

**Dial-a-Ride new
vehicle user
feedback**

07251

August 2008



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Research conducted by Synovate

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Bluebird is the latest 'new large vehicle' to be added to the Dial a Ride (DaR) fleet, and has recently come into service. Research was required to gather feedback from passengers and drivers who have used the vehicles, to highlight any potential issues or problems they have experienced. Any necessary improvements could then be incorporated into future batches of the vehicles before they come into service.

The research took the form of mini-depth interviews with passengers and drivers, together with observations of people using the new vehicle.

Key findings

The new Bluebird was well received by all passengers interviewed. Key to this positive response was the feeling of increased space within the cabin. The general appearance of the vehicles was regarded as smart with 'bright', 'nice' and 'cheerful' looking colours on the inside. There was a feeling of space and light in the interior, provided in part by the large windows. This is an improvement on the claustrophobia felt by some users on the older style vehicles. Comparisons were drawn with the livery of the TfL buses and people liked the idea of DaR buses sharing similarities with mainstream buses.

The ramp was regarded as a good addition and more convenient than steps. People liked the ease of access provided by the side entrance, and the space caused by the added width of the bus meant that manoeuvrability was improved for passengers. For the passengers who could not use the side entrance, the rear entrance proved easy to use and offered a better access point for people who were in larger more bulky wheelchairs or had larger walk-on strollers.

Passenger feedback regarding the seats and aisles were also positive with a preference amongst many passengers for single seats over double seats. There was ample legroom and the width of aisles ensured enough space for accessing the seats and storing shopping bags.

Certain areas were mentioned as being in need of improvement by the passengers:

- Lack of armrests on the front two chairs
- Lack of handrails on the front walls
- No designated storage area for shopping

Drivers broadly agreed with all the passenger feedback on it. However, they did have some criticisms, mainly focusing on aspects of the bus that were seen to be uncomfortable for the bus driver or impacted on standards of service.

A quick summary of the main criticisms from the drivers are as follows:

- The lack of air conditioning in many of the cabins
- The width of the bus causes problems when accessing certain roads
- The lack of a side window on the right hand side
- Drivers are dependent on mobile phones for communication with the office
- The new satellite navigation system is not very user-friendly

1. Background

1.1 Introduction to the research

Dial a Ride (DaR) is highly regarded by both passengers and drivers alike. Its fleet of small buses are designed to meet the needs of elderly and disabled people within London who cannot use public transport.. The Bluebird is the latest 'new large vehicle' to be added to the DaR fleet, and has recently come into service. Research was required to get feedback from passengers and drivers who have used the vehicles, to highlight any potential issues or problems they have experienced. Any necessary improvements could then be incorporated into future batches of the vehicles before they come into service.

1.2 Background information regarding the vehicles

The VW Bluebird will operate alongside older vehicles such as the Mercedes Sprinter, and is designed to eventually replace the Sprinter as they come to the end of their service.

Overall size

The Bluebird is designed to offer more width than the Sprinter, creating extra space for passengers inside and allowing increased manoeuvrability for wheelchairs.



Mercedes Sprinter



VW Bluebird

Ramp versus steps

The side entrance of the Bluebird differs from the Sprinter in that it offers an entrance that can be entered via a ramp rather than by steps. This ramp makes it easier for walkers and gives the added option of making the side entrance available for wheelchairs.



Mercedes Sprinter: steps at the side entrance



VW Bluebird: ramps at the side entrance

Rear access

Both buses offer rear access, although the Bluebird has seats that can be turned to face the wall at the back and at the front of the bus, if they are not being used. This can create more space for wheelchairs. Rear access on the Bluebird is again by ramp, compared to the hydraulic lift on the Sprinter.



Rear wheelchair access on the Sprinter

2. Research Overview

2.1 Objectives

The over-arching research objective was to examine whether the Bluebird represents a good addition to the DaR fleet, and whether it represents an improvement to the existing vehicles..

Specific objectives were as follows:

- To explore responses to the new DaR large vehicles
- To identify any problems or issues that are being encountered and explore suggestions as to how they could be overcome
- To assess levels of satisfaction with the new vehicles

2.2 Methodology

Face to face depth interviews were conducted with passengers and drivers, with each lasting up to 15 minutes. Fieldwork was conducted at two depots:

- Southall on 6th August 2008
- Woodford Green on 7th August 2008

At both the Southall Depot and the Woodford Depot, interviews were conducted on the new Bluebird buses with passengers whilst they were in transit, during a standard eight hour shift. This method enabled an accurate observation and research into how the buses worked on a day to day basis.

Interviews were conducted with a range of passengers, with varying levels of mobility (including two wheelchair users) and a number of drivers, all of whom had recent experience of driving a Bluebird bus. The discussion guide used within the interviews can be found in the appendix.

In total, 18 passengers and 4 drivers were interviewed and their feedback provides the basis for this report. It is important to remember that this is a qualitative study, with a relatively small sample size, and thus the normal common-sense cautions and limits of qualitative research apply to these findings.

Quotations from feedback given by drivers are provided in the report, in order to give examples of what drivers told us. These are in quotation marks and in italics font.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Overview

There was positive feedback from all passengers interviewed. The Bluebird was thought to offer a good service and was considered to be superior to the Sprinter.

Key areas:

- Appearance: people liked the livery and interior colour scheme and design
- Better access to the vehicle via a ramp rather than steps
- Improved manoeuvrability in the aisles and entrance areas
- More leg room and seating space
- Added space for wheelchairs and shopping bag storage

This report will concentrate on these key areas while also looking at the views of the drivers.. Observations that were made during the time spent on board the bus are also included within the report.

3.2 Appearance

All passengers believed that the overall appearance of the vehicle was good. People were most likely to mention the brightness of the interior as well as the added perception of space created by the larger windows and interior layout. A few passengers added that they did not have the feelings of claustrophobia that they sometimes felt when they were on the Sprinter bus. These were not an issue because of the larger spaces between the individual seats, the absence of bench seats, wider aisles and increased light from the large windows.

The colour and design were believed to mirror that of the London TfL buses in operation, and this was thought of positively by the passengers. The lighter shade of

red, 'smart and bright' interior design and wider 'more bulky shape' were the things most noticed by passengers. Drivers, on the other hand, likened the Bluebird to that of a 'hoppla' bus as well as the more standard 'red London buses'.

'...One of the passengers was a bit surprised when I got out of the bus the other day, she thought it was a normal bus that had taken a wrong turning down her cul de sac...'

Drivers agreed with the passengers, believing that the new vehicles looked 'smart' and 'nice'.

3.3 Ease of access

Access to the bus was considered to be easy for all types of passengers. People responded well to the introduction of ramps, which they considered to be a improvement over steps. This improvement was further enhanced by the operation of the 'kneel function' which hydraulically lowers the bus, so that the entrance is at kerb height. Due to this, the full extended ramp was either flat or at a very low gradient, so that the side door could be used by a larger number of passengers. It also provided enhanced side access to those with more serious mobility problems, for example, those who were dependent on walking frames, or some wheelchair users. This created a more efficient service overall for drivers and passengers alike, with more comfort and independence provided for the passengers and less time and effort required for the drivers.

'...the ramp compared to the steps works well; when you're old you can't bend your legs as well...'

Rear access was used twice during the fieldwork: once for a large electronic wheelchair, and once for a woman with a large walking frame. The ramp proved to be

perfectly adequate for both occasions, while the ability for the chairs to be folded and turned into the wall at the back of the bus created extra space and manoeuvrability for the wheelchair. Both passengers were perfectly happy with the access and the increased manoeuvrability gave them more independence in reaching their desired space / seat.

'...Im always worried I wont get in (a DaR bus) with the size of my wheelchair, but the added width of the Bluebird means I can access the bus ok, and it still feels spacious when im finally settled in it...'

3.4 Aisles and seating

As mentioned above, the manoeuvrability into and around the bus has been aided by the increased size of the aisles. They give the passengers added comfort when getting to the seats and combined with the handle bars positioned on the top of the seats, give a greater degree of independence to the passengers as they board the bus and find their seats.

'...The process of getting to the seat from the entrance was pretty good...'

Seating on the Bluebird was considered to be comfortable and well laid out. It was understood by most of the passengers that the Bluebird couldn't carry as many passengers as the Sprinter due to a reduced number of seats, but this created more space for users. The seats did differ throughout the bus with the front two nearest the drivers cabin being the narrowest and lacking armrests, and those towards the middle and back being wider and having armrests.

'...seats on the Sprinter were a bit hard. These are more comfortable and better laid out...I like the fact there aren't any double seats and all seats are single...'

However, the seat belt was not regarded as being particularly comfortable and had a tendency to cut into people's chests, although it was noted that it had more 'give' than the seat belts on the Sprinter. Also, for the short distances the DaR buses were generally used, passengers were happy to hold the seat belts slightly away from their chests, and it had little effect on their overall comfort.

The new seat layout gives passengers plenty of legroom. This made them more comfortable and gave them areas to place their shopping bags, walking frames, and other personal items so that they were near to them. The larger aisle space on the Bluebird also gives passengers increased storage space.

It was observed on the first day out, that the Bluebird easily accommodated three walk-on passengers with shopping bags, a shopping trolley and a walking frame, as well as an electronic wheelchair user with shopping bags. The aisles were used as storage for the shopping bags, while the back two chairs were turned round and faced towards the wall to create extra space for the electronic wheelchair user and her shopping.

3.5 Improvements called for by passengers

Passengers suggested several areas where improvements could be made to the Bluebird.

The main areas of improvement was with regard to the two front seats. These are important, as they tend to be most used by be the least mobile passengers, as they are closest to the side entrance and offer less distance for them travel. This magnifies the problem, as these passengers are the people in most in need of support.

Feedback and observations highlighted that the lack of arm chairs and narrowness of the front two seats impacted badly on some of the passengers. One passenger

complained that she was unable to fit on the seat completely which caused a degree of discomfort. Anecdotal evidence from the driver also highlighted how one passenger complained that she felt like she was falling due to the lack of arm rests, and he had to stop the bus and move her to back to some other seats.

One of the seats at the front is also designed so it faces backwards. Many passengers did not like sensation of facing the 'wrong way', but unfortunately, due to the necessity of finding the closest chair for those who are not very mobile, the choice for these particular passengers is limited.

Another problem encountered was with the lack of handrails at the front wall section of the bus near to these front seats. There are wall handles around the doors and on the top of the chairs; however, there is no support along the walls on the way to the middle and back of the bus. Nearly half of all passengers spontaneously mentioned this as a potential problem.

'...there could be a little handrail on the wall near the front two seats to help you get on and another one behind the drivers cabin to help you get to those front seats...'

A minor area of improvement mentioned would be the addition of a designated storage area for shopping bags. It was acknowledged that it would be hard to create enough storage space for all the shopping bags, but it was observed on one occasion that shopping bags were mixed up and the passenger was left with the wrong shopping due to the close proximity of the bags to each other. Therefore it is assumed that storage for at least some of the shopping would make this less likely to happen.

3.6 Driver concerns

Drivers were in universal agreement that passengers were pleased with the Bluebird and that they (passengers) saw it is an improvement on the Sprinter. In addition, all drivers interviewed gave positive feedback for the access and facilities of the bus. They believed it was spacious and had nice colours, and thought that the ramp was an improvement on the steps. The lack of tail lift could potentially mean more physical work for them, yet many used the side door quite comfortably, and the gradient, strength and position of the ramp were such, that if the rear access was used it was of no additional physical strain to the driver.

However, drivers did have some concerns that were directly linked to their comfort and potential hindrance to the service overall. These are divided into two categories, one being superficial 'teething problems', and the other being more important 'structural problems' that could have a knock-on effect on service overall.

Teething problems

Firstly, from driver feedback collected, there was an inconsistency in the cabins with the air conditioning function. At the Southall depot, the majority of buses did not have any air conditioning, while the opposite was true at the Woodford depot.

'...there is so much glass up there and it gets very warm up the front without any air conditioning...'

The side window on the right hand side was also considered to be problematic for two reasons: it was only a small slide open window with very little possibility for letting air in, and the size made it hard for them to get their arm out of the window to adjust the mirror or collect tickets etc.

Communication with the main office for information (booking enquiries mainly) was impaired by the fact that drivers had to use their mobile phones to do this. Other DaR buses had access by hands free radio, and the drivers were not pleased with the logistics of having to stop every time they had to communicate with the office. According to driver feedback, 'Bluetooth' technology was expected to be added in the future, but this was not considered to be as good as the previous technology in use in the Sprinter vans.

In addition, problems with the new satellite navigation were experienced by the drivers. Principally, the new equipment was not as easy as the previous ones to operate, with drivers having to type in post codes which took longer and was less 'user friendly'.

Structural problems

The main concern of the drivers was that the overall width and length of the bus made negotiating narrow roads and cul de sacs a problem. The landscape for both depots covers varied types of geography and 3 out of the 4 drivers believed that the Bluebird was not right for a lot of routine journeys.

'...with narrow roads it just doesn't do the job especially in a inner city environment, the width means you just cant get through width restrictions...'

Added width problems are caused by the fact that the bus needs to be a certain distance away from the kerb to ensure that the doors can open and that the ramp can be extended fully. Buses were observed taking up a lot of the road and obstructing traffic from both sides. There was also driver feedback highlighting that there had been damage to a number of the doors because the buses had been too close to the kerb when the doors had opened / closed.

There was a belief that the sheer size was going to impact on the drivers' ability to operate a door to door service.

'...I think this will have a knock on effect on the passengers and they will have to start going to the end of the road to get collected rather than wait at their front door...'

A less serious concern, but one that compounds the problem of the overall size of the bus, is that the Bluebird does not have a lock on the steering wheel that gives it as much turning power as the Sprinter; this creates added difficulty when buses are accessing housing estates and smaller residential streets.

4. Conclusions

Passenger feedback was very positive for the Bluebird bus by all passengers interviewed. Appearance was rated highly, and many people believed that the exterior and interior colour scheme was bright and cheerful, and that the atmosphere inside the bus was comfortable and spacious.

None of the passengers interviewed had experienced any problems with accessing the bus. The ramps offered an efficient and comfortable method for people to get on and off, while the extra interior space gave them increased manoeuvrability at the entrance and getting to their seats. The seats and aisles were considered to be comfortable and spacious and there was adequate room for the storage of shopping bags.

Driver's feedback and observations underlined the views of the passengers. The ramps were considered an improvement to the steps and the increased access of the side entrance aided overall service efficiency. Rear access was also found to work well for wheelchairs and walk on passengers as well, with the internal space maximised by the 'fold and turn chairs'.

The combination of the seat layout, handle bars, added space and side entrance gave the passengers more independence when mounting and dismounting the bus and the single seats were considered more comfortable and spacious than those on the Sprinter.

However, drivers listed concerns with the environmental condition of the cabins, windows and communication tools. Another concern was that the overall size of the bus might have a negative impact on their ability to service certain passengers who live in locations that are harder to access.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on passenger feedback and observations, arising from any problems they may have had with using the Bluebird:

- Increase the width of the front two seats
- Provide armrests on the front two seats
- Install handrails along the front section of the wall next to the side entrance
- Provide handrails along the section of the wall behind the driver's cabin
- Provide storage areas

The following recommendations are based on feedback from the drivers and relate to things they considered would be easy to implement:

- Install air conditioning in all driver cabins
- Upgrade the communication tools: radios and satellite navigation systems

In addition to this, the overall size of the vehicle caused some concern with the drivers, and careful assessment should be made to ensure that the service is not impaired.

Appendix

Discussion guide

TfL JN.07251 / Synovate JN. 081551

DaR passenger feedback of New Large Vehicle

Introduction (1 min)

Interviewer introduction

Synovate introduction

Purpose of the research – on behalf of TfL/ Dial a Ride

For interviewer...

- *To explore anecdotal feedback from passengers about the new DaR large vehicles.*
- *To identify any problems or issues that are being encountered and explore suggestions as to how they could be overcome.*
- *Assess levels of satisfaction with the new vehicles.*

Duration: approx. 20 mins

Confidentiality / no sales

- Explain that we work under the MRS Code of Conduct which ensures that everything they say remains confidential and that we are not trying to sell them anything. If they wish us to give any named feedback to TfL/ DaR we can do this on their behalf, but only if they specifically request that they want this to be done.

Permission to audio record

Respondent Introduction & Background (1 min, 2 mins total)

Ask for...

- First name
- Some basic background info about them (where they are from etc)
- How often they use DaR
- What they generally use DaR for

ASK ALL: Appearance of vehicle (1 mins, 3 mins)

Can you tell me what you think of the appearance of the vehicle?

- How do you think the bus looks?
- What are your first impressions?
- Why do you think this?
- What do you most like about the appearance of the bus?
- What do you least like about the appearance of the bus?

(For walk-on users) Entrance to the bus (5 mins, 8 mins)

Getting on observe people getting onto the vehicle

Interviewer will be sat in the front passenger seat, but will be able to move around the bus and be seated next to passengers as is convenient and practical, bearing in mind presence of carers / relatives.

AS BOTH WALKERS AND WHEELCHAIR USERS CAN ACCESS VIA SIDE OR REAR RAMP, CAPTURE FOR BOTH ENTRANCES:

- What do you think of walkers and wheelchair users being able to access both at the side and rear entrance? Which entrances have you used? Which do you prefer? Why?
- Which entrance do walkers tend to use and which entrance do wheelchair users tend to use?
- Do you have any physical difficulties getting up the ramp?
- How does the ramp compare to steps on other Dial a Ride buses?
- Is there anything that could be improved?
- Do you think it is steep / flimsy?

WITHOUT PROMPTING, INTERVIEWER TO CAPTURE IF ANY MENTIONS OF:

- raised hinge in the middle
- anti slip surface

Handrails

- Are the handrails where you expect / need them to be?
- Are there enough?
- Is there anything that could be improved?
- Are you able to board as independently as you would like?

Size/width of door for access

- Is there enough room to get on board?

- Is there anything that could be improved?

Space/getting to your seat

- How easy is it to get to your seat?
- Where do wheelchair users tend to sit and where do walkers tend to sit?
- Is there enough room in the aisles?
- Are there enough handrails / adequately spaced?
- Is there anything that could be improved?

The seat itself (3 mins, 11 mins)

Legroom

- How do you feel about the seat layout. *Probe:* are there any feelings of claustrophobia?
- Is there enough legroom?
- How easy was it to get into the seat?
- Are you able to sit in your preferred space?
- Would you be able to sit anywhere if the bus was full – why is that?
- Is there anything that could be improved?

Seat comfort

- How comfortable are the seats?
- Do you feel they are wide enough?
- Do the headrests make your head feel comfortable? – Why is that? Is there anything to be improved?
- Are they the right style – are they flat enough or too flat?
- Are they suitably comfortable for you to be able to travel? Why is that?
- Is there anything that could be improved?

(For wheelchair users):

Entrance to bus (3 mins, 6 mins)

AS BOTH WALKERS AND WHEELCHAIR USERS CAN ACCESS VIA SIDE OR REAR RAMP, CAPTURE FOR BOTH ENTRANCES:

- What do you think of walkers and wheelchair users being able to access both at the side and rear entrance? Which entrances have you used? Which do you prefer? Why?
- Which entrance do walkers tend to use and which entrance do wheelchair users tend to use?
- How do you find the position of the door at the rear? / side?
- Is this something that you like?

- What do you think about the ramp?
- Do you think it is steep / flimsy?
- Is there a handrail to hold onto?
- How do you feel it compares to a tail lift?
- Why is that?
- Is access straightforward / easy?
- How do you feel when you are accessing the bus via the ramp?
- Are there any improvements you would make?

WITHOUT PROMPTING, INTERVIEWER TO CAPTURE IF ANY MENTIONS OF:

- raised hinge in the middle
- anti slip surface

Once on the bus (4 mins, 10 mins)

Space/getting to your seat

- How easy is it to manoeuvre once in the bus?
- Where do wheelchair users tend to sit and where do walkers tend to sit?
- Is there enough room in the aisles?
- Are there any problems if there is another wheelchair /walk-on user already there?
- Is there adequate storage space?
- Is there anything that could be improved?

Wheelchair positions (1 mins, 11 mins)

- How do you feel about the position of the wheelchair?
- Do you think the fold and tip chairs help for space / manoeuvrability?
- Do you have a choice in facing backwards / forwards?
- Do you feel secure in your position?
- Is there anything that could be improved?

ASK ALL: Seatbelts (2 mins, 13 mins)

- How easy is it to put the seat belts on?
- Do you need the driver's assistance to do this?
- Do they retract easily?
- Is there anything that could be improved?

Storage / capacity / aesthetics and interior (4 mins, 18 mins)

- Are your bags adequately stored?
- Is everything stored away effectively?

General aesthetics and environment

- How do you feel about the way the vehicle looks inside?
- Do you like the design / colour scheme?
- How do you feel about the environmental factors? – Temperature issues, cleanliness, air conditioning, windows

(Walk-on Passengers only) - Getting off (1 mins, 19 mins)

- How easy was it for you to get off the bus using the ramp?
- Handrails – where expected, need them to be, are there enough?
- Is there room for you to exit?
- Is there anything that could be improved?

(Wheelchair users only) – Getting off (1 mins, 19 mins)

- How is it getting off the bus using the ramp?
- Is there anything that could be improved?
- How do you **feel** when you are exiting the bus via the ramp?

Ask all: Vehicle summary (1 mins, 20 mins)

- Overall what features do you like best about the bus?
- Any suggestions for improvements?

Driver interviews

These drivers will be interviewed at the most convenient time for them, may be at the beginning of the shift or at the end or whilst they are in transit. The discussion will aim to cover the same areas as with the passengers.

Introduction (2 mins, 2 mins)

Ask for...

- First name
- Some basic background info about them (where they are from etc)
- What depots they use
- How often they use the Bluebird

Exterior appearance (2 mins, 4 mins)

Can you tell me what you think of the appearance of the vehicle?

- How do you think the buses look?
- What are your first impressions?
- Why do you think this?
- What do you most like about the appearance of the buses?
- What do you least like about the appearance of the buses?

Getting on the bus (3 mins, 7mins)

AS BOTH WALKERS AND WHEELCHAIR USERS CAN ACCESS VIA SIDE OR REAR RAMP, CAPTURE FOR BOTH ENTRANCES:

- What do you think of walkers and wheelchair users being able to access both at the side and rear entrance?
- Amount and location of handrails?
- Are users able to board as independently as they would like?
- Size / width of door access
- Space for manoeuvrability
- What do you think about the ramp? Is it easy to put in place?
- How do you feel the ramp compares to a tail lift?
- Is it easy to lift out?
- Are the pulls designed in such a way that means they are not going to get full of dirt ?
- Is there anything you would improve?

INTERVIEWER TO CAPTURE IF ANY MENTIONS OF:

- raised hinge in the middle
- anti slip surface

Getting to the seat (2 mins, 9 mins)

- How easy is it to the seats?
- Is there enough room in the aisles?
- Where do wheelchair users tend to sit and where do walkers tend to sit?
- Are there enough handrails / adequately spaced?
- Is it ok for wheelchair users – degree of manoeuvrability.
- How did you find the floor? Was it flat enough?
- Is there anything that could be improved?

Seating (3 mins, 12 mins)

- Feedback on seats – comfort, are they wide enough, headrests –
- Are they the right style – are they flat enough or too flat?
- Are they suitably comfortable - is there anything that could be improved?
- How do you feel about the position of the wheelchair?
- Do you think the fold and tip chairs help for space / manoeuvrability?
- Is there a choice in facing backwards / forwards?

Seatbelts (2 mins, 13 mins)

- How easy is it to put the seat belts on?
- Do they need the driver's assistance to do this?
- Does it cut into their neck?
- Are they too tight / not enough resistance?
- Do they retract easily, are they difficult to reach?
- Is there anything that could be improved?

Storage / capacity / aesthetics and interior (4 mins, 17 mins)

- Are the shopping bags adequately stored?
- Is there sufficient storage space provided?
- Do things move around in transit?

Capacity

- This bus can seat X passengers?
- How do you feel about that? Is it too many or too few?

- Is there anything you specifically like or dislike?

General aesthetics and environment

- How do you feel about the way the vehicle looks inside?
- Do you like the design / colour scheme?
- How do you feel about the environmental factors? – Temperature issues, cleanliness, air conditioning, windows.

Getting off (2 mins, 19 mins)

- Height of steps – how is the height down to the kerb?
- Handrails – where expected, need them to be, are there enough?
- Is there room for you to exit?
- Is there anything that could be improved?
- How is it getting off the bus using the ramp?
- Are there any exit difficulties?
- How does it compare to a tail lift exit?
- Is there anything that could be improved?
- How do you feel when you are exiting the bus via the ramp?

Ask all: Vehicle summary (1 mins, 20 mins)

- Overall how do you feel about this bus, why is that, is there anything else?