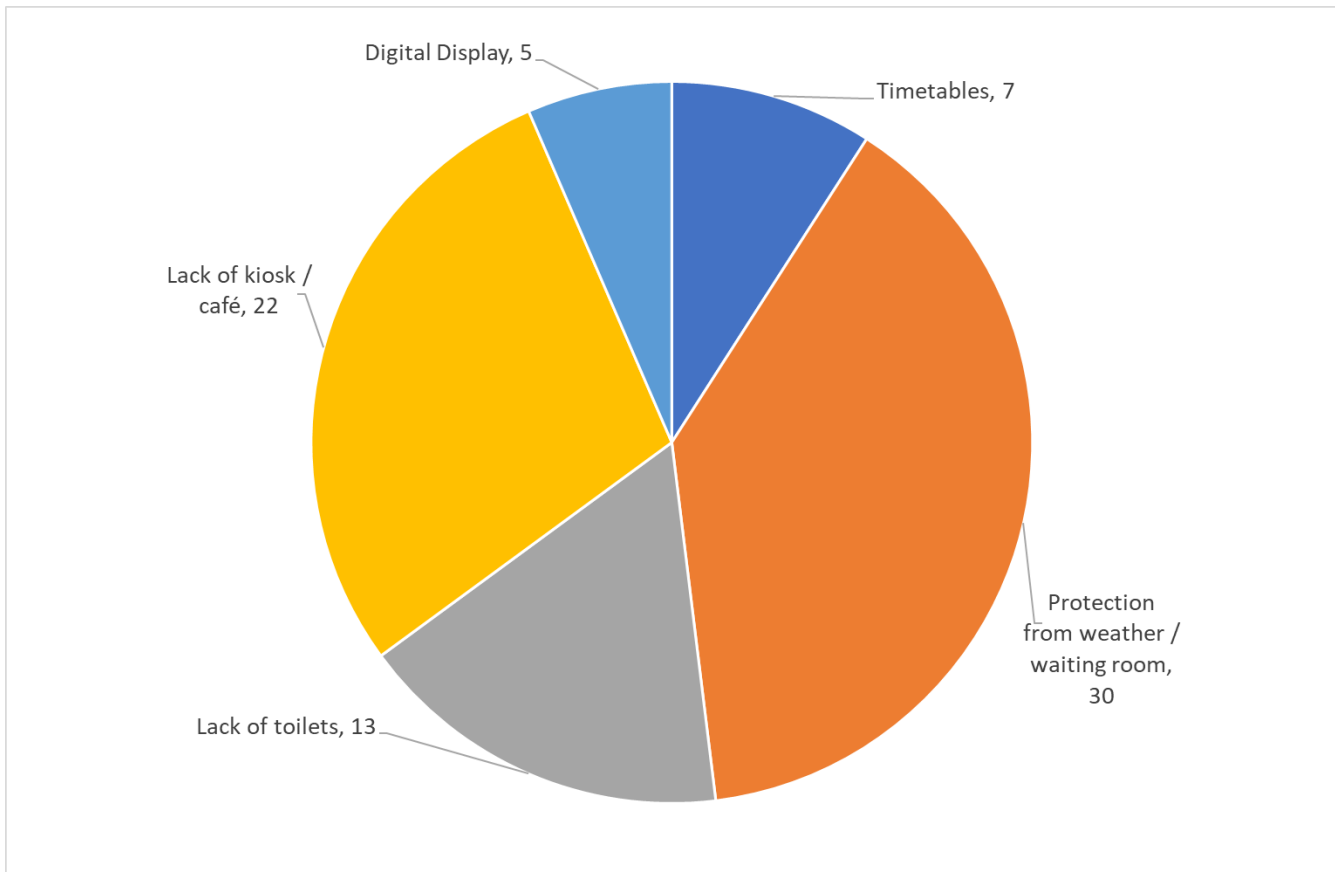
Passengers liked....



And suggested improvements to.....

³ At the time of the survey two of the three WCs remained locked to prevent use. One was open, but not clearly signed, and some passengers were unaware that it was available.

⁴ Timetables at the top of the frames are well above eye level for a woman of average height. At the time of the survey, the timetable for the most popular route, Stagecoach #1, was not with the others, but yards away on the window of the disused waiting room, and there was no space remaining for it in the main set of frames.



“Seats get damp as rain blows under roof. Timetables too high up to see.”

“Could do with panel on fence to stop water blowing through. Convenient for town - flat walk. Would like kiosk back. Toilets important.”

“Not very comfortable - rain gets in. Would like some protection from back of seats. Is good to be able to sit.”

“Great that has seating & WC. Pretty good - sheltered - nice feel.”

“It’s like a wind tunnel, needs some shelter behind railings, has seats though. Kiosk and toilets should be reinstated”

“Correct timetables now being displayed - good. Toilets not open early morning or late at night. Kiosk would be good.”

“Nice covered area, reinstate the electronic timetable.”

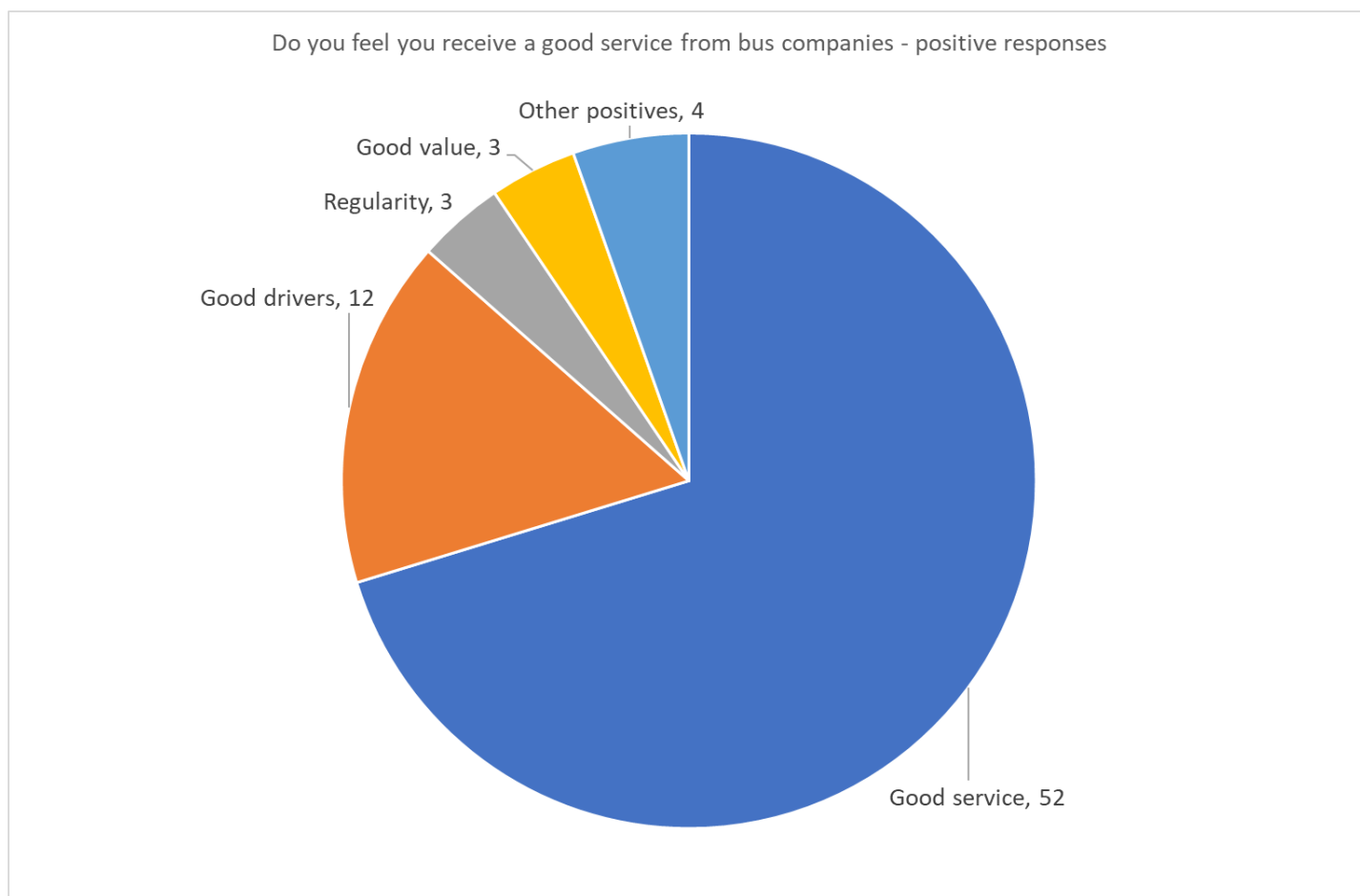
Passenger views of bus services

Overall, bus users felt they received a good service from bus operators. Phrases like ‘Good service’ and ‘No complaints’ were frequent. Bus drivers were frequently appreciated.

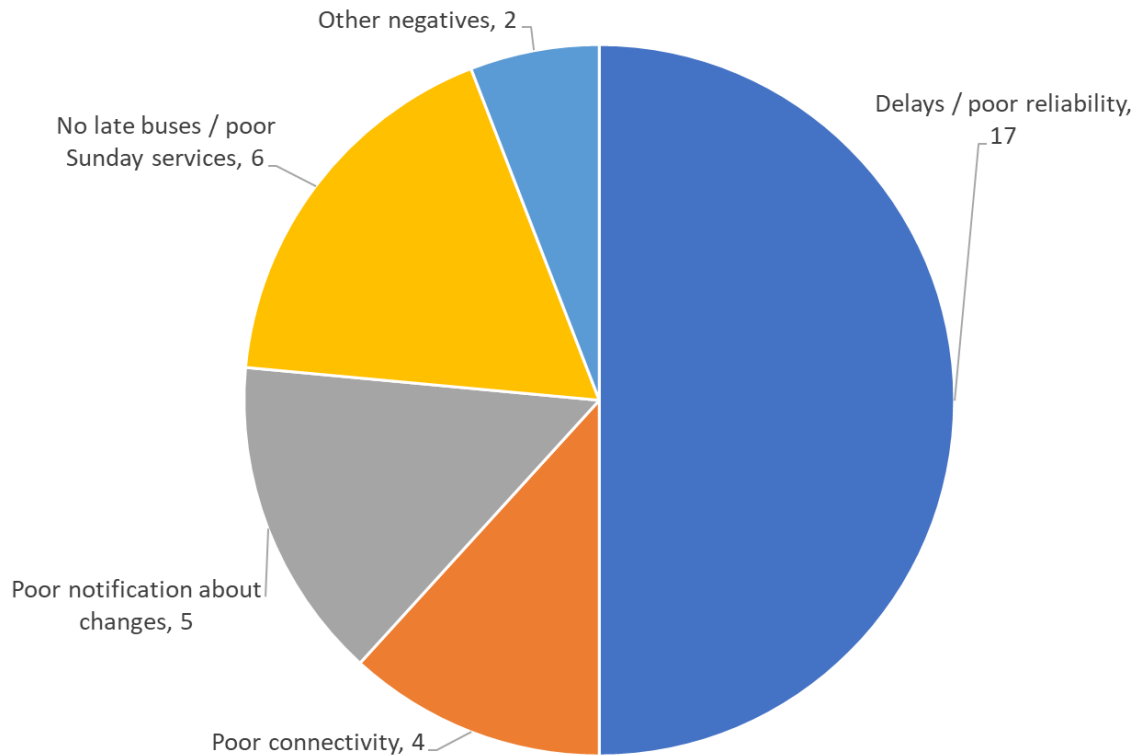
Where responses were negative, they mainly concerned reliability and communication about delays (notably on route 1, though the impact of roadworks was acknowledged). Some respondents wanted additional evening or Sunday services.

Examples of poor connections between timetables hindering long distance travel by bus were cited, eg Bere Alston to Barnstaple (routes 87 & 85) or Tavistock to London (route 1 & National Express).

The charts below show the split of themes among comments coded as positive (total 74) or negative (total 34).



Do you feel you receive a good service from bus companies? - negative responses



“Good service, £2 fare very good, bus drivers friendly.”

“100%. All good drivers. Where there are delays, due to state of rural roads.”

“From Tavistock to Plymouth its fantastic. From Calstock every 2 hours isn’t great. A bigger gripe is that they don’t run and I don’t know why.”

“Good service to Plymouth, would like a direct service to Exeter.”

“Much better service than in Hampshire”.

“Public transport here lets you down so often. 100% better in Swansea & Belfast.”

“Staff are nice and helpful, could be improved by more buses later in the day, bus fares are good.”

“Should be a better connection between services, has ¾-1 hour wait sometimes, feels no thought put into it.”

“Adequate, but not happy about lack of communication. Bus drivers ok, they have to take a lot of stick.”

“Make a lot of use of the buses. Fine unless they break down.”

Appendix A: Survey method

Volunteers conducted face-to-face interviews with 93 individuals waiting at Tavistock bus station on weekdays. This was timed to cover different times of the day, other than evening or early morning. Passengers who contributed were travelling on a wide range of routes, with the Tavistock to Plymouth bus (#1) accounting for just under half of all responses. As far as was practical, the 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. From observation or information offered by participants, there was diversity of age, gender, ethnicity and disability. Participants included fare payers as well as those with bus passes, and both residents and visitors. Tavistock's variable autumn weather conditions applied!

Interviews were based on the 7 questions below, with further conversation to explore points raised by the passenger where relevant.

- How do you usually find out about bus routes and times?
- Which bus are you waiting for?
- Have you been affected by recent changes to bus services in Tavistock? If yes, how did it affect you?
- How did you find out about the changes? (or How do you usually find out when a timetable changes?)
- Looking at this bus station, what do you like or not like about it?
- 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 of the gist of the point made.

