

EAST SUFFOLK TRAVEL ASSOCIATION

SURVEY OF TRAIN AND BUS JOURNEYS DURING OCTOBER 2021

REPORT OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The East Suffolk Travel Association, an independent voluntary body for public transport users, has conducted for one month a train and bus survey each year (except 2020) for two decades. The object is to obtain a snapshot of positive and negative experiences of specific train or bus journeys made by members and visitors to our website

Findings of train survey

Detailed questionnaires were completed on 78 journeys. 45% were between East Suffolk Line stations, 26% on the Lowestoft – Norwich line and 29% to places beyond Ipswich or Norwich, of which 9 were to London Liverpool Street while other “distant” destinations included Portsmouth, Nuneaton, Nottingham and Menston (Yorks) and in two cases Paris (by Eurostar).

47% walked to the station, 27% cycled, 17% used another train, 5% went by car and 3% by bus.

Punctuality – 93% of trains departed on time, 5% departed late, 1% left early and one train was cancelled Average lateness was 10 minutes, skewed by a late departure from Stansted Airport of 34 minutes.

53% of trains arrived on time, 12% arrived late by an average of 12.3 minutes and 32% arrived early – an average of 2 minutes per train. The average lateness was skewed by the late arrival of the above-mentioned Stansted Airport service diverted via London because of a signalling problem at Newport. On one Liverpool Street – Halesworth journey two successive East Suffolk Line trains were cancelled as was the replacement bus and the passenger was collected by car by her husband.

Information – 48% found out about train times via the internet, 23% from a printed timetable, 4% from an app, 4% from an information centre and 3% by other means. 18% said they already knew the times of trains – indicating the importance of having a stable timetable that does not change too frequently. All but one said this information was correct.

Tickets – 27% bought their ticket on line, 25% used a station booking office, 16% a ticket vending machine, 14% purchased their ticket on the train and 7% used an app. The remaining 11% already had a ticket or a pass. (NB In our local area only three stations – Ipswich, Lowestoft and Norwich have ticket offices)

Purpose of journey - 66% of replies said leisure, 30% business and the remaining 4% domestic.

Staff – 98% found staff at stations or on trains helpful. Tickets were issued/checked on the train in 92% of cases (a higher percentage than in our 2019 survey) with the small number not checked being on Ipswich – Felixstowe, Manningtree – Woodbridge and Oulton Broad – Lowestoft journeys.

Reasons for lateness – Of the 12% of journeys where the train arrived late, half the respondents knew the reason – through the on-train announcement, own observation or being told by another passenger.

On all stations, real-time displays were reported as working.

Seats on trains – no one reported being unable to obtain a seat.

Connections – 32 passengers had connections with other trains or buses and 25 (or 78%) of these found them easy. One journey was from Woodbridge to Bungay, changing from train to bus at Beccles and just over half the journeys were within East Anglia

Train cleanliness – 93% said they found their train was clean. 7% found litter on the floor; crisp packets on seats; wet toilet floor.

Comments: A small minority of respondents did not answer every question.

An open-ended request for comments drew 9 praising the new Stadler trains and 9 favourable comments on the conductors' announcements about forward connections. There were some adverse comments about the lack of pocket timetables ; non-collection of fares on replacement buses; lack of directions from Beccles station to the bus stops; and the need for a more frequent Ipswich – Peterborough service.

Findings of Bus Survey

52 completed questionnaires were received about local bus journeys.

45 referred to First Eastern Counties services, 4 to BorderBus, 2 to Our Bus and 1 to Simonds. Three journeys intended by First were cancelled. The majority of journeys involved travel to and from the principal towns in East Suffolk.

Punctuality – 58% of services departed on time; 32% departed on average 5 minutes late; 5% were cancelled. One journey was not undertaken because the bus had to be rerouted and punctuality of another was not reported.

19% of services arrived on time; 29% arrived an average of 7.7 minutes late (skewed by 5 which were 10-15 minutes late); 37% arrived early by an average of 2 minutes per journey; the remainder were cancelled or times were not reported. What mattered for most passengers was that 56% arrived on time or slightly early.

Information – 37% found out about the service from the printed timetable; 25% from the internet; 19% from a timetable at a bus stop or bus station (provided by the operator, not by Suffolk County Council), 6% from an electronic screen and 4% from an app, while 10% already knew the time of the bus. In 96% of cases the information was accurate.

Asked their main reason for using the bus, 60% said convenience, 16% said they had no alternative, 9% concern for the environment, 5% good value; 5% less stressful than driving, 5% medical appointment and 5% necessity.

Purpose of journey – 45% said leisure, 22% education or training; 14% commuting to work, 10% business, 5% appointment, 2% visiting friends and 2% volunteering.

96% of respondents said the driver was helpful and everyone was able to obtain a seat.

5 passengers knew why the bus was late (in variably congestion) and 3 said they did not know.

Facilities at stops – previous ESTA surveys have revealed a considerable number of criticisms about these; and we have reported them to the County Council and /or operators. This time the only specific criticisms were lack of shelter or seating at Warwick Avenue, Woodbridge and a notice at a Halesworth stop just advising passengers to “use an app.”

Use of connections – 15 of the journeys reported involved using a connecting bus, mainly centred on Beccles, and 14 responses said this was easy.

Frequency of journey – 36% said they made this particular journey at least once a week and 64% said at various intervals ranging from 2-3 times a month to occasionally.

An open-ended invitation attracted 28 comments. 6 concerned drivers and all but one of these were positive. One X22 driver was complimented on how he dealt with an apparently drugged passenger attempting to light a cigarette on the vehicle. Another driver “missed a stop” and a few passengers were confused about which bays buses used at Lowestoft bus station.

Conclusion

Many positive experiences were reported, such as helpful staff on both trains and buses, usually easy connections and, compared to our previous survey, in October 2019, some improved punctuality by both trains and buses.

There was increased use of the internet for finding out about timetables, but paper timetables were still appreciated. Indeed, for nearly 1 in 5 bus journeys, the passenger used a timetable displayed at the bus stop. These are, of course, now provided by the operators, since Suffolk County Council generally ceased to do so.

The number of trains now arriving ahead of their scheduled time partly reflects the greater speeds now possible with the new bimode trains on our regional services. Will this situation will be reflected in faster published times and perhaps certain additional stops with the December 2022 timetable change?

Will there also be tangible effects of Suffolk County Council's Bus Service Improvement Plan when we undertake our next survey?

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Rod Lock and Trevor Garrod

29/12/2021

For more information about the policies and activities of the East Suffolk Travel Association (established in 1965) visit our website www.eastsuffolktravel.org.uk .