

Task 2: Focus group with bus drivers and interviews with managers and other stakeholders

Bus Drivers

As noted above, it was possible to hold only one focus group with bus drivers. Therefore, it should be borne in mind that the opinions discussed relate to just five participating drivers, a small proportion (8.6%) of the 58 individuals on the rota line for the number 6 route. The participants were generally experienced drivers; one had been driving for 14 years, another for 19 years, and another for 22 years, all with the same company. The focus group took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and indeed one of the lockdown periods. The participants noted that the pandemic was making their job easier due to there being less traffic on the roads and fewer passengers around. In addition, certain changes to the roads including a greater number of bus lanes were making their job simpler and they were unsure about what the situation would be once the lockdown was over.

When asked about their prior knowledge regarding the OSMDLS, the participating drivers claimed that they had simply been told by their employer that the lights are experimental and being tried out on one route, much the same as they had been told by the researcher. **As noted above in the Method section (2.2.1.1), some information had been provided by the bus company, of which the participating drivers may not have taken advantage.** The drivers called them side lights, and some had only recently become aware of their official name. One driver said “... *they’re some kind of new lights gives it more visibility when we are driving in the dark*”. Another driver said “... *I’ve always seen them as just an extra set of running lights for night-time or night drivers ... I mean they are good in the sense that they make your bus more prominent ... to passengers and when you’re coming up to bus stops and things like that.*”

There was confusion over the two different operating states of the lights – participants knew that at times the lights were flashing and at other times were static but had not been informed about the two different stages of the research. Neither had they independently noticed that there had been differing stages of lights as part of the research. However, the drivers noted finding the lights useful: “*I was speaking to night drivers and they find it very useful. And we find it actually very useful as well. Because when we first start in the morning ... they are on*”. There was general agreement with this statement.

There was broad acceptance of the OSMDLS amongst the participating drivers with some very positive comments. The participants saw the potential benefit of the lights in the early morning for mandatory bus checks and walkaround as an extra bonus, and not necessarily a key reason for having the lights. The lights were also easy to assimilate, with one driver commenting “*I think having used them now for a couple of months it’s a case of it’s accepted that they’re there ... and it’s part and parcel of your bus.*” None of the drivers had any incidents or near misses when they had the lights operational on the bus and none of the drivers had experienced passengers asking them about the lights. As a result, any comments made by drivers about passengers’ opinions must be considered to be an assumption rather than being based on evidence.

The participants discussed various advantages of the lights; they suggested that the system made driving the bus easier: “*It makes life easier definitely, it makes life easy.*” All of the participants agreed with this sentiment. They also expressed the opinion that the lights would be especially useful for Central London routes where there is a large number of passengers and pedestrians. Indeed, the participating drivers noted that once the traffic returns to usual levels (after the pandemic and lockdowns) they thought “... *they’re going to be very good because when ... going down very very busy routes ... the more visible you can make yourself then the better.*”