

What do good public transport services look like ?

This briefing provides a brief survey of the literature about quality in public transport services, and discusses some of the issues raised by that literature.

Service quality is defined in general management literature as the relationship between what customers expect and what they experience. But what does that mean in public transport in particular? And is it the right way to define quality in public transport services?

This is not a simple matter, because public transport has to serve the whole community, not just any particular individual passenger, and different people prioritise different things. Public transport policy makers, planners and managers have to take account of sometimes conflicting priorities and aspirations in the context of budgets that, no matter how large, are always limited.

Many studies and reports has addressed the issue of quality in public transport over the last decade or so -- see the six studies listed at the end of this briefing for some prominent examples -- but there is no agreed international approach to how to measure it. Different studies and authors categorise the elements of service quality differently, and some give more weight to some categories than others

However, we think that the service quality elements featured in the literature can be boiled down to 12 key categories:

Accessibility: how easy is it for everyone, including people with disabilities, to use the service?

Affordability: are costs shared so that services have the resources they need and all can use them?

Availability: does the service go where it is needed at the times and frequency needed?

Communication: can you get information where, when and in the form needed?

qualitypublictransport

is a partnership between Public World and the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF), with the support of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Its purpose is to support transport unions in building alliances with passengers and other civil society organisations to promote good services and sustainable transport systems.

That means services that enable everyone to travel safely, comfortably and reliably, and employ enough securely employed, properly trained and fairly rewarded transport workers.

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Convenience: how easily can you find out about timetables, and pay fares, and so on?

Enjoyment: is the experience of using transport services a comfortable and pleasant one?

Integration: is it easy to switch between modes and services?

Reliability: does the service keep to schedule and maintain standards consistently?

Respect: Are workers and passengers treated with the dignity as human beings with rights?

Responsiveness: Are problems and complaints addressed properly in a timely way?

Safety: are passengers and workers reasonably safe from harm, both when riding and waiting?

Speed: does the service get there quickly enough, relative to private alternatives?

In practice, there are bound to be trade-offs between the categories, and within them. For example, a service that stops a lot might be more accessible and convenient but slower. Or a focus on safety can undermine other aspects of service quality if it is taken too far. As the [International Association for Public Transport](#) (IATP) points out:

“Any enhancement to security has to be balanced against the need for the efficient provision of service. Any security enhancement that impacts negatively on numbers travelling, scheduling times, access and exit to the system and passenger throughput must be fully considered before implementation. Furthermore, security enhancements should not unnecessarily erode the liberties and individual human rights of the travelling public.”

In addition, the relative importance of those different elements varies from one situation to another, and from one passenger to another. Whereas security might be the key issue in one location, in another the hazards might not be so great. For women at night, personal security might be the key issue, but at other times their experience might be more affected by other factors.

That is why the process of how urban public transport decisions are made can be crucial to the outcome, both by taking into account the views and experiences of the widest variety of people affected and by reaching reasonable compromises between conflicting priorities. As with other areas of public service, democratic accountability is not only right in principle -- because all citizens are affected by the decisions and contribute to funding them -- but also contributes directly to service quality by enabling services to be better suited to the needs they must meet.

All the above categories of service quality can be broken down further into much more specific elements. One of the most comprehensive guides to urban public transport quality has been produced in the United States by the Transit Cooperative Research Program for the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Its [Handbook for Measuring Customer Satisfaction and Service Quality](#) provides an

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“example list of quality indicators” consisting of 48 items, reproduced here (with some changes to vocabulary).

- 1 Absence of graffiti
- 2 Absence of offensive smells
- 3 Accessibility of trains/buses to disabled people
- 4 Availability of handrails or grab bars on trains/buses
- 5 Availability of monthly discount passes
- 6 Availability of schedule information by phone/mail
- 7 Availability of schedules/maps at stations/stops
- 8 Availability of seats on train/bus
- 9 Availability of shelter and benches at stations/stops
- 10 Cleanliness of interior, seats, windows
- 11 Cleanliness of stations/stops
- 12 Cleanliness of train/bus exterior
- 13 Clear and timely announcements of stops
- 14 Comfort of seats on train/bus
- 15 Connecting bus service to stations/main bus stops
- 16 Cost effectiveness, affordability, and value
- 17 Cost of making transfers
- 18 Displaying of customer service/complaint number
- 19 Ease of opening doors when getting on/off train/bus
- 20 Ease of paying fare, purchasing tokens
- 21 Explanations and announcement of delays
- 22 Fairness/consistency of fare structure
- 23 Freedom from nuisance behaviors of other riders
- 24 Frequency of delays for repairs/emergencies
- 25 Frequency of service on Saturdays and Sundays
- 26 Frequent service so that wait times are short
- 27 Friendly, courteous, quick service from personnel
- 28 Having station/stop near destination
- 29 Having station/stop near my home
- 30 Hours of service during weekdays
- 31 Number of transfer points outside town centre
- 32 Physical condition of stations/stops
- 33 Physical condition of vehicles and infrastructure

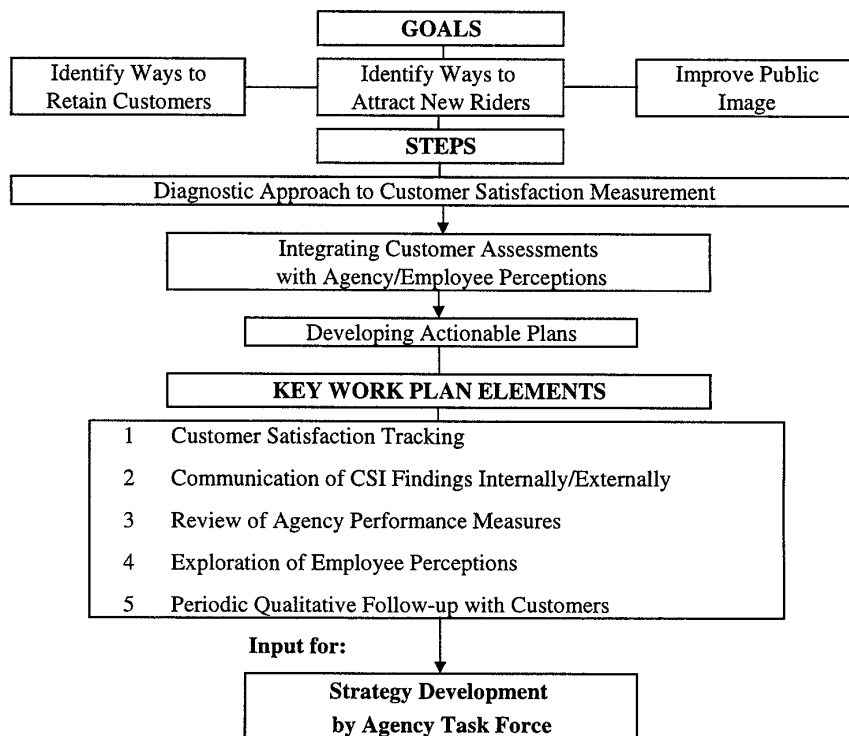


- 34 Posted minutes to next train/bus at stations/stops
- 35 Quietness of the vehicles and system
- 36 Reliable trains/buses that come on schedule
- 37 Route/direction information visible on trains/buses
- 38 Safe and competent drivers/conductors
- 39 Safety from crime at stations/stops
- 40 Safety from crime on trains/buses
- 41 Short wait time for transfers
- 42 Signs/information in appropriate languages
- 43 Smoothness of ride and stops
- 44 Station/stop names visible from train/bus
- 45 Temperature on train/bus — not too hot or cold
- 46 The train/bus traveling at a safe speed
- 47 Trains/buses that are not overcrowded
- 48 Transit personnel who know system



Even in those 48 categories there is no mention of journey time, which underlines the limitless potential to specify elements of quality service. The same FTA handbook sets out in diagrammatic form its recommended approach to involving both passengers and employees in quality improvement.

**Chart 1.1
Overall Customer Satisfaction Management Plan**



The European Union's directorate for Energy and Transport ran a three year project called PROCEED, which focused on public transport in towns and cities of between 25,000 and 200,000 in population. It analysed 67 urban public transport systems and developed 55 specific guidelines on how to improve urban bus transport planning and operations. Its conclusions have been published as [Guidelines for High Quality Public Transport](#), accompanied by study notes, both of which are available in several languages. It also boiled down these guidelines into a set of recommendations for High Quality Public Transport (HQPT). Those recommendations, summarised below, show the important linkages between quality *systems* and quality *services* in public transport:

- Obtain broad political consensus
- Obtain adequate funding for long-term investments and operating costs.
- Measures to “pull” people into public transport must be accompanied by measures, such as congestion and parking charges, to “push” them away from car use.
- Fully integrate public transport into all levels of the urban planning process.
- There must be a ‘responsible public authority’ in overall charge, and if services are delivered by a separate organisation both parties must be equally committed to meeting the same quality standards.
- Regular exchange of experiences among planners and decision makers from different cities helps build knowledge, but there is no one ‘best practice’ solution.
- Quality services require regular collection and analysis of as much information about both objective changes to transport need -- such as geographic distribution of inhabitants and changing work locations -- and subjective performance data derived from interviewing passengers
- Quality services require quality management.
- Bus networks can replicate the advantages of tram networks by focusing on high frequency, direct routing, dedicated lanes, co-ordinated vehicles and platforms, and prioritisation measures at intersections.
- Public transport services must be “as good as possible” in all respects, but high quality in all aspects of operation is expensive. So, “the goal is to balance the quality of each element so that it contributes to a consistent quality level for the overall system.”
- Frequency, operating times, and walking distances to transit stops are key-features of a quality public transport system. “With short intervals (10 minutes or less) people stop using timetables and instead experience what is effectively a ‘turn up and go’ system.”
- The agency responsible for local and regional public transport service need not be the same, but their activities must be integrated to produce co-

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ordinated timetables, physical coordination (interchange points), tariff schemes, etc..

- Branding is important: “A good and positive image of the urban bus system among all citizens is a major factor in delivering success.”
- Innovation must be balanced with continuity, so that the system responds to changing needs while avoiding so much change that passengers’ knowledge of the system does not keep up.
- A quality tariff system doesn’t necessarily mean low fares but does mean high value for money.
- Computer-based technologies should be used strategically -- some are essential, others are helpful and others less so.

The challenge of striking a balance between all the elements of service quality in public transport is made all the harder by the fact that some points that might seem obvious can turn out to be a lot more complicated than you might think. For example, there is evidence that passenger satisfaction does not necessarily increase when quality improvements are made!

A Swedish study by Margareta Friman found that “the satisfaction people experience when using public transport services is influenced by quality improvements only to a limited extent”. What really counts, she found, is the impact of what she called ‘critical incidents’. Her report explains:

“A critical incident is an encounter that is particularly satisfying or dissatisfying. Its occurrence is assumed to have a significant impact on satisfaction. In public transport services, negative critical incidents may have the highest impacts. Examples are delay in the service, lack of information, misinformation, or rude employees/staff. In contrast to being customers of services that focus more on positive feelings (e.g., restaurants or entertainment outlets), avoiding dissatisfaction is likely to be the passengers’ goal when using public transport services.”

Her report arrived at an unexpected conclusion: “In summary, the results indicated that improvements in information systems, vehicle standard, departures, and new travel centres do not improve satisfaction. On the contrary, the differences detected showed a decrease in satisfaction.”

Friman discusses the reasons for this counter-intuitive result. It seems to arise, in part at least, from the fact that quality improvements raise expectations -- and service quality is defined as the extent to which a service satisfies expectations. So if a public transport system introduces shiny new buses with more comfortable seating, for example, the customer satisfaction produced from that will be more than undermined if it fails in some other important way.

One central lesson to be taken from the literature is that, even if services are provided by privately owned companies, there is no substitute for effective, democratic decision-making processes to guide public service policy and practice. There is also strong evidence that workplace democracy contributes strongly to quality improvements in public services. In a review of the international literature, Brendan Martin and Conor Cradden show that there are



three sets of reasons why involving employees more fully in public service design and delivery decisions tends to improve quality and efficiency. In their report, [Partnership and Productivity in the Public Sector](#), they summarise these as:

- *organisational*: decisions will tend to be better the closer they are made to where they must be implemented;
- *relational*: making decisions work in practice means that the relationships between the people who carry them out need to be good;
- *psychological*: individual members of organisations tend to think and work more effectively if their contribution is valued.

Further reading

Chris A. Hale (2011), "New Approaches To Strategic Urban Transport Assessment," Australian Planner, Vol. 48/3, 173-182.

David Levinger and Maggie McGehee (2008), "Connectivity: Responding to New Trends Through a Usability Approach," Community Transportation, Spring 2008, pp. 33-37

Stephen G. Stradling, Michael Carreno, Tom Rye and Allyson Noble (2007), "Passenger Perceptions And The Ideal Urban Bus Journey Experience," Transport Policy, Vol. 14, No. 4, July 2007, pp. 283-292.

Greg Marsden and Peter Bonsall (2006), "Performance Targets in Transport Policy," Transport Policy, Vol. 13, No. 3, May 2006, pp. 191-203.

AARP (2005), Livable Communities: An Evaluation Guide, AARP Public Policy Institute.

Jeffrey Tumlin, Jarrett Walker, Jemae Hoffman and Ria Hutabarat (2005) Performance Measures for the Urban Village Transit Network, Transport Research Board Annual Meeting.

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