

# Passenger advisory boards – concepts and experiences in Germany and Austria

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## 1 Introduction

Public transport is an important part on everyday life especially in cities. Bus and rail services are important instruments to achieve transport, environmental and social policy objectives. Due to the dominance of monopolies, long-term planning and political influences, suitable measures are necessary to guarantee a user-friendly service.

User advisory boards (Fahrgastbeiräte) are an instrument frequently used to consult with passengers on service-related matters. These are institutions with an *advisory role*, which consist wholly or mainly of *public transport users* and/or *members of organisations* which represent user interests.<sup>1</sup> They are set up on a *long-term basis* or permanently to discuss and express the *users' views on public transport*, both current matters and future plans. In contrast to the activities of “user associations” or “civic action committees” who have no guarantee of being listened to, user advisory boards have some formal “*foundation*” due to their link to an operator or transport authority.

The first user advisory board was set up in Cologne by the local operator KVB in 1989 (Bröer 1994). Today, about 100 boards exist in the German-speaking countries.<sup>2</sup> However, their detailed set-up varies considerably, both in terms of their formal and organisational framework (e.g. institutional affiliation, statutes) and their realm and approach.

Therefore we undertook a survey of user advisory boards as part of the “Busrep” project. This paper presents first results of our study.

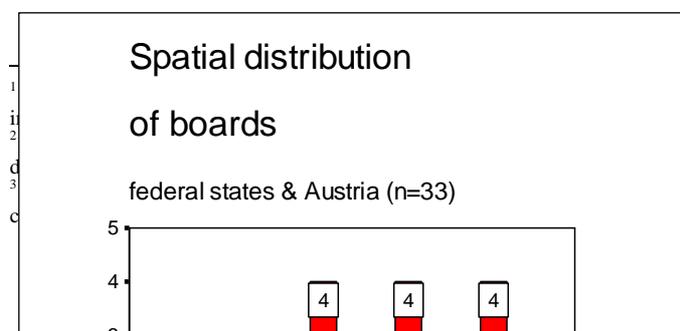
## 2 Parameters of the study

A written survey was conducted using the boards' contact addresses as identified by internet and telephone enquiries. Hence both board members (usually their chairmen or speakers) and contact persons in the operators' administration were contacted.<sup>3</sup>

The questionnaire consisted of eight thematic sections: Questions on the history of the board, the organisation of its activities and the members' selection procedure should give an overview of the institutional background. The tasks and activities, the structure of meetings, external relations and experiences made aimed to establish the effects of the board's work and allow conclusions for the future.

In addition, interviews with some board members, moderators and other people with relevant experiences were conducted. Some conclusions are described in section 4.

In total, 98 organisations were contacted of which 37 (ca. 40%) responded. The regional structure of the responding boards is shown in figure 1.



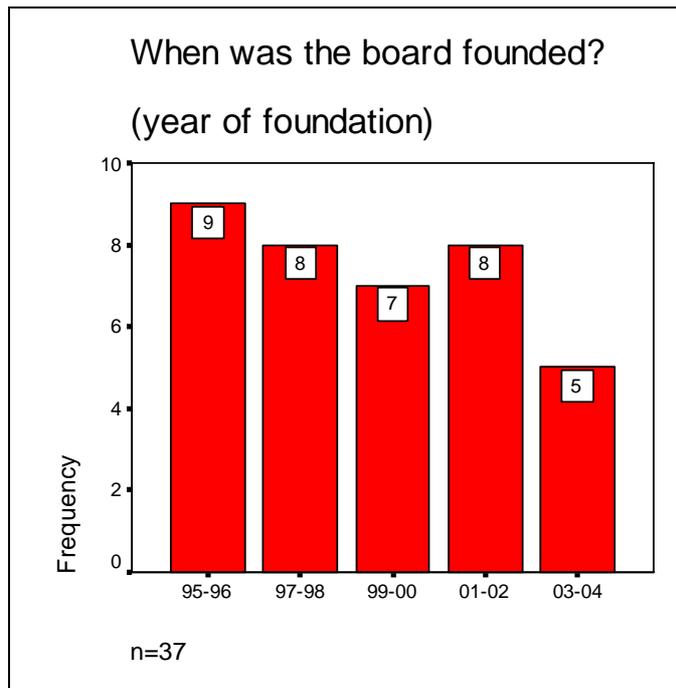
at“, but these are also used for other forms of user advisory board“ as the most common expression. identified in Switzerland. The precise number of boards is definition occasionally use the same term as well. orities or other organisations to which the user advisory board

**Fig. 1: Regional distribution of user advisory boards**

### 3 Passenger advisory boards in Germany and Austria

#### 3.1 Initiation and constituting factors

The responding boards' foundation dates were distributed evenly over the last ten years. The first user advisory board, founded 1989 in Cologne, appears to have remained a "lonely pioneer" for some time. Less new ones seem to have been founded in 2003-4. This can be due to a saturation effect, but also a result of less publicity work of new organisations which makes them more difficult to track down.



**Fig. 2: Foundation year of the boards**

On average, 109 applications were received, ranging from 10 to 600 per case.<sup>4</sup> Compared to an earlier survey of user advisory boards conducted 1997 by the association VCD (Meyer-Liesenfeld 1997)<sup>5</sup> shows great similarities with a slightly lower range: Between 40 and 500 applications were recorded in this earlier study.

In the VCD study, applications were usually received following articles in regional newspapers and public calls for submissions by the operator. Our survey shows a wider range of communicative means. Newspaper articles still dominate, but in addition we find public displays (15 cases), flyers (14), the internet (13), the operators newsletters and advertisements (6 each).

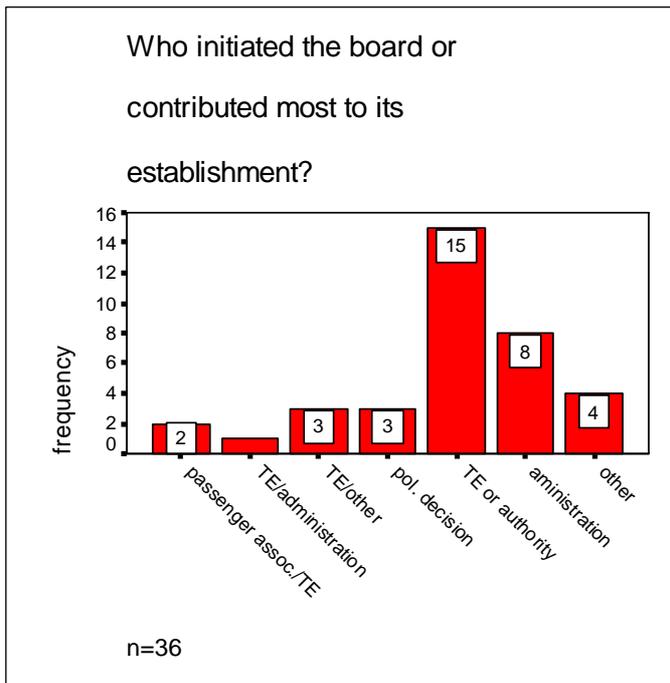
Nine boards reported a dominance of certain groups among the applications received. Men were over-represented in 6 cases, a pattern also found in the VCD study with a below-average interest among women in 30 to 50% of the cases. Other “strong” groups are people in working age (3), senior citizens (4) and the age group between 30 and 50 (4). In total 17 boards did not report any pattern of disproportionate interest. Despite of these differences, 89% of the respondents (31 cases) stated that the board’s final composition was as planned.

Most boards have between 20 and 30 members, but the average of 17 indicates that smaller ones are at least as common.

In 41% of the cases the establishment of the board was initiated by the transport operator itself, followed by the public administration with 22%. The other cases are due to mixed activities, political initiatives or activities from the users’ side (fig. 3).

<sup>4</sup> Several thousand applications were reported for the nationwide „Kundenbeirat“ of Deutsche Bahn, but this board was not included in our study.

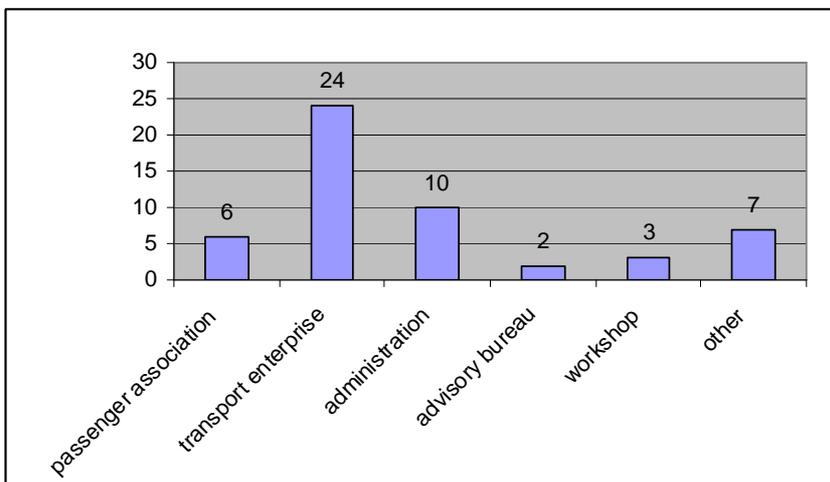
<sup>5</sup> Also referred to as “VCD survey“ in this paper.



**Fig. 3: Institutions behind the board's foundation**

### 3.2 Concepts and Structures

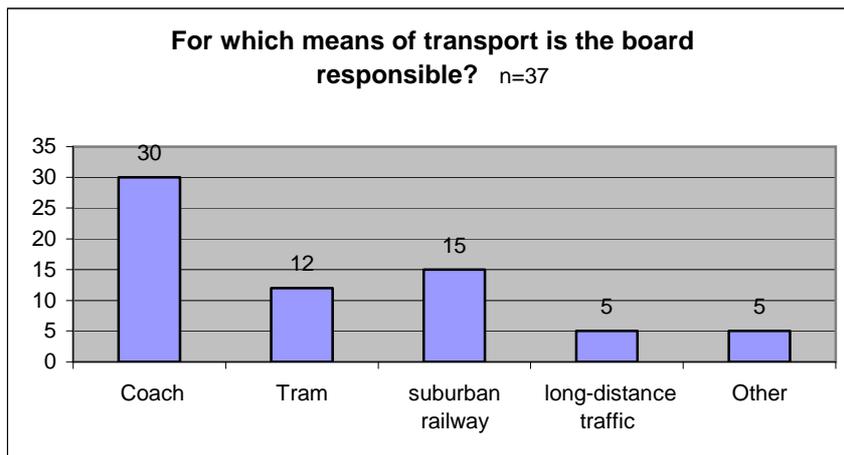
Based on this observation, it is not surprising that the board's concept was also most often (24 cases) developed by the operator. Other influences were made by local authorities, passenger associations and other user advisory boards.



**Fig. 4: Development of the board's concept**

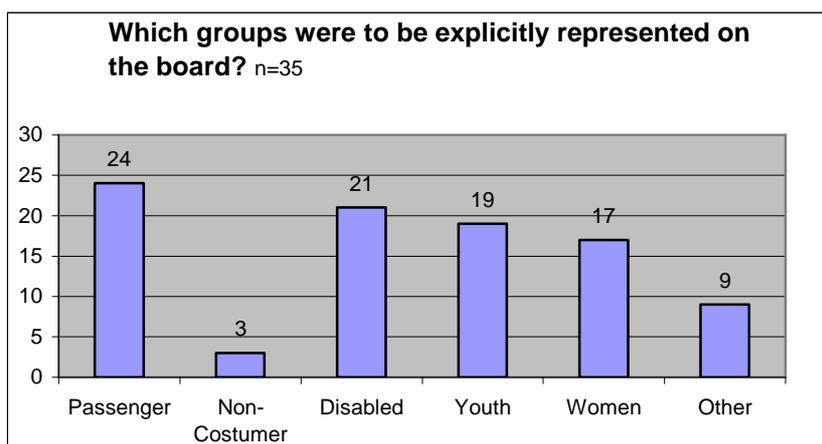
Passenger advisory boards are mainly set up on provincial level (35%) or for the operator's catchment area (27%). 16% are set up for one city only. Transport authority districts and German regions (Länder) account for 8% each.

This distribution is reflected in the boards' responsibility for the different modes: 81% deal with bus services which typically dominates on the urban and provincial level. About half as frequent are urban and suburban railway services (41%) which are found in cities and agglomerations. Only 14% were set up to (also) deal with long-distance traffic, corresponding to those cases where user advisory boards were set up for a region (Land). In many cases, however, the boards are dealing with more than one mode.



**Fig. 5: Modes covered by the user advisory boards**

A balanced representation of different socio-demographic groups on the board is essential to achieve a good overview of the users' views. Actual public transport use is most often quoted as a necessary criterion. Other groups named are people with disabilities and younger people. However, due to the structure of applications received, some groups may in the end be over- or under-represented on the board (see above).



**Fig. 6: Criteria for the selection of board members**

A key decision to be made here is between so-called “lay user boards” and “expert” or “associations’ boards”. Our survey included only eleven user advisory boards where no members had affiliations to transport-related pressure groups. This is much lower than in the VCD survey eight years ago where four out of eleven groups (36%) were classified as “lay user boards”. However, we cannot decide at this stage whether the associations’ members were selected for the board because or despite of this fact. Both appears possible (cf. section 4).

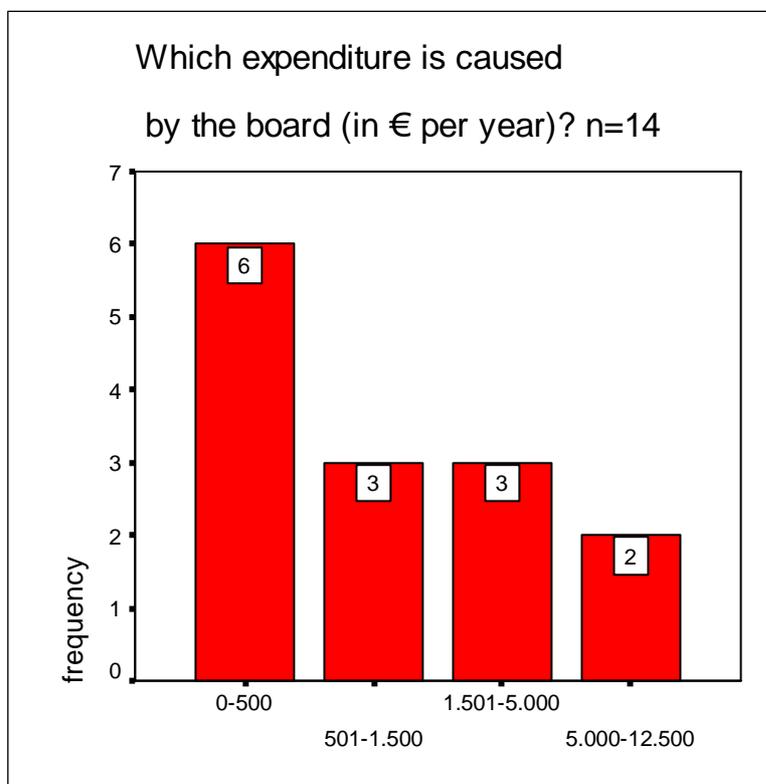
The two studies differ also regarding the existence of a fixed statute for the board. In the VCD survey, only one case had no such formal base whereas we now found a nearly balanced distribution between groups with and without (18 vs. 17 cases). This may indicate a trend towards more open, non-institutionalised forms of communication, perhaps related to the greater openness for representatives of associations (see above) and publicity (see below). However, this aspects still requires closer analysis.

Mixed results were also found in our study for the standards of communication with the operator. 15 boards had an agreed time-limit for the operator to respond to the board’s questions and comments while 20 had none. This limit is 50 days on average, and the

operators usually manage to respond in time. It is also linked to the average number of board meetings (4 per year). The VCD survey reported a slightly higher number of five meetings per year.

A user advisory board incurs costs which were considered negligible in the 1997 study. These costs are typically met from the operator's public relations budget. This judgement is also reflected in our findings, although not too many participants responded to this question. 43% quote costs of less than 500 € per year (fig. 7). An expenditure of more than 5000 € was given only twice. These differences can perhaps be explained by the fact that both operators and board members have responded to our questionnaire. They may in some cases have allocated the working time spent by their staff as participants of the board meetings to the costs of the board. This aspect requires further analysis.

The time required for preparation of the meetings, paperwork and correspondence is on average given as 66 hrs per year. This reflects the greater workload of a board chairperson, ordinary members are likely to have more limited commitments.

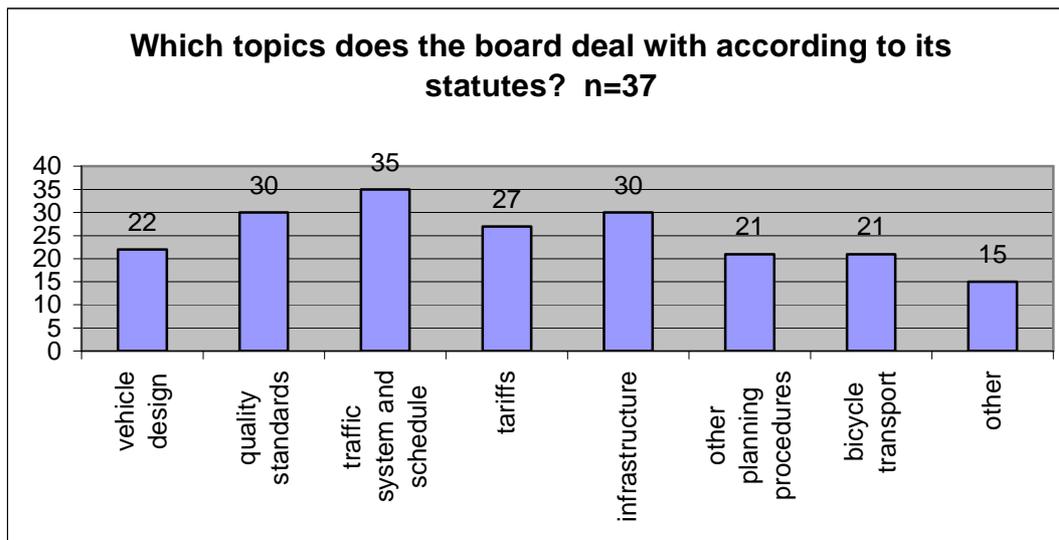


**Fig. 7: Annual expenditure per board**

### 3.3 Activities and external relations of the board

A wide range of activities follows from the general role of a user advisory board (cf. section 1). The meetings are dominated by discussions on network and timetable development which is on the agenda of 95% of the respondents. Infrastructure (stations), quality standards and fares are named by three quarters. Vehicle design, carriage of bicycles and other types of building work are named by half of the boards. Similarly, the VCD study lists timetable, fares, information, service (quality standards) as the main subjects. Infrastructure design was not explicitly mentioned.

It is interesting to relate the themes discussed to the areas where the boards have been more or less successful (see section 3.4).



**Fig. 8: Topics according to board's statutes**

Another important aspect is the position given to “individual complaints” on the boards agenda. This refers to cases of service malfunction or other individual problems experienced either by the board members themselves or reported to them. The VCD study found that roughly half of the meeting time is used to raise and discuss such experiences. Our study confirms that these continue to be important in the boards' work. 32 respondents deal with such issues, only five exclude them completely. However, 20 have no dedicated procedure or a fixed position on the agenda while nine do so.

We asked for the importance of such “individual problems” with an open question. It was often given as “great” or equal to all other issues. Percentages given were at least 40%, eight boards rated them as “average”, only five as not that great.

The role of user advisory boards as a dialogue-orientated institution from time to time makes it necessary to look beyond the board's “area” of responsibility. In three quarters of the cases (72%), individual members are also active in associations (12 cases) or action groups (9) with a transport-related interest. A political activity of board members (in political parties and/or parliament) was still reported in eight cases, despite the fact that the statutes sometimes explicitly exclude “politicians” from such activities. This confirms our earlier observation that the role of “professionals” in user advisory boards has grown compared to the earlier study (cf. section 3.2).

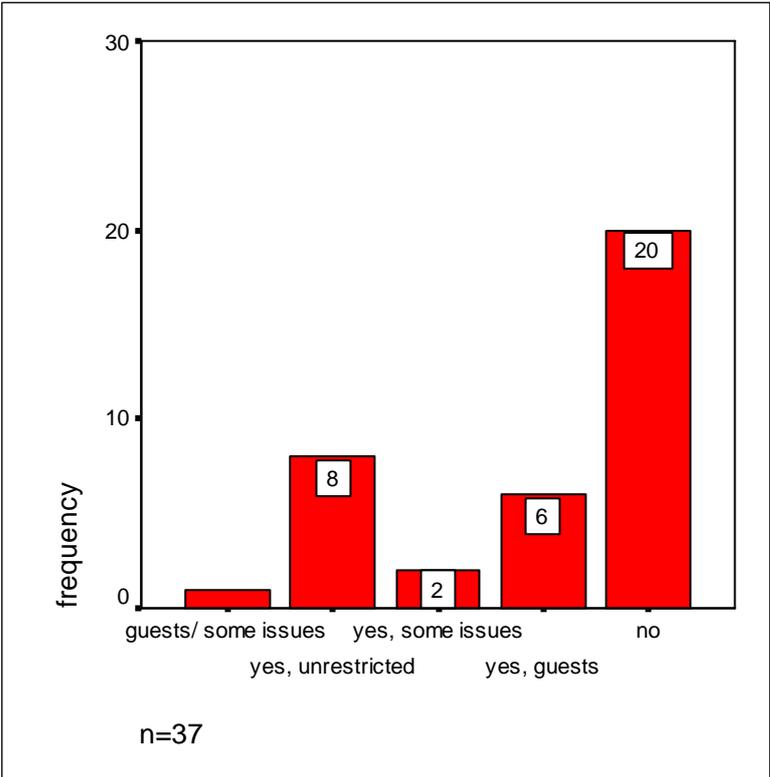
An involvement of user advisory boards in other institutions or processes is another way of exercising influence. However, the boards surveyed rarely participate in formal planning procedures concerning public transport. Only 17% (6 cases) said they did so, giving discussions on public transport master plans and infrastructure (station) projects as examples. The others did not do so - at least on an institutional level.

The situation is similar for the representation of the board in other bodies or groups. Only four (11%) boards are as an institution represented in statutory organisations (e.g. the steering committee of a regional transport authority).

However, contacts and co-operation with similar organisations in neighbouring regions or another geographical level are more common: 15 boards have such contacts while 18 do not, but only five examples of concrete agreements were given. These included political issues and services concerning several institutions' area. Ten boards reported subject-related joint publicity work, also undertaken together with the operator.

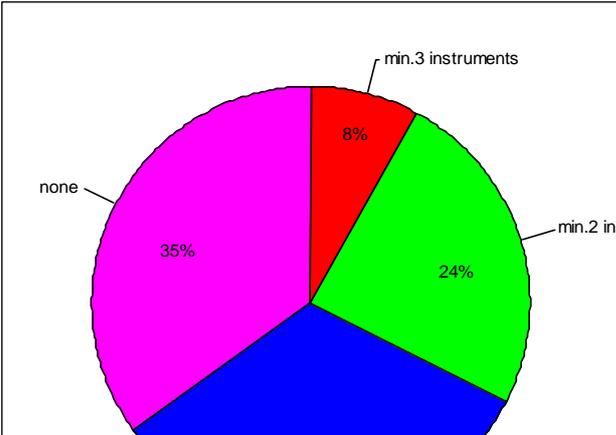
Hence there are several possibilities for co-operation and network building even though they are not often used so far. The VCD study concluded that the not well developed relations between the different organisations are due to lack of a supporting network and of information. Further possible reasons are the reliance on voluntary engagement of the members and their sometimes limited commitment. The boards' external relations are also useful for a flow of information for its own activities.

The public itself has unlimited access to the board meetings in eight cases, nine others have at least partially-public meetings (fig. 9). However, even those boards which always hold private meetings usually have "external" guests from the operator, authorities or other associations who provide background information or present certain topics to the members.



**Fig. 9: Publicity of board meetings**

The limited public relation and hence public awareness of the boards has already been noted as a deficit in the VCD study. Documentation and external relations use similar means as the recruitment of members (see above). In the VCD study, press releases are the only means of communication targeted at the public at large. In this respect, the boards now use a greater variety of channels (fig. 10), but one third of them still does not publish its work at all. The options given in the survey were press releases, an internet presence, annual reports, the operator's periodicals and local authority publications. However, the internal documentation of the board's work seems to be secured through the minutes and annual reports.



**Fig.10: Number of publicity instruments used**

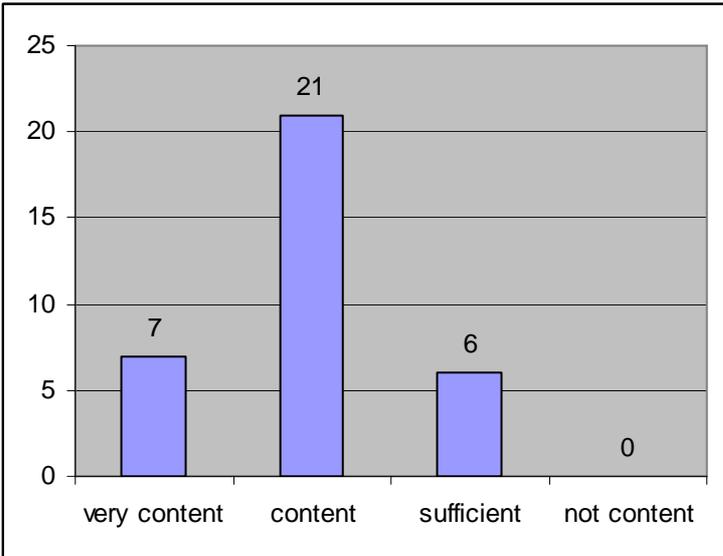
### 3.4 Experiences and outlook

Looking back, the evolution of user advisory boards now allows an evaluation of their effects on public transport planning and operator policy. The respondents' impression was in 15 cases that collaboration with the operator has developed in a positive way. In particular, the "direct access" to the customers' views and the growing understanding for the operational restrictions among the board members are highlighted as positive aspects. Still, the majority of the respondents (19) has not noted any change in either direction.

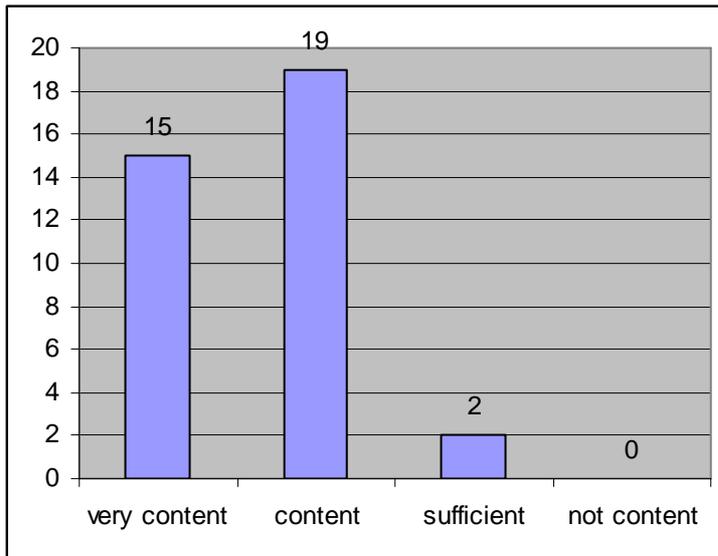
The boards' impression is that they are, on the whole, seen positively (9), important (4) and taken seriously (2) by the operators. Other comments saw the board as helpful (2), supportive (2) and recognised (4). Only three respondents saw their counterparts' attitude as unsatisfactory.

This perception is confirmed by the satisfaction with the operator's responses to the board's requests and comments (fig. 11). Only 18% rate the response quality as just "satisfactory". However, the board's frequent affiliation to the operator may have led to a less conflict-prone way of communication than in other circumstances.

The satisfaction with the meetings' atmosphere is almost unanimously positive (fig. 12) with more than 95% satisfied respondents.



**Fig. 11: Satisfaction with operator's response to the board's concerns**



**Fig. 12: Satisfaction with atmosphere at meetings**

This is possibly linked to the high share of suggestions from the board which the operator agreed to implement. On average - and probably based on a quite rough estimate of the respondents - 51% were accepted, higher than in the 1997 VCD study. However, individual values given range from 10 to 100%, and non-success is evidently more common in those areas which account for the majority of the boards' work: Areas where requests often have not been fulfilled include fares (8 cases), infrastructure design and building works (9), network planning and timetables (8) and capacity enhancements (5). The reasons given to refuse the boards' requests are cannot always be identified in the questionnaires, but it can be assumed that - as in the VCD study - financial restrictions are often to blame.

Future expectations voiced include above all to expand the boards' activities (12). Another 12 respondents declare themselves satisfied and wish themselves continuity. Seven want a greater engagement of their members and a better user involvement in general. Four see publicity activities as an area due for improvement. This was already identified in the VCD study. Another four respondents refer to a concrete project or programme.

## 4 Conclusion

This first analysis shows that user advisory boards have established themselves as an institutionalised way of consulting and involving transport users. They can contribute to a constructive relationship between providers and their customers. The fact that the establishment of a board was often initiated by the operators themselves can be seen as an indicator of a changing view on customer relations and their own role. The board members mainly see their work as useful and would like to see it continued.

However, our further analysis and the future use of this instrument must also take into account some at least ambiguous experiences which were discussed in the interviews made:

The operators' expectation of a user advisory board often seeks to obtain views from the "everyday user". Hence the involvement of members of associations - who often have the ambition to be or become "experts" - is met with scepticism. But it is difficult to avoid, as our study has shown. For the same reason, a long-term board membership of "lay users" may not necessarily be positive as over time they develop an "expert's perspective" as well. On the other hand, it is not always easy to find enough volunteers for a user advisory board even today. Hence board promoters must think about new ways to motivate citizens in the same way as other associations and movements need to do.

Last not least, a board's work can evolve more or less positively even when the framework conditions are identical. Whether it turns into a "meaningless waffle" or an efficient way of raising the passengers' views can only in part be influenced through a statute or other formal criteria. Instead, it requires a more comprehensive look at the stakeholders' perspectives and continuous efforts.

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