

Enhanced Partnership Board

Tuesday, 31 January 2023

Update on Punctuality & Comparison with 2019

Is the paper exempt from the press and public?	No
Reason why exempt:	Not applicable
Purpose of this report:	Discussion
Is this a Key Decision?	No
Has it been included on the Forward Plan of Key Decisions?	Not a Key Decision

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Executive Summary

The Enhanced Partnership has set itself a target of 95% of all buses running on time at key measurement points (start/end of journey and at timing points on route). It should be noted that the Traffic Commissioner has set a target of 95% of all registered services to operate within a window of 1 minute early to 5 minutes late. Performance against this target remains consistently poor, and has recently deteriorated, with latest data indicating punctuality¹ at an average of 74%. This paper sets out some of the plans to improve punctuality on routes to provide passengers with a service they can rely on.

1. Punctuality measured as between 1 minute early and 5 minutes late at timing points.

What does this mean for businesses, people and places in South Yorkshire?

Poor punctuality is one of the key areas of dissatisfaction amongst passengers and is often stated as the primary factor in potential customers not using the bus. Improving punctuality such that buses turn up on time, most of the time, is one of the primary factors in improving the performance of the bus network in South Yorkshire.

Moreover, achieving high levels of punctuality is critically important in attempts to grow bus patronage and achieve a financially sustainable network. Without improvements to punctuality, marketing campaigns that seek to encourage non-users to start using the bus are likely to be ineffective, and at worst will be counter-productive. A poor experience for a new user trying the bus for the first time may further cement the perception, possibly permanently, that the bus is a poor alternative to the car. We have to get the “product” right before we can successfully market the bus as an attractive alternative to the car. Improvements to punctuality are therefore urgent, and all parties within the partnership have a role to play.

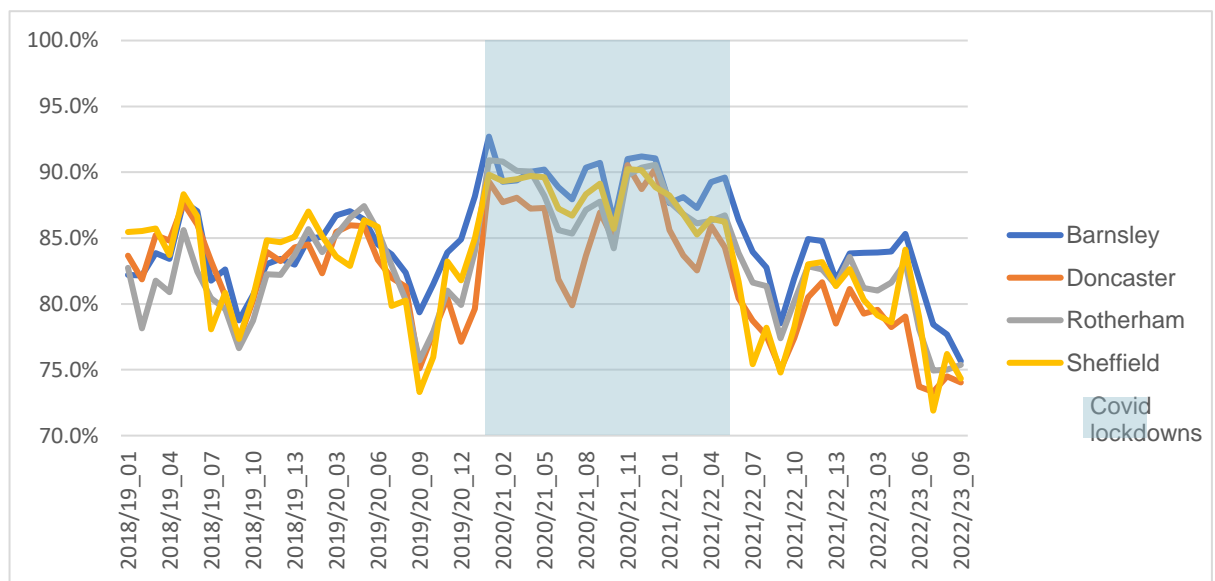
Recommendations

Board members share their views on the points raised in the paper, including the comments already received in the consultation section in 4.1 below, and confirm their support in the improvement activities proposed.

1. Background

1.1 Punctuality on bus services in South Yorkshire has been a long-standing challenge. There are a number of contributing factors in this issue, including increasing levels of road traffic, unpredictable congestion, road works, changes in working patterns and timetabling decisions by operators to maximise resource utilisation.

1.2 Even pre-Covid, punctuality was problematic. As the data below demonstrates, performance has never been above 88% since the start of the 2018/19 financial year.



- 1.3 During the periods of lockdown and significant levels of home working during the pandemic, particularly where levels of vehicle use on the roads was significantly reduced, punctuality was markedly improved, such that most services ran within 5% to 6% of the target.
- 1.4 However, we are now seeing levels of road use back to pre-pandemic levels and combined with challenging operating conditions for bus operators such that resource use needs to be maximised, performance has failed to reach the stated target collectively agreed in the Enhanced Partnership.
- 1.5 Each time a service change date is agreed, this is an opportunity for operators to correct any known issues in their timetables to ensure that the service (i.e. the time taken between two points on any given route) accurately reflect the conditions on the ground and the ability of the bus to be able to predictably run to time.
- 1.6 There is however a desire for timetables to be consistent and easy for customers to understand and hence will often be at set intervals throughout the day even though we know that it will take longer to complete a given route during peak hours in the AM and PM peak.

The example below whilst having differential running times at peak times (between 65 and 83 minutes) there remains an opportunity for further finessing of the running times using technology to make journey times better reflect the conditions on the ground. First plan to engage with a technology provider to support this approach in the near future and intend to use service 97/98 below as an early test (see 2.3 below).

97, 98 ▶ Monday to Friday

Hillsborough ▶ Sheffield ▶ Totley

Service number:	98	97	98	97	98	97	98	97	98	97	98	97	98
Hillsborough, Interchange	0520	0550	0620	0650	0705	0720	0740	0755	0810	0825	0840	0900	0915
Southey Green, Southey Green Rd/Southey Green Cl	0531	0601	0631	0705	0720	0735	0755	0810	0825	0840	0855	0915	0930
Norwood, Norwood Rd/Northern Gen Hosp	0541	0611	0642	0715	0730	0742	0807	0822	0837	0852	0907	0925	0940
Ellesmere, Lyons St/Petre St	0546	0616	0646	0722	0737	0749	0815	0830	0845	0900	0915	0932	0947
Sheffield, Arundel Gate	a. 0555	0625	0655	0731	0746	0758	0825	0839	0855	0909	0925	0942	0957
Sheffield, Arundel Gate	d. 0557	0627	0657	0733	0748	0800	0827	0841	0857	0911	0927	0944	0959
Nether Edge, Abbeydale Rd/Empire Rd	0607	0639	0704	0743	0758	0811	0838	0852	0908	0923	0940	0956	1011
Millhouses, Abbeydale Rd South/Pingle Rd	0617	0644	0711	0752	0808	0821	0848	0902	0918	0933	0950	1006	1021
Totley Brook, Totley Brook Rd/King Ecgbert Sch	0628	-	0725	-	0820	-	0901	-	0932	-	1003	-	1032
Totley, Gillfield Wood Terminus/Baslow Rd	-	0656	-	0804	-	0834	-	0916	-	0946	-	1017	-
Service number:	97	98	97	98	97	98	97	98	97	98	97	98	97
Hillsborough, Interchange	0930	0945	1000	1015	1030	1045	1100	1115	1130	1145	1200	1215	1230
Southey Green, Southey Green Rd/Southey Green Cl	0945	1000	1015	1030	1045	1100	1115	1130	1145	1200	1215	1230	1245
Norwood, Norwood Rd/Northern Gen Hosp	0955	1010	1025	1040	1055	1110	1125	1140	1155	1210	1225	1240	1255
Ellesmere, Lyons St/Petre St	1002	1017	1032	1047	1102	1117	1132	1147	1202	1217	1232	1247	1302
Sheffield, Arundel Gate	a. 1012	1027	1042	1057	1112	1127	1142	1157	1212	1227	1242	1257	1312
Sheffield, Arundel Gate	d. 1014	1029	1044	1059	1114	1129	1144	1159	1214	1229	1244	1259	1314
Nether Edge, Abbeydale Rd/Empire Rd	1026	1041	1056	1111	1126	1141	1156	1211	1226	1241	1256	1311	1326
Millhouses, Abbeydale Rd South/Pingle Rd	1036	1051	1106	1121	1136	1151	1206	1221	1236	1251	1306	1321	1336
Totley Brook, Totley Brook Rd/King Ecgbert Sch	-	1102	-	1132	-	1202	-	1232	-	1302	-	1332	-
Totley, Gillfield Wood Terminus/Baslow Rd	1047	-	1117	-	1147	-	1217	-	1247	-	1317	-	1347

- 1.7 The most recent timetable changes were implemented on 02 October 2022, and as borne out by the data, these did nothing to correct punctuality issues at a South Yorkshire level.

Time Band	Notes	Pre-02 Oct	Nov-22	Change (Pre-Oct to Nov 22)
Before 07:00		90%	87%	-3%
07:00 to 07:30		86%	84%	-2%
07:30 to 08:00	Bus lane time	78%	77%	-1%
08:00 to 08:30	Bus lane time and school start	65%	68%	3%
08:30 to 09:00	Bus lane time and school start	62%	66%	4%
09:00 to 15:00	Inter-peak	76%	77%	1%
15:00 to 16:00	School finish time	58%	59%	1%
16:00 to 18:30	Bus lane time	60%	58%	-2%
18:30 to 00:00		80%	81%	1%
Overall		74%	74%	0%

Key Issues and initiatives

2. *Timetabling (operator-led)*

- 2.1 Road congestion and buses having to share and compete for road space with private vehicles is typically cited as the most common cause of poor punctuality at times when roads are at their busiest. However, congestion itself varies significantly throughout the day and, particularly early morning and late evening, congestion should not be a factor in a service being able to run to timetable.

- 2.2 However, as the data presented in 1.7 clearly demonstrates, even before 7am, services are only running to 87% punctuality (so 7% off target). There is therefore a need for timetables to be updated to more accurately reflect the journey times experienced in reality.

- 2.3 Given the wealth of data available to operators as to how bus movements occur and their real-time journey speed throughout their operation, there is an opportunity to use this data to better understand where the key areas of congestion are and reschedule services to more accurately take these into account at times of day and days of the week. It should be noted that although improvements to punctuality through better scheduling was not specifically included in the BSIP, EP Plan, EP Scheme or "Accelerated" EP proposals, it is potentially one of the quickest and most effective ways to improve performance against the EP agreed target of punctuality.

SYMCA have already held preliminary discussions with a technology provider (Prospective) on the use of this data for First services and would welcome views from Stagecoach, TM Travel and other smaller operators if they would be willing to participate in a similar programme, or if they have equivalent plans already underway.

Paragraph 1.6 above sets out the potential tension between timetables that are accurate, and those that are simple. There is also a tension between on the one hand timetabling with enough headroom and “slack” to allow buses to catch up from small delays; and on the other, the perceived inconvenience of a bus having to wait at a timing point if it is ahead of schedule.

Less aggressive timetabling that builds more slack into the timetable also potentially requires more buses to operate the same service, which may lead to reductions in overall frequency if additional buses are not to be introduced. Under these circumstances, there is a direct trade-off between punctuality and frequency.

Any changes to timetables implemented as a result of a rescheduling process also potentially conflict with the EP Scheme commitment to limit service changes to twice per year, Whilst consideration should be given to introducing minor changes at the earliest opportunity, major changes run the risk of further disrupting passenger plans, and it may be more appropriate to wait until the next agreed service change date (likely to be July 2023). Any scheduling change needs to be well publicised to passengers in advance.

However, on balance, it is generally accepted that the ability of passengers to rely on a timetable is the highest priority factor in generating patronage growth, and that this should take precedence over the other factors mentioned above. This suggests there should be a major focus by operators over the next few months in improving bus scheduling.

Bus priority (local authority-led)

- 2.4 Although improving scheduling represents the quickest route to improving punctuality, over the medium to long term, bus priority measures will also be key. Further work is required to both improve the extensiveness of bus lanes in South Yorkshire but also the more effective use of existing bus lanes. There are a number of capital programme schemes which are looking to extend bus lanes in the region (e.g. the CRSTS capital funding has dedicated allocations for bus lanes and bus priority, A61 road widening works for buses have started, a number of “hot spot” congestion alleviation measures are introduced around Barnsley and the A630 will see the installation of bus priority signals and these schemes are expected to be implemented between 2023 and 2027.

Where a bus lane already exists, there are areas where other road users disregard their hours of operation and use them for driving and/or parking. Enforcement of the hours of operation of a bus lane, giving the bus free use of the road space and ensuring all other vehicles not permitted in it are using the remaining road space is essential to ensure the bus gets priority movement along congested corridors. We are seeking views from Local Authority colleagues as to what can be done to increase the levels of enforcement in key hotspots, including the installation and use of cameras to issue fines where possible.

- 2.5 Furthermore, consideration needs to be given about the hours of operation of bus lanes. Using Sheffield as an example, typical hours of operation are from 7.30am to 9.30am and 4pm to 6.30pm. We know however that with changing hours of school times across the city, and region, schools are finishing much earlier than 4pm and hence congestion commences much earlier in the PM peak (typically from around

3pm). This is again borne out in the data shown in 1.7 and consideration should therefore be given by Local Authorities to possibly extending the hours of operation, particularly in the PM peak to perhaps commence at 3pm (noting that a more detailed examination of the data would be required to evidence any decision).

- 2.6 We also know that in Sheffield there are plans to significantly widen the hours of operation of key corridors such as Abbeydale Road and Ecclesall Road to 7am to 7pm which would bring notable benefits to punctuality across the day.

Improving bus boarding times (Joint SYMCA and operator-led)

- 2.7 Measures to speed up bus boarding times by minimising interaction times between the passenger and driver can also improve punctuality, as well as reducing journey times. SYMCA is developing plans to improve the ticketing and retail approach for how operators sell products and encourage pre-purchase. Where we are able to speed up transaction times on boarding for passengers and remove variability in their time interacting with the driver, this gives a greater level of confidence in journey times.

This work includes moving customers to both pre-purchase their tickets (in part through differential pricing) but also digital ticketing (including barcode tickets) and Tap and Cap initiatives using contactless bank cards. A marketing campaign that focuses on the pre-purchase of tickets is possible in the short term; however other measures such as the universal use of tap and cap are likely to take some time to implement and are unlikely to be a quick fix.

- 2.8 The Accelerated EP programme also includes an initiative to rationalise bus stops. Removing stops that are little used, or where bus stops are closely grouped, can reduce journey time by minimising the time it takes for the bus to decelerate and accelerate. Boarding times are, however, unlikely to be significantly changed, as it can be assumed affected passengers will board at a different stop. There may be scope for some rationalisation, although there may also be local opposition to stops being removed, and the costs of removing infrastructure such as shelters can be substantial. On balance, bus stop rationalisation is unlikely to be a significant or rapid measure in the improvement of punctuality. But it may still be worth exploring in particular locations.

- 2.9 Finally, we would welcome views from operators as to any other initiatives they have planned or would wish to see which would improve service punctuality.

3. Options Considered and Recommended Proposal

3.1 Option 1

Continue to develop, with support from Local Authorities and bus operators, a specific range of interventions to target where there are punctuality issues on the ground but also improve the preparation of timetables and the use of technology to improve the passenger's trust in services running to time.

3.4 Option 1 Risks and Mitigations

We need to ensure that proposals put forward are acted upon and there is a shared intent across all stakeholders to implement changes to the benefit of passenger

punctuality. This includes allocation of appropriate resources to the delivery of the plans.

3.5 **Option 2**

Accept that the target set by the Enhanced Partnership Board of 95% is not achievable in the current circumstances and therefore lower the target to either be more achievable, or already delivered on the basis of current performance (e.g. a target of 75%).

3.8 **Option 2 Risks and Mitigations**

We would need to accept that the experience of the passenger in being able to rely on services arriving on time would not improve above current levels of performance. In doing so, this would likely demonstrate that the Enhanced Partnership was not sufficiently ambitious in being able to make demonstratable improvements in services. It would also mean that major marketing campaigns to encourage people to use buses may be ineffective or, at worst, counter-productive.

3.13 **Recommended Option**

Option 1.

4. **Consultation on Proposal**

4.1 In consultation on this paper, one operator has expressed the view that amending timetables to better reflect real-world conditions is not their preferred approach for tackling poor punctuality. They have concerns that the impact of doing so will deter passengers due to:

- 1) longer travelling time for users
- 2) the need for the bus to wait out time on route when traffic conditions are more free flowing
- 3) the need to put in additional costs or reduce frequency to keep costs down, and
- 4) increases in the complexity of timetables

There is clearly a trade-off, and reviews of scheduling need to draw an appropriate balance between the above factors and punctuality gains. It should be noted that other measures to address punctuality such as bus priority, while effective both in improving punctuality AND reducing journey times, will take longer to implement. This highlights the importance of all commitments in the EP being delivered as an integrated package.

5. **Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision**

5.1 Not applicable as a discussion paper only.

6. **Financial and Procurement Implications and Advice**

6.1 Not applicable as a discussion paper only. Any financial implications resulting from schemes and proposals suggested in this paper will be subject to their own financial and policy approval processes (e.g. through Transport and Environment Board).

7. Legal Implications and Advice

7.1 Not applicable as a discussion paper only.

8. Human Resources Implications and Advice

8.1 Not applicable as a discussion paper only.

9. Equality and Diversity Implications and Advice

9.1 Not applicable as a discussion paper only.

10. Climate Change Implications and Advice

10.1 Not applicable as a discussion paper only.

11. Information and Communication Technology Implications and Advice

11.1 Not applicable as a discussion paper only.

12. Communications and Marketing Implications and Advice

12.1 Not applicable as a discussion paper only.

List of Appendices Included:

None