

11 Quality of service

11.1. In this chapter we consider the following aspects of quality of service: customer complaints, occupancy and standing, punctuality and reliability, cleanliness, passenger comfort, safety, information to passengers and consumer representation. We then go on to consider the costs of a range of quality improvements.

11.2. An organisation may obtain measures of the quality of its service in a number of ways:

- (a) direct physical measurement, usually as part of the day-to-day control procedures, aggregated and analysed as appropriate;
- (b) consumer responses obtained via market research studies and other enquiries, for instance by consumer bodies; and
- (c) direct consumer response, notably through individual suggestions or complaints.

Direct measurement

11.3. It is part of the inspectors' role to monitor the performance of the bus services and part of the Depot Managers' job to ensure that quality is maintained. Inspectors' reports are not aggregated centrally or collated and analysed locally in a way which would permit statistical trends to be identified or comparisons with other areas or with general performance standards to be made. The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (the Consumer Council) recorded 'lack of monitoring' as a key point in its submission. The companies agreed with us that they should have a corporate system for producing information on quality of service which would provide, for example, a comparison of the performance of areas. To provide such a system would be part of the job of the Inspector General.

Market research studies

11.4. Ulsterbus and Citybus (and particularly the Belfast service) have been the subject of a number of surveys of consumer views. We draw from two of these: a consumer survey carried out on behalf of the Consumer Council by Market Research Northern Ireland Ltd (MRNI) in April 1987; and a usage and attitude survey prepared by Ulster Marketing Surveys Ltd (UMS) for Ulsterbus and Citybus in September 1988.

11.5. Table 11.1 shows a summary of the results of the 1987 MRNI survey for the Consumer Council.

TABLE 11.1 **Bus users `quite dissatisfied' or `very dissatisfied' with aspects of service quality**

	<i>per cent</i>	
	<i>Ulsterbus</i>	<i>Citybus</i>
Drivers	11	20
Boarding/access	23	31
Punctuality	34	40
Cleanliness	23	46
Smoking/ventilation	32	48
Seat comfort	21	51
Stops/shelters	61	58
Timetable information	23	19

Source: General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland; MRNI, 1987.

Of those things we consider in this chapter, particular areas of discontent shown by this survey amongst Citybus users were bus stops and shelters, comfort levels and the overall passenger environment, whilst Ulsterbus users were particularly dissatisfied with stops and shelters.

11.6. Table 11.2 shows results from the survey carried out by UMS for Ulsterbus and Citybus.

TABLE 11.2 **Bus users rating aspects of service quality `quite poor' or `very poor'**

	<i>per cent</i>	
	<i>Ulsterbus</i>	<i>Citybus</i>
Reliability	10	14
Punctuality	11	16
Time taken on journeys	11	8
Courtesy of driver	9	17
Comfort of buses	17	52
Facilities at bus stations*	35	29
Cleanliness inside buses	20	41
Cleanliness outside buses	16	29
Timetable and route information	16	23

Source: Ulsterbus and Citybus; UMS.

*Taken to refer to bus stops and shelters in the case of Citybus.

These results confirmed those of the panel discussions which were also carried out as part of the same study. The report concluded that attitudes towards Ulsterbus were generally favourable, with good results for reliability, punctuality and courtesy of drivers; the heaviest criticism was for facilities at bus stations and cleanliness inside buses. There was less approval for Citybus, with the heaviest criticism falling on comfort of buses, cleanliness inside and outside buses, and bus stops and shelters.

Customer complaints

11.7. The companies follow up all written complaints individually. If the Depot Manager is unable to resolve a complaint, it will be referred to the Area Manager. Each timetable provides the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the four Area Managers and contains an invitation to passengers, if they feel that they have cause for complaint, to raise the matter first with the local Depot Manager or Area Manager; and, if they subsequently feel that their complaint has not been resolved, to refer the matter to the Consumer Council.

11.8. Despite the importance ascribed by the companies to complaints, no corporate records are available showing the numbers and nature of complaints received nor of the resulting action taken. Area Managers provided us with the number and nature of written complaints they had received during the last two years. A summary is shown in Table 11.3.

TABLE 11.3 **Summary of written complaints received in Ulsterbus and Citybus: total numbers**
Period of returns

<i>Nature of complaint</i>	<i>11/86 to 10/88 Citybus</i>	<i>11/86 to 10/88 Central</i>	<i>9/86 to 8/88 Southern</i>	<i>1/87 to 10/88 Northern</i>	<i>1987 & 1988 Western</i>	<i>Total Ulsterbus</i>
Services	96	19	54	13	8	94
Drivers held to blame	49	8	11	4	10	33
Stops	9	4	12	0	2	18
Dirty buses	1	0	-	1	-	1
Balance*	<u>87</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>55</u>
Total	242	42	87	42	30	201

Source: MMC analysis of Ulsterbus and Citybus data.

*Including unsubstantiated/drivers not held to blame	71	5	7	N/A	7	19
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11.9. From these figures of passenger complaints for the last two years we calculated the ratio of written complaints to passenger journeys. This ratio is 1.7 complaints¹ per million passenger journeys for Ulsterbus and 3.2 complaints per million passenger journeys for Citybus. These results show that Ulsterbus has a better record of complaints than Citybus. Both undertakings, however, have complaint levels better than any of those found by us in our investigation of a number of bus companies in 1982.²

11.10. Passengers can also raise complaints direct with the Consumer Council when they have not been satisfactorily resolved by the bus companies. The Consumer Council has a sub-committee for dealing with all issues concerning transport. Table 11.4 shows the number of written complaints received by the Consumer Council over the period 1985 to 1988. All complaints are considered by the Transport sub-committee.

TABLE 11.4 **Number of complaints received by the Consumer Council, 1985 to 1988**

	<i>Citybus</i>	<i>Ulsterbus</i>	<i>Total</i>
1985	-	7	7
1986	2	4	6
1987	4	6	10
1988	1	3	4

Source: General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland.

Passenger comfort

11.11. We include under 'passenger comfort': driver behaviour, bus comfort including seats and ventilation, and bus stops and bus stations. This is the aspect of quality of service on which Ulsterbus and Citybus have been most heavily criticised. Criticism tends to be greater of the comfort inside Citybus buses, whilst for Ulsterbus the facilities at the stops and stations are more heavily criticised. For instance, in its evidence to us, Community Technical Aid Northern Ireland suggested that Citybus paid virtually no attention to passenger comfort and the service was viewed as a result as a second-class mode of transport.

¹Excludes complaints not upheld. Total passenger journeys for 1987 and 1988 taken as 52.72 million for Citybus and 106.04 million for Ulsterbus.

²*Bristol Omnibus Company Limited, Cheltenham District Traction Company, City of Cardiff District Council, Trent Motor Traction Company Limited and West Midland Passenger Transport Executive: a report on stage carriage services supplied by the undertakings.* HC 442, 28 July 1982.

11.12. Citybus buses have been equipped with hard fibreglass seating (to minimise the effects of vandalism), and the interiors are designed to accommodate large numbers of standing passengers. UMS reported on Citybus that respondents were critical of the hard seating; not only were they very uncomfortable but they were also seen as presenting a significant safety hazard for younger children;¹ the perceived lack of proper ventilation (the bus windows are sealed) and the limited impact of the 'no smoking' rule, were widely seen as contributing significantly to the unpleasant atmospheric conditions which typically prevailed within the bus. UMS also said that the standard of driving was a much criticised feature of the Citybus service. In particular, concerns were expressed that the drivers did not allow sufficient time for passengers (especially the elderly or disabled) to find a seat before moving off. We discuss the companies' increasing the number of seats on 'standee' buses in paragraph 11.24.

11.13. The companies told us that since the introduction of video cameras on buses, the incidence of vandalism had been greatly reduced, and it was felt that the interiors of buses could be upgraded without undue economic risk. The trades unions told us that they welcomed the introduction of 'video buses', which provided a measure of protection for the drivers; and that they hoped to see the use of video cameras extended. The companies planned to introduce soft seats within the existing seat frames in the front half of Citybus vehicles in the near future. The company was also researching alternative seating materials, and was to put samples of possible new seats on trial in Citybus vehicles in due course. The companies were also examining how the buses could better cater for the needs of the elderly and those with impaired mobility. This was a matter on which both Belfast Civic Trust and Community Technical Aid Northern Ireland expressed concern in their evidence to us.

11.14. There is a complete ban on smoking in Citybus buses, and in the front half of Ulsterbus buses. The companies pointed out to us, however, their lack of legislative backing for the enforcement of these regulations (see paragraph 2.52). In the course of our inquiry, the Ulster Cancer Foundation carried out a passenger survey in conjunction with Citybus. The company decided on a publicity campaign, to be followed by enforcement by inspectors, concurrently with the provision of cleaner buses and softer seats. Citybus was confident that its ban on smoking would be sustainable, given legislative and public support.

11.15. The programme of in-service driver training which we discuss in paragraph 11.38 would also cover 'passenger care' aspects, although the companies pointed out that passenger comfort was affected not only by the standard of driving of the bus drivers, but by that of drivers of other vehicles on the road at the same time, and that violent braking was sometimes necessary to avoid collision with other vehicles.

11.16. For less frequent Citybus users, the UMS study said that the degree of comfort which a car offered was judged to be of prime importance in their preference for its use, and 'the lack of comfort in Citybus was seen as fully justifying their current perceptions that this was a service only to be used as a last resort!'

11.17. For Ulsterbus, the UMS study concluded, on this aspect, that the courtesy of the drivers emerged as one of the most reputable aspects of the service, whilst bus stations were particularly heavily criticised for lacking even the most basic facilities. Table 11.5 shows the results of the two surveys for Ulsterbus.

¹The report said: 'The belief was that a combination of a frictionless seating surface and dangerous driving behaviour meant that children not old enough to hold on were at risk of being thrown about the bus.'

TABLE 11.5 Aspects of passenger comfort: Ulsterbus

	<i>percentage responding</i>			
	<i>UMS survey 'Quite good' and 'very good'</i>	<i>MRNI survey 'Very satisfied' and 'quite satisfied'</i>	<i>UMS survey 'Quite poor' and 'very poor'</i>	<i>MRNI survey 'Very dissatisfied' and 'quite dissatisfied'</i>
Courtesy of drivers	73		9	
Drivers		75		11
Comfort of buses	66		17	
Seat comfort		62		21
Smoking/ventilation		53		32
Stops/shelters		30		61
Facilities at bus stations	39		35	

Source: Ulsterbus and Citybus; UMS: and General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland; MRNI.

11.18. The companies do not regard it as their responsibility to provide bus shelters, and only regard passenger facilities as their responsibility where these are at their bus station premises, upgrading these as part of a general programme to update the companies' operational premises. Generally in the United Kingdom shelters are provided as a public amenity, and in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the DOE (NI) or district councils. The companies agreed with us that passengers regarded the wait at the bus stop as an integral part of the bus journey, and important in forming their impressions of bus travel; and that it was in the companies' interests that the wait at the stop should be as comfortable as possible for passengers. They told us that in Belfast they had had discussions with a firm which erected bus shelters to provide advertising sites, within which they wanted the route timetable to be displayed. A programme of reconstruction and refurbishment of bus stations, incorporating a better standard of waiting rooms and toilets, was in progress at the time of our inquiry. We refer to problems of obtaining land and planning difficulties in respect of the building programme in paragraphs 6.47 and 6.52.

Cleanliness

11.19. All buses are scheduled to be washed daily; mechanical washers are available in most depots. There are three mechanical washers in Citybus depots. Night shift cleaners sweep out each bus every night and deal with graffiti, clean windscreens and mop out floors. Graffiti are a problem for Citybus but less so for Ulsterbus. Approximately every three weeks day cleaners operating in squads give the buses a complete internal clean which includes washing ceilings, windows, rails, ledges, panels, seats and floors.

11.20. Out of 443 Ulsterbus and Citybus complaints, only two were about cleanliness. Yet, as Tables 11.1 and 11.2 show, bus users registered high levels of dissatisfaction about the cleanliness of Citybus buses, and lower levels about Ulsterbus cleanliness. The companies told us that following the introduction of video systems in Citybus buses, and the decrease in vandalism and graffiti, the cleaners were able to devote more time to ordinary cleaning. The interiors of Citybus buses would now, they believed, stand comparison with those of the buses in any city in England. The trades unions also told us that the introduction of video cameras by Citybus had provided an opportunity to improve the standard of cleanliness of its bus interiors once and for all.

Occupancy and standing

11.21. There are legal constraints on the maximum number of passengers that are allowed to stand on a bus. For the purpose of meeting those constraints seated schoolchildren under 14 count as two-thirds of an adult and children under 6 are not counted. Overcrowding manifests itself either as the number of passengers unable to enter the bus at a stop because all the seats and all the standing

places are full or as passengers' being required to stand for a period in excess of a target time. Ulsterbus and Citybus regard a target of a maximum of 15 minutes' standing for any one person during a journey in the morning peak period as acceptable. The usual practice for monitoring overcrowding is to instruct inspectors to provide regular daily checks on particular routes for which overcrowding difficulties have been reported.

11.22. Only the analysis of complaints in Northern area permitted us to identify complaints about overcrowding. Of the 42 written complaints received in Northern area in 1987 and 1988 eight were concerned with overcrowding. The companies told us that a large proportion of these were about one particular problem, which had been rectified.

11.23. The Belfast Transportation Strategy Review stated that there was evidence to suggest that discomfort was experienced from this cause by passengers travelling on Citybus. In Table 11.6 we show the results of the BTSR 1985 survey, showing those routes where more than 10 per cent of the completed questionnaires contained complaints about overcrowding. Neither the Consumer Council nor the Ulsterbus/Citybus surveys asked their sample of passengers about excessive standing or failure to be picked up by their preferred bus.

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TABLE 11.6 **BTSR survey: incidence of passenger comments on overcrowding**

<i>Corridor</i>	<i>Citybus route number</i>	<i>% response (if greater than 10%)</i>
Lisburn Road	59	12
Castle Street	15	12
Peter's Hill	39	11
Clifton Street	3	13
	57	10
York Street	10	15
	61	10
	8	11
Queen's Bridge	31	10

Source: BTSR Survey 1985.

11.24. A feature of Citybus buses is the relatively few seats and the correspondingly larger area for standing passengers. The companies told us that the least seating capacity was provided on early Citybus vehicles bought in the mid-1970s, with 33 seats for a total of 79 passengers. This had steadily been raised to 43 (plus 37 standing positions). The company is now to fit existing buses with 43 seats. A fully-seated bus of this size would have 53 seats and 22 standing places.

Punctuality and reliability

11.25. By reliability we mean whether the bus runs at all; and by punctuality, whether it runs to time. Citybus and Ulsterbus have stated that their objective is to run 100 per cent of the timetable, ie to have every bus depart on time and arrive on time, with no cancellations. However, few records are made of the departure and arrival of buses. The surveys of bus users (see Tables 11.1 and 11.2) show that the level of dissatisfaction of Citybus users with punctuality and reliability is greater than that of Ulsterbus users. The UMS survey reports satisfied customers, as well, as shown in Table 11.7.

TABLE 11.7 **Bus users rating punctuality and reliability 'quite good' or 'very good'**
per cent

	<i>Ulsterbus</i>	<i>Citybus</i>
Reliability	82	74
Punctuality	74	67
Time taken on journeys	76	75

Source: Ulsterbus and Citybus; UMS.

This survey reported that 'steady service/consistent' was the thing most liked about Citybus by its users.

11.26. The Wayfarer ticket machines provide operational data which could be used for measuring punctuality (see Chapter 10). The companies told us that they had plans to do this.

11.27. We were told that, effectively, there are no service cancellations other than those caused by serious physical disruption. Replacement buses and drivers are usually available to ensure the continuance of the service. Normal practice is for drivers to ring the local depot for a replacement and if connecting services are affected these may be held for five to ten minutes or alternative transport arranged.

Information and publicity

11.28. We were told that the companies saw the first requirement of marketing to be making sure that all the potential passengers were aware of the service. In the past they have not considered that the normal stage carriage services needed much advertising, although they have used advertising to promote the airport bus and other new or special services. Displays of Citybus route timetables was one of the suggestions made by the Belfast Civic Trust in its evidence to us. However, the companies are now increasing their efforts to publicise the services.

11.29. Seven timetables are produced to cover the companies' services: one for each region, one for Citybus, and one for the express services. These are published on a rolling basis, each one being renewed approximately every six months. Timetables are sold from all the bus stations and from parcel offices and by post. Timetables are not available through many other outlets. Information is provided over the phone. Phone calls are answered while the bus station is manned, for example from 6.00 am to 10.30 pm in Belfast, calls being taken by the inspectors when the offices are closed. There is a central enquiry point in Citybus providing a 24-hour service.

11.30. Around Donegall Square inspectors, who can provide information about Citybus services, are to be found, and there is a ticket kiosk where questions on the service can be answered. We were told that a new kiosk was to be built to replace this one. No information apart from bus service numbers is provided at the Citybus bus stops.

11.31. Information about Ulsterbus services is displayed at bus stations. In country towns and villages Ulsterbus provides information on the service and departure times where possible near the bus stops, for example in shop windows. Information has not in the past been put at bus stops owing to problems with vandalism. An experiment in Northern area involving the erection of some 40 'vandal-proof' timetable holders has proved successful. Only one was vandalised in four or five months, and Ulsterbus plans to erect more throughout the Province.

11.32. Service numbers and destinations are shown on the front of buses. The companies said that there were two reasons for not having side and rear displays: it would be impracticable for the driver to go to the back of the bus to change it manually, and an electronic display would be too expensive; and there were possible safety reasons with people trying to run up and catch a bus when it was about to depart. The companies considered that they were in line with industry standards in this respect. The way of numbering the Citybus buses might be confusing to strangers. The bus on its

inward journey displays the route number of its next outward journey, which may not be the number of the route on which it is travelling inward.

11.33. On the rural services we were told that people identified the bus they required by the destination shown on the bus rather than by the numbers, and would not benefit from rear and side displays. Minibuses display only their destination.

11.34. Information about changes to services is disseminated through various channels, eg free local and on-bus distribution of leaflets, inspectors informing people on the buses about the change, local papers and church services.

Safety

11.35. Table 11.8 is an analysis of claims received per million bus miles for 1986/87 and 1987/88.

TABLE 11.8 **Analysis of claims received**

<i>Period</i>		<i>Number of claims</i>	
		<i>Ulsterbus</i>	<i>Citybus</i>
1986/87	Claims received	634*	329
	Bus miles ('000)	25,460	7,254
	Claims per million bus miles	24.9	45.4
1987/88	Claims received	694*	390
	Bus miles ('000)	26,739	7,498
	Claims per million bus miles	26.0	52.0

Source: MMC analysis of Ulsterbus and Citybus data.

*Including Flexibus.

Table 11.8 shows that the record of Citybus is worse than that of Ulsterbus. The overall claims record for 1987/88 is worse than that for 1986/87.

11.36. Table 11.9 shows the fatal and major accidents recorded by the claims department.

TABLE 11.9 **Fatal and major accidents**

<i>Period</i>	<i>Ulsterbus</i>		<i>Citybus</i>	
	<i>Fatal</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Fatal</i>	<i>Major</i>
1985/86	1	0	2	1
1986/87	3	2	1	0
1987/88	6	3	0	1

Source: Ulsterbus and Citybus.

Although the numbers are small we note the rising sequence of fatal accidents on Ulsterbus; none of these deaths, however, was of a passenger on the bus. The companies pointed out that no inference about culpability could be drawn from the figures.

11.37. In a conclusion to the summary of the companies' annual report to the directors on accident trends (January 1988), attention was drawn to the cost of accidents, and four matters identified for consideration: attracting satisfactory candidates for driver vacancies, adequate and up-to-date training, disciplinary action against drivers who were persistently involved in accidents and attention to bus gearing which might affect braking and jerking.

11.38. The companies told us that it was part of the brief of the recently-appointed driving school manager to institute measures to improve driving standards and the standard of customer care. These would, it was expected, include instituting a programme of in-service driver training and the provision of free tuition and encouragement to drivers to take the advanced driving test. We were

also told that the possibility of stronger disciplinary action against drivers with poor accident records was being considered.

Consumer representation

11.39. The Consumer Council has a statutory duty to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers and special responsibilities regarding passenger transport. Under the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984 the Consumer Council was given the duty to:

... consider and, where it appears to be desirable, make recommendations with respect to any matter affecting road or railway passenger transport services and facilities in Northern Ireland and services and facilities provided for passengers travelling to and from Northern Ireland.

11.40. The Consumer Council has periodically made proposals which it feels would lead to improvements for consumers, eg changes to the Citybus fares structure and ticketing system, alteration to operating boundaries between Citybus and Ulsterbus, introduction of cross-linked services and minibuses operations, better information at bus stops and improvements to bus stations, and greater passenger comfort.

11.41. The Consumer Council, in its evidence to us, argued that Ulsterbus and Citybus enjoyed a monopoly, and that to judge how well it was doing required means of measurement beyond the financial information which was available. It suggested the establishment of consumer performance indicators, effectively monitored. It said that information on performance indicators and standards achieved should be published and not regarded as confidential information for the operators alone; and that publication of such information would make the operators more accountable to the public about the way they discharged their duties. It argued that such measures of performance, and their publication, would benefit the companies as well as the consumer.

Costs of quality of service improvements

11.42. We asked the companies to calculate the costs of action to improve the quality of service in each of the categories identified above. We also asked them to consider whether any of these actions might give rise to additional revenue through increasing the number of people travelling. The companies pointed out that given the short time in which the exercise was carried out the costs calculated were only of use to give a broad measure of the scale of expense and could not be relied on for any precision.

11.43. From the information the companies provided we calculated, for what seemed to us the most practicable of the options in each case, the approximate addition to the fare for an average journey which would be necessary if the whole cost of the improvement was to be recovered in increased fares. Table 11.10 shows this. The companies also estimated the costs of increasing frequency on routes (see Chapter 10).

TABLE 11.10 **Quality of service improvements: estimates of effects on costs of travel**

<i>Improvement</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Average increased cost per journey</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Standing and comfort higher proportion of seats on Citybus	All Citybus buses with 'fully-seated' layout	High	Delays at bus stops caused by reduced circulation in buses. Less room for luggage and push-chairs
	All Citybus buses with 43-seat layout	Low	No problems expected. Now agreed
Comfort toilets	Provide more in own premises and refurbish existing ones (total 40) (Ulsterbus only)	Moderate	Toilets being refurbished where premises being rebuilt
waiting room	Some new provision. Improved standards, heating, upgrade seating etc (total 30) (Ulsterbus only)	Moderate	Improved standards already included in new building projects. Toilets and waiting rooms may have to be closed at times because of vandalism
soft seats (Citybus)	All soft seats (retrospective fitting)	Moderate	
	50% soft seats (retrospective fitting)	Moderate	Already agreed. Some concern about future maintenance costs
reduced vandalism	Extended use of video (both companies)	Low	Already agreed
smoking (both companies)	Advertising campaign. Inspectors enforce ban	Low Nil	Advertising campaign budget approved
Waiting time at bus stops	Reduce waiting time at stops by half, eg from 15 mins to 7½ mins	High (Citybus) Very high (Ulsterbus)	Would increase peak hour requirement for buses and crews
Punctuality and reliability	Bus priority measures, eg bus lanes, priority signalling	Nil	Joint committee of DOE (NI) and Citybus examining options
Cleanliness	Buses swept twice daily (both companies)	Moderate	Substantial improvement already achieved following introduction of Citybus video
Driving standards, courtesy, accident reduction	Driver training (both companies)	Moderate, declining	New Training Manager already appointed
OAP passes	Passes more readily available; OAPs should not have to travel more than ten miles to get pass	Very low	Action taken
Public information bus stop displays	Provide and maintain displays at 4,200 principal bus stops	Moderate	Companies believe some improvement is called for, and that judicious increase in information to potential passengers may result in additional business

<i>Improvement</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Average increased cost per journey</i>	<i>Comment</i>
—route sheets and timetables	Publish route sheets twice a year	Low	
	Free local booklet for each town or large village	Moderate	
	Issue existing full timetables free	Low	
	House-to-house distribution of leaflets in towns and villages	Moderate	

Source: MMC analysis of Ulsterbus and Citybus information.

Ranges:	Very high	= 10p/journey and above
	High	= 1p up to 10p/journey
	Moderate	= 0.1p up to 1p/journey
	Low	= 0.01p up to 0.1p/journey
	Very low	= below 0.01p/journey

All are approximate.

11.44. The companies estimated that, if they adopted the fully-seated (53-seat) layout, they would have to purchase and run ten more buses at peak periods, to counteract the consequent delays caused by slower loading and unloading at stops and the slight reduction in maximum capacity. For this reason they preferred adopting a 43-seat layout, although doubted if retrospective fitting to the oldest buses was justified.

11.45. To reduce vandalism on the buses, the existing video systems were being extended, and some £35,000 was already spent.

11.46. The passes which permit pensioners to take advantage of concessionary fares are issued by the companies, and to get one the pensioner has to present himself or herself, with adequate identification, at a particular place and time, for a photograph to be taken and pass to be issued. Some pensioners have to travel considerable distances for this, and the companies have decided to increase the number of places where passes are issued, so that an applicant has to travel no more than ten miles to get one.

11.47. The companies told us that some increase in the information displayed and available to the public was needed, although to engage in all the improvements shown under 'Public information' in Table 11.10 would be more than was necessary.

11.48. The companies made some estimates of the effects on demand of these improvements, which we discuss in Chapter 10. In the case of driver training they expected a payback in a reduction of the costs of accidents.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Measurement

11.49. Ulsterbus and Citybus rely mainly on direct inspection and supervision to ensure adequate performance in the quality of service. This is an essential feature of any quality control system which is further reinforced in the case of the bus companies by their short lines of command. Our recommendations for change should be seen as suggesting improvements and additions.

11.50. The lack of analysis of direct measurements of quality of service, which could provide comparison with company standards at depot, area, and company level, and trends over time, is a significant weakness in the companies' control systems. We recommend that they should develop such quality performance indicators for all key aspects of quality, set appropriate standards, and ensure that meeting such standards is an important aspect of every manager's objectives.

Market research studies

11.51. We noted that the companies had commissioned a market research survey and were acting on the results. This survey identified the same weaknesses as the Consumer Council's survey, although suggesting that bus users were more satisfied with the service. We concluded that the apparent difference in levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction shown for similar quality factors in these two surveys have to do with differences in sampling methods and wording of questions; and that both surveys are of most use in identifying relative strengths and weaknesses. We recommend that the companies should interpret these and future surveys (commissioned by themselves or others) in this light and should regard such surveys, both local and Province-wide, as normal marketing tools.

Customer complaints

11.52. The companies pride themselves on their diligent individual handling of complaints, and this is to be commended. Our analysis of complaints showed that the matters about which people tend to complain were not the same as those which the surveys showed they were dissatisfied about. In our opinion this does not discredit the results of the surveys, or of the analysis of the complaints. Both are means of tracking company performance and consumer views. We recommend that the companies should analyse complaints on a common basis, at area level, and aggregate this analysis centrally.

Occupancy and standing

11.53. We regard overcrowding (passengers not able to get on a bus because it is full, or being obliged to stand for excessive periods) as an important aspect of quality of service. The information available to us, and to Ulsterbus and Citybus, was insufficient to enable us to be certain if this is a serious problem, although there was some information, from complaints and the Belfast Transportation Strategy Review, to suggest that on some routes it is. We do not necessarily agree that the companies' present standard, that, in the morning peak, no one person should be obliged to stand for more than 15 minutes, is either appropriate or capable of accurate monitoring. We recommend that the companies should establish standards so that service performance can be measured against them. We also recommend that this aspect of quality should be a subject of questions in future surveys.

Punctuality and reliability

11.54. By reliability we mean whether the bus runs at all; and by punctuality, whether it runs to time. Ulsterbus and Citybus run a very reliable service. What evidence we have about punctuality is mixed. We recommend that Ulsterbus and Citybus should establish a system for providing useful measures of punctuality, and develop standards with which measures of punctuality can be compared. For Ulsterbus, we think that the company's proposal to use Wayfarer for this is a good one. In Citybus, at least until new ticketing systems provide an alternative, we recommend sampling on a route-by-route basis as one way of achieving this.

Cleanliness

11.55. The companies told us that the relatively high levels of dissatisfaction about cleanliness of Citybus buses recorded in the surveys reflected past, rather than present, performance in this respect.

We recommend that the companies should satisfy themselves that performance in this respect is adequately monitored and achieves a good standard.

Passenger comfort

11.56. There is considerable evidence that many bus journeys in Northern Ireland are uncomfortable. Many Ulsterbus users find the bus stations and shelters inadequate; many Citybus users find the buses unpleasant (notably because of other passengers' smoking) and uncomfortable and would like better bus shelters.

11.57. The companies have started on a programme of bus station improvements. We were told that in the course of this, toilets and waiting rooms would be brought up to a good standard. In the design of new facilities passenger comfort should have as high a priority as operational and administrative convenience. The companies have been thwarted on past occasions in obtaining suitable sites. We recommend that they should seek the assistance of the DOE (NI) in such matters.

11.58. Bus passengers regard the wait at the stop as an integral part of their bus journey. It is therefore in the bus companies' interest to do what they can to see that satisfactory shelters are provided at principal bus stops, regardless of the ownership of such street furniture. We recommend that the bus companies should draw up a list of sites where shelters are needed, and seek the full co-operation of those primarily responsible (local councils and the DOE (NI)), as well as of specialist firms (see paragraph 11.18), in providing them.

11.59. Citybus decided that it had first to tackle the problem of vandalism before making improvements in bus comfort. Its installation of video cameras has proved a very successful deterrent to vandals and it has recently decided to improve the comfort on its buses.

11.60. Citybus is to replace 50 per cent of the fibreglass seats in its buses with softer seats. We welcome this step.

11.61. Many bus users find their fellow passengers' smoking, in contravention of the regulations, a significant contribution to their discomfort. The companies told us that they planned to have a publicity campaign accompanied by enforcement of the regulations (see paragraph 11.14). We commend this.

11.62. Concern has been expressed about the difficulties which those of impaired mobility experience when using the buses. We welcome the attention being paid to this by the companies.

Safety

11.63. The companies' safety record is satisfactory, but we note that numbers of fatal and major accidents in the two companies taken together have risen in the last three years. We agree with the companies that a programme of in-service driver training, incorporating aspects of 'customer care', should be effective in improving both customer comfort and safety, although we recognise that Ulsterbus drivers in particular are generally regarded as helpful and courteous. We recommend that steps should be taken to implement this programme forthwith.

Information and publicity

11.64. Knowledge about the service is essential to convert a potential to an actual user and timetables should be freely and widely available. We were encouraged to learn of steps the companies were taking to put up vandal-proof displays of timetables at bus shelters, and to be able to provide route timetables on request through desk-top publishing. We recommend that the companies should proceed with this initiative, and that they should survey actual and potential customers in due course to determine how successful their initiatives have been.

Consumer representation

11.65. The Consumer Council, in its evidence to us, recommended the use of performance indicators to monitor quality of service. Our recommendations (paragraph 11.50) are for a corporate analysis of measurements of quality of service, to be compared with corporate standards. The Consumer Council also recommended publication of performance indicators. We agree with this in principle, and recommend that Ulsterbus and Citybus should publish an annual quality of service performance analysis, in which the results are laid out in such a way that members of the public can see how the companies have performed, and can relate this to their circumstances. We recommend that the companies should seek the views of the Consumer Council on the form of this report.

11.66. The aspects of quality of service which we think should be reported on, and our proposals for measures of performance, are at Appendix 11.1.

Monitoring

11.67. The present intention of the companies is to form a small unit under the Inspector General to monitor achievements in all these areas and to compile records and statistics. In the main, these would be based on periodic sampling exercises and surveys. We recommend that the companies should seek the most cost-effective means of measurement compatible with achieving the objectives we have outlined, notably in paragraphs 11.50 and 11.65.

Costs of quality of service improvements

11.68. On the basis of the information the companies gave us, the following have no or negligible costs, or have costs which can be expected to be recovered in savings:

- inspectors enforcing no-smoking ban;
- bus priority measures;
- improved availability of OAP passes; and
- in-service driver training.

The first two need legislative or other support from the authorities. We recommend that the companies should give these priority, and we are pleased that in the course of our inquiry the companies decided to act on some of these.

11.69. The following have costs which are low or moderate but with the prospects of offset in improved revenue:

- 43-seat layouts in all Citybus buses;
- extended use of video cameras to combat vandalism;
- advertising campaign about no-smoking on buses; and
- all proposals for improving public information.

In the course of our inquiry the companies made decisions on some of these. We recommend that they should come to early decisions on the others.

11.70. The following have moderate costs, and some steps are being taken, or are in contemplation, by the companies to effect improvements:

- toilet provision and refurbishment on bus company premises;
- improved standards in some waiting rooms on companies' own premises; and
- 50 per cent soft seats fitted to all Citybus buses.

11.71. Our conclusions and recommendations on the effect of quality of service improvements on demand are in paragraph 10.87.