

GUIDE
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Destination Unknown:

An investigation into bus
passenger experiences

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Destination Unknown

Introduction

For many disabled people public transport is vital to enable them to travel independently.¹ For people who are blind or partially sighted, buses should play an essential everyday role.

Audio visual (AV) next and final stop announcements allow all passengers (including tourists, distracted parents and business travellers) to identify their bus stop without having to rely on the help of bus drivers, other passengers, or attempting to try and keep track of where the bus is on its journey.

AV announcements are particularly important for passengers who are blind or partially sighted. The technology enables passengers to travel independently who may otherwise find it difficult to identify their stop along a route.

Guide Dogs have conducted a survey (a follow up to surveys in 2013 and 2012) to find out about bus passengers' experiences, the problems passengers face when using the bus and the difference AV would make.

This survey has revealed a shocking two thirds (65%) of blind and partially sighted bus passengers have missed their stop at least once in the last six months.

This shows that many blind and partially sighted passengers are still headed to a Destination Unknown when catching the bus due to a lack of AV and insufficient driver training.



“Because I am totally blind using the bus can be like a game of chance, I have to depend on other people to tell me where I am and when to get off. This leaves me feeling very nervous because I spend most of the time I am traveling worrying if they have remembered me and where I need to get off. You would not believe some of the places I have ended up when I did use the buses.”

Respondent, Liverpool

“The drivers try to do their best to tell me when my stop is, but a lot of the time it doesn't happen. I can't afford to get taxis everywhere I go because I live on my own in a flat and if I was getting taxis everywhere, then I'd have no money for bills, food etc. Also, I am a guide dog owner, and my guide dog is there to help me get from A to B independently. I can't achieve this with my dog, if I'm having to rely on taxis or people giving me lifts everywhere.”

Guide dog owner, Antrim

1. Transport Select Committee 'Access to transport for people with disabilities' Report

Methodology

The 'Destination Unknown' survey was conducted between February and July 2014. 2,009 people participated in the survey from across the UK. Over 989 responses were received from people who identify themselves as having a disability, including 818 respondents who are blind or partially sighted. All 818 blind and partially sighted respondents identified themselves as bus users, with 91% using the bus at least once a month.

If you are interested in findings for a specific area or group of respondents then please email: campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk
More information about the campaign is available at: www.guidedogs.org.uk/talkingbuses

Where could you be with AV?

Only 19% of UK buses have audio visual (AV) announcements on board, and the vast majority of those vehicles are in London.² This year's survey sought opinions from all respondents on how useful this technology is, or might be, and investigated the impact it could have on a person's travel behaviour.

97% of all survey respondents said they thought audio visual announcements would be fairly or very useful on all buses. This rose to 100% amongst blind and partially sighted respondents.

Furthermore, a huge 46% said they would either use buses instead of their current mode of transport or use the bus more frequently if their local service had AV announcements on board, rising to 68% for blind and partially sighted respondents. This indicates there is not only a real appetite for AV technology but also that bus operators could benefit from higher passenger numbers if they installed this technology due to modal shift. This is consistent with the findings of bus operator Trent Barton, who reported that 85% of all their passengers found such announcements useful³. Unfortunately, however;

73% of bus users who responded to Guide Dogs survey said none of their local services had on board AV announcements

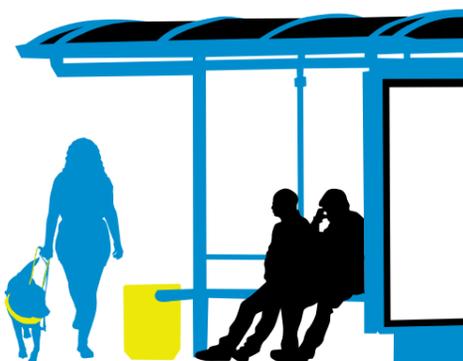
(this rose to 79% for those who frequently use buses outside of London).

"(Talking Buses would be) invaluable, currently I have to count the stops. I keep thinking did I count the last stop or not?"

Guide dog owner,
Leeds

"At last I would know when to get off. I would make more journeys and use more than one service to visit family, friends and for a day out if I could be sure I would not get lost. I frequently miss my bus stop when coming home from important hospital appointments and always feel tense and nervous over the worry this causes me. Needless to say, if I don't know where I am when I get off I have no means of knowing how to get home again."

Guide dog owner,
Ipswich



The current lack of on board announcements is leaving passengers with sight loss at very real risk of missing their stop.

25% of respondents who are blind or partially sighted have missed their bus stop three or more times over the last six months

and **70% told us they have at some stage missed their stop** because a bus driver forgot to tell them when they had reached their destination. Furthermore, 32% had missed a stop because they were too worried to ask for help and 29% because another passenger who had been asked to help refused or forgot.



Nearly a quarter (23%) of disabled respondents have been left at least a mile away from where they wanted to be because they missed their bus stop.

When comparing the journey experiences of those respondents who have AV on all bus services (113 people) with those who have no Talking Buses (1272 people) the difference is particularly stark. A passenger with access to Talking Buses will spend less on taxis. 52% of respondents who live in an area where all their services have AV said they spent no money on taxi travel per month, compared with only 38% of those with no Talking Buses. For passengers with sight loss this difference was even more pronounced.

"When I am in my wheelchair I cannot see behind me, I have to sit facing the people on the bus. I usually get off at the wrong stop."

Wheelchair user,
Norfolk

"If there were audio announcements on-board I would be more able to travel outside my "known area"

Vision impaired
respondent, Antrim

"I recently travelled on a bus with all these facilities and it was excellent. Although I've heard audible stop announcements before, which was good, the full experience of announced bus stops, next stop and which bus when you're at the bus stop just makes life easier. For me it means as a vision impaired person I can travel with my young son with more confidence"

Vision impaired
respondent, Reading

2. Accessibility Action Plan, Department for Transport, 2012
3. Trent Barton Passenger Survey, 2008.

More details of how having AV can improve people's lives are listed below.

Percentage of people who agreed with the following statements	Living in an area with AV	Living in an area without AV
Travelling by bus causes difficulties visiting places	27%	58%
Transport is a barrier to work	15%	31%
The prospect of bus travel prevented you taking a job	2%	11%
The prospect of bus travel prevented you from attending a job interview	6%	14%

It is clear from these findings that AV benefits all passengers and could benefit bus operators (and hard pressed bus drivers) as well. AV evidently makes a considerable difference to the quality of a person's bus travel as well as boosting confidence and independence.

Recommendation

Guide Dogs calls for the Government to legislate for all new buses to be fitted with AV to make them accessible for people with sight loss.



"I have previously worked as a bus driver and in my experience many passengers rely on the driver to inform them when they have reached a particular destination. However with the volume of traffic on the road and the concentration required to drive a bus safely it is very easy to forget to remind passengers all of the time. Therefore this service (AV) would benefit all passengers and leave the driver to give his full concentration to driving the bus safely and deliver the passengers to their destination."

Respondent, Cambridge

"I have an autistic son and this (AV) would help with knowing where he is, to prepare him for change. Ultimately this would aid independence."

Respondent, Essex

Travelling as a disabled passenger

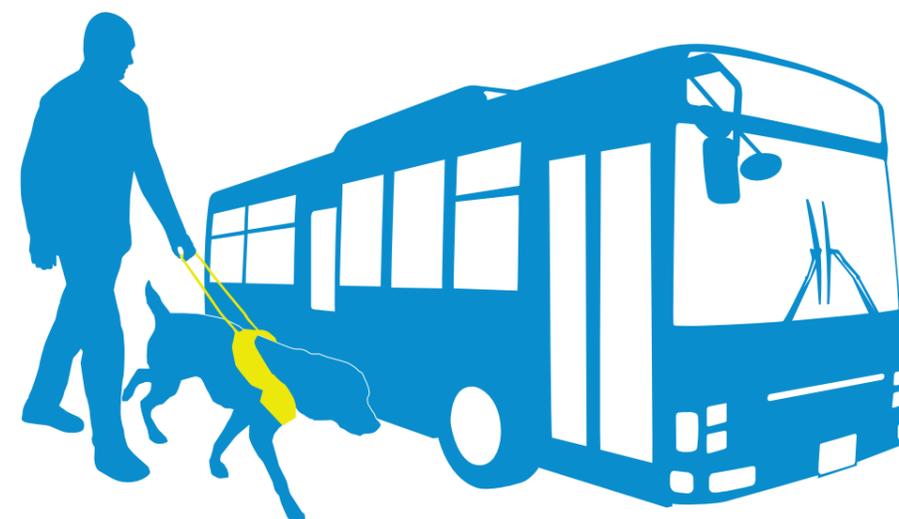
Experiences of bus travel differ significantly between passengers with and without a disability. Less than half (47%) of disabled respondents described their average experience on board a bus as fairly or very good, compared to 63% of respondents who didn't identify themselves as having a disability. In fact 19% of disabled respondents rated their usual experience as fairly or very poor compared with only 7% of non-disabled respondents.

Inadequate bus driver training persists

Only 14% of respondents said a bus driver always responds appropriately to their needs as a disabled passenger and worryingly 22% said drivers rarely or never respond appropriately.

When thinking about their most recent bus journey 43% said they felt their driver had not received training on how to respond appropriately to their needs as a disabled passenger. This is damning evidence that many bus companies are still not adequately training their drivers to respond to the needs of disabled passengers, despite Government urging them to do so.

43% of disabled respondents had over 15 minutes added to their journey when they missed their stop, 6% had over an hour added.



"There is no consideration for guide dog owners, or disabled people. I have to use these buses every day to get to and from work - if I could walk then I would. The sheer fear that goes through me each time I board a bus is just awful."

Guide dog owner, Kent

"The bus drivers never speak to me when I board the bus. I have asked them to tell me when I reach my stop but they forget so there's just no point even asking them. They just seem totally cut off and will not enter into any form of communication. I hate using the buses and dread getting on them each day. I work full time and have to travel on them."

Guide dog owner, Kent

Following disappointing findings in previous surveys that drivers are not sufficiently trained to meet the needs of disabled passengers, bus companies are still not doing enough to train their drivers to ensure a consistently high level of customer service for disabled passengers. Last year bus operators had disappointing results in our Guide Dogs' survey.

Unfortunately the results have been more shocking this year.

When respondents who are blind or partially sighted were asked if bus drivers tell them the number of the bus they're driving when requested only **35% of bus drivers** were identified as always communicating this information. This was down from 55% in the previous year's survey.

Bus drivers always...	2013 Survey	2014 Survey
Pull right up to the kerb when you are waiting to board a bus	25%	18%
Wait until you've found your seat before driving off	17%	14%
Tell you the number of the bus when you ask them	55%	35%

* Based on blind or partially sighted respondents in 2013 and 2014 survey results

Only 12% of disabled respondents said bus drivers always say hello.

Some operators are working with Guide Dogs and others to improve their bus driver training in parts of the UK, and this is to be commended. We are happy to arrange informal question and answer sessions for drivers and offer sighted guiding training for drivers.



"I find it very hard to take my grandson who lives with me, on a bus. He is blind and getting on a bus with him and another grandson is very hard to make it safe for them, when the bus start to move and drive off and we are still trying to walk to a seat"

Respondent, Liverpool

"If the bus is not a Talking Bus then I have to rely on the driver to tell me I am at the correct stop and when this does not happen it really dents my confidence as well as putting me in danger and leaves me very vulnerable and upset"

Guide dog owner, East Sussex

To discuss the simple steps they can take to improve their driver training, bus operators should contact campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk

The Impact

When asked about experiences during the last six months, **over a third (36%)** of disabled respondents admitted the thought of travelling by bus stopped them going out each month, **rising to 37% for those with sight loss.**

56% of disabled respondents said travelling by bus causes them difficulties in visiting places (this rose to 60% for those with sight loss).

20% of blind or partially sighted respondents spend over £30 per month on taxis because they choose not to travel by bus – nearly half of these spend over £50.

Nearly 3 in 10 (29%) said transport was a barrier to work. This is a very worrying situation as disabled people are already more likely to be out of work.⁴ This shows that at the moment transport is contributing factor. When asked about how transport is a barrier to work survey respondents told us, the prospect of travelling by bus had:

- prevented 11% from taking a job
- made 27% late for work
- prevented 13% from attending a job interview
- 16 people cited bus travel problems as the reason that they have lost a job

It is disappointing that the standard of service being offered to disabled passengers by bus operators is not only falling short of where it should be but is deteriorating in many cases. The impact this poor service has for passengers goes far beyond the inconveniences of a missed stop, damaging a person's employment prospects, confidence and independence.

Recommendation
Guide Dogs recommends the Government remove the postponement currently placed on the EU Bus and Coach Regulations concerning driver training and make disability training for bus drivers mandatory.

⁴ Labour Force Survey, Quarter 2, 2012

" Losing my sight has made a huge influence on my confidence. I feel safer at home and going past my front door scares me."

Respondent, Stockport

"I only use the bus when accompanied by someone sighted. I therefore do not travel to places as and when I would like."

Guide dog owner, York

"I am very reluctant to work later shifts due to my eyesight and the buses, I find it very difficult to travel when it's dark as I really have to strain my eyes to try and see my stop. Even if it is a learned route if the weather is dark, rainy or foggy I can still have trouble in locating my stop."

Vision impaired respondent, Northampton

Going Mobile?

Several operators have begun creating smartphone applications which offer real time journey information to passengers. Although these smartphone applications can be helpful, the survey results clearly indicate this should not be seen as an appropriate alternative to AV announcements. Smartphone ownership is not universal amongst blind and partially sighted people, as many people cannot afford one. Of the blind and partially sighted people that took part in the survey

7% do not own a mobile phone at all and of those that do own a mobile phone **only 65% have a phone that is a smartphone.**

Further concerns about the over reliance on smartphone applications are raised when considering smartphone usage amongst bus passengers as well. As well as low ownership rates, 10% said 3G signal in the places they travel to by bus was poor. Additionally over half (52%) said they would be concerned about the financial costs of using their data allowance to tell them journey information. Several of those who already use a smartphone application raised problems with the battery life from prolonged usage. Some respondents also raised concerns about the safety risks of having expensive technology on display whilst on the bus.

The limitations of smartphone applications have been recognised by the Transport Minister:

“ 19% of families with at least one disabled member live in relative income poverty. For them, smartphones may be too expensive or difficult to use ”

– Baroness Kramer, Transport Minister⁵

Whilst smartphone applications may be useful for some they are not an appropriate solution for all bus passengers.



⁵ Baroness Kramer, Speech, 18 December 2013.

“I am quite new to bus travel and am not very good at picking out landmarks in the road, such as inclines, bumps, rough ground etc. I therefore use my mobile phone, with a GPS application, to make sure that I get off at the right stop. This causes my battery to drain very quickly, such that if I do not charge my phone when I get to work, I would not be able to get home again confidently because my phone will run out of battery power.”

Vision impaired respondent, Coventry

“(I never use the bus because) losing my sight has made a huge influence on my confidence. I feel safer at home and going past my front door scares me.”

Respondent, Stockport

“I think an app is going too far - not many people plan bus journeys round here and the elderly need the announcements more. They're far less likely to have a smartphone!”

Respondent, Eastbourne

Conclusion

In the 2013 'Road to Nowhere' report Guide Dogs revealed the significant impact poor quality bus travel has on a passenger with sight loss' independence. The survey showed passengers were missing out on social events and doctors' appointments, hampering their ability to do simple things many people would take for granted. This 'Destination Unknown' report shows that while things may be getting worse in many respects for passengers, audio visual (AV) announcements are an easy and popular solution for all. Adding just 1% to the cost of a new bus, AV announcements are also an affordable measure⁶.

In September 2013 the Transport Select Committee published its 'Access to Transport for People with Disabilities' report. Amongst the recommendations were calls for all buses across the UK to be installed with AV technology over the next 10 years.

A further recommendation was the withdrawal of the current postponement of EU Bus and Coach Regulations which would make disability training mandatory for bus drivers. Since then, despite supportive statements from the Bus Minister regarding AV technology and a Government investigation into the voluntary uptake of disability training by operators, nothing has changed.

At time of writing, Guide Dogs still await news on the EU Bus and Coach Regulations for disability training which is now overdue by several months. The charity is also still waiting for legislative commitment from the Government for mandatory AV technology on all new buses. These measures would greatly enhance the travel experience of all passengers and improve the independence of disabled passengers in particular.

Recommendations

1. Guide Dogs calls for the Government to legislate for all new buses to be fitted with AV to make them accessible for people with sight loss.
2. The Department for Transport to reverse their decision to postpone the implementation of the driver training elements of EU regulation No. 181/2011 for up to four years.

“I am a self-employed therapist and do a small amount of hours at a local gym as I do not earn much I make up my income with working tax credits, if I had more confidence in public transport it would enable me to gain more clients and increase my earning potential.”

Guide dog owner, Slough

“When I visit London the bus services have audio announcements and this is very helpful if you are partially sighted or blind. It would really help to have them on all bus services.”

Vision impaired respondent, Bognor Regis



⁶<http://www.taspartnership.co.uk/content/images/30126.pdf>

campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk

www.guidedogs.org.uk/talkingbuses

