

# **From Workhorse to Thoroughbred: a Better Role for Bus Travel**

## **Response by the Transport Planning Society**

July 1999

The Transport Planning Society (TPS) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the White Paper 'From Workhorse to Thoroughbred: a Better Role for Bus Travel', but despite the promises in last summer's integrated transport white paper, we are disappointed that this 'daughter' document adds little to clarify the Government's policy on buses or present new, innovative means of policy implementation.

TPS believes that the only real way to ensure a better role for the bus is through an overall strategy to reduce traffic congestion. People will only abandon their cars and take to public transport if it offers a sizeable personal benefit to them. Within this framework, efforts to improve the image of the bus, raise service standards and resolve timetabling issues will no doubt be enjoyed by passengers, though in themselves they cannot be expected to significantly increase patronage.

Attempts to secure improvements in bus journey times and reliability through the introduction of discontinuous sections of bus lanes and other minor bus priority measures are unlikely to make the bus a real 'challenger' to the car. Furthermore, they rely on drivers' compliance with often confusing regulations.

Effective enforcement has long been the Achilles heel of the transport system and bus passengers are amongst the worse affected by drivers' disregard for bus stop clearway and bus lane controls. It is crucial that a more aggressive approach to enforcement is taken, and this might mean revising the level of priority attached by the Police to traffic duties, or moving this area of work to another body.

We are disappointed that the document has failed to provide a mechanism for resolving the conflicts that exist within the bus industry between operators, local authorities, the Traffic Commissioners, OFT and MMC. The recent case of a competition issue being resolved at a planning inquiry highlights this lack of arbitration, and with the Traffic Commissioners taking a greater role in policing the quality of services, we are concerned that inappropriate rulings against operators could result in a shortfall or an absence in service provision.

We are also concerned that if fiscal incentives, Green Transport Plans, bus priority and other measures were successful in increasing bus use, there would be no means of preventing operators from exploiting their commercial position. We believe there is a need for an economic regulator - akin to the 'watchdogs' that monitor the other formerly publicly owned utilities - to observe the effects on profit margins and ensure that operators' economic behaviour was in the passengers' interest.

The following comments reflect our views on issues raised in the document.

### **QUALITY PARTNERSHIPS**

TPS believes that there needs to be a means to address the concern which exists that operators

may not deliver quality in longer term, and that local authorities will not deliver all elements of bus priority and infrastructure. The joint funding on certain schemes has shown need for these issues to be addressed. For example if a bus operator is part-funding a junction improvement, he will want to be sure that all of the investment will be focussed on improving the bus journey times rather than that of general traffic. If an authority is new bus shelters and information systems, they need to be sure the service quality will be maintained for example through independent checks on quality partnership schemes to ensure **a fair distribution of investment and likely return.**

Stronger commitment is needed to **enhance ALL parts of the bus experience** (enquiry - walk - wait - ride - walk - image) rather than just the bus and the highway system. Omission of one element such as the information or the footpath design, may be enough to deter the new market, and this may mean the use of a 'quality checklist' to audit the door to door journey experience.

Quality enhancements should be focussed where there is scope for market growth and modal shift rather than concentrating on strong bus corridors. This may mean **deliberately investing in areas of higher car ownership** where the benefit will all be to a relatively affluent part of the community but whose travel habits need to be changed. Independent assessment is needed to avoid temptation to apply QP where a popular reaction can be guaranteed from a strong PT market - more trips by existing users does not contribute to modal shift or more sustainable transport solution overall

The potential for QP to attract new bus users and be a real alternative to the car needs to be recognised in the encouragement to highway authorities to use radical bus priority measures in QP schemes which positively **restrict car capacity** of the highway rather than maintain the 'status quo'.

## QUALITY COMMITMENTS

The current system (outside London) is one of deregulation and it seems that the paper proposes a move towards:

- **self regulation** (via Quality Commitments) – though quality commitments may not mean anything more than ‘responsible authorities and operators doing what they were all going to do anyway but with some gift-wrapping’;
- if that fails, **re-regulation** (via Quality Contracts, effectively jargon for some form of franchising). The paper promises guidance on how this change of regime would be justified, for example through modal shift and environmental improvements, but this would generally be more a political than technical decision with the Government delegating policy on regulation (or otherwise) to local authorities.

This avoids the issue of whether regulation or deregulation acts to maximise benefits within a constrained network support budget or not. We believe that regulation is the best bet – particularly in local bus markets in urban areas. Under deregulation, multiple operators compete away profits on busy corridors during the day (leading to oversupply of buses on such routes), and neglect quiet times and quieter corridors which then have to be provided as socially necessary services from a budget for revenue support.

In a regulated environment, the regulator can manage supply on busy corridors, generating profits which can then be used to cross-subsidise routes at the quieter times and places, but **overall maximising passenger kms per £ of network.** This is exactly what LT have been successfully doing in London for the last 10 years, and the same principles are applicable to any large urban centre (and possibly any urban centre) in the UK. Competition and deregulation, as

described above, is a poor solution, and the only real remaining alternative is a private sector monopoly - which effectively exists in some areas – with the dangers of monopoly profits being made by the operator at the expense of the passenger.

## **QUALITY CONTRACTS**

This is a major piece of legislation if it is introduced and will amount to network franchising as used for many areas outside the UK and in London now. It must be considered whether this is indeed necessary, now that many areas have strong operator territories and **quality and stability are already being achieved in some area.**

However in exceptional areas where levels of service quality are poor due to remaining elements of wasteful competition. We suggest that these should be identified by a study and a trial area is set up in the same way as was done prior to deregulation in the early 1980's. We suggest that given the market strength across modes of the major operator groups, their views should in any case be taken on board by careful consultation with each group and the CPT.

With regard to transition periods, a very significant notice period is likely to be needed in view of the major changes, which this process will involve. A useful pointer may be to look at the introduction of franchising for other services such as refuse collection where the need to deal with movements in responsibility and ownership for depot sites, vehicle fleets and staff may have useful pointers for the bus industry.

## **PASSENGER INFORMATION**

### **Information at stops**

We believe that the basic principles should be that:

- timetable information for all bus routes serving a stop is provided at that stop; and
- operators should pay for the costs associated with posting such information and maintaining it thereafter.

Conditions may range from a stop served by a single route perhaps operating twice a day, through to stops being served by ten or more different operators, each providing a high frequency service. However, the requirements are the same:

1. Provision of the stop (flag, and post if necessary), and associated panel (or panels) for the posting of information
2. Provision of the information for inclusion in the panel
3. Posting of the information each time the service changes
4. Maintenance the condition of the stop (eg dealing with vandalism or structural damage).

In the current London model, items 1, 3 and 4 are the responsibility of LT Buses (with costs borne by them), but item 2 is provided by the operator to an LT Buses specification. This basic approach could be followed in other areas, with local authorities taking on tasks 1, 3 and 4. Cost recovery could, however, be on the following basis:

- Items 1 and 4 could be apportioned to the operators on any of (a) their scheduled mileage (as a simple proxy for the scale of their operation), (b) their unique route mileage (as a measure of the spread of their network), or (c) directly on the basis of the number of stops

they serve.

- Item 3 should presumably only be charged at the time of a service change. If that service change is restricted to one operator only, they would pay the full cost of the timetable posting, and if several operators change timetables at once the cost be apportioned on any of the above bases (a-c) for the services that change.

Operators may wish to post their own timetables, but the local authority would need to be convinced that this would be done to a suitable standard, and without prejudice to other operators information at shared stops. For these reasons, it seems logical for the local authority to be responsible for the task in the majority of cases.

The Paper notes that there is no requirement to post fares information at stops, and points out that such information may be too complex for posting to be practical. This may currently be the case, but fares information is important – for comparing operators, as a marketing tool for the service, and in allowing potential passengers to have the correct cash or bus pass ready before boarding. We believe the basic fares information should be provided at the stop (ie cash fares, and which season tickets may be valid), but there may not be scope to show all through ticketing information.

The point about complexity of information is well made in the Paper, but the solution should be to simplify the information rather than withhold it. The bus industry has a long history of providing information that only people in the bus industry can understand, with a common example being the provision of a complex matrix timetable for a high frequency route, where all the passenger needs to know is (a) the basic frequency by time of day (eg every 8-10 minutes from 0700-1900 Mon-Sat, and similar information for other times), (b) first and last buses, and (c) key points downstream on the route and typical journey times to get to them. The presentation of timetables should be improved (perhaps via the local authority specifying basic formats around which operators could design their own displays), and fares should be shown in a user-friendly form.

### **Information away from the bus route**

Here, we believe the key issue for local bus services is to present the network as a whole, rather than specifically to any one operator. We therefore believe that the role should rest clearly with the local authority.

There is, however, a conflict with some of the principles underpinning quality partnerships – a ‘quality operator’ would effectively receive the same marketing via these methods as one that did not comply with the quality conditions. This could therefore be a deterrent to operators seeking to improve marketing of their individual services. However, this disadvantage is probably outweighed by the advantages of marketing the network as an integrated whole (a lesson that has been learnt on the national rail network). More generally, the provision of network information can be seen to be in some ways at odds with the competitive principles of deregulation, which would only disappear (under the Paper’s proposals) in the case where a franchise, or Quality Contract, was put in place.

### **Information on the bus**

This should clearly all be the responsibility of the operator, but standards need to be defined.

We fully support the requirement to display route number and destination to a specified standard on the front, back and nearside of the bus. But there should also be a display of the fare chart close to the point at which the user pays, so that any potential disputes can be rectified

immediately.

We see no need to display the timetable on the bus – once the passenger has boarded, the timetable becomes less of an issue. More important is for the passenger (particularly those unfamiliar with the route) to know where they are, and where they are going. This can be done via tube-style line diagrams prominently displayed on the bus, ideally coupled with a programme to name stops, and such innovations as real-time 'next stop' signs on the bus such as those under trial in London. There are practical problems with posting line diagrams in cases where an individual bus operates on several routes during the course of a day, but we do not believe this should prevent implementation of such effective low-cost measures.

## **SERVICE REGISTRATIONS**

Service timetable data, as used in service registration, is the basis for all planning and resource allocation in the transport industry. We believe that this should **certainly be in a standard format** as this can then be linked to all other information systems and other transport operations, planning and development **software**. Several packages have now been developed and the cost need not be high so there will not be an unfair imposition on small operators.

## **INFORMATION DISPLAYS**

The use of a route description as a marketing promotion tool should be protected and it is unwise to blindly agree that all numbers should be sequenced in a certain way. **Local market conditions** should be taken into account and if the service is better known as the 'Townsville Transit - Line 1' and attracts more riders by this branding, then this should be encouraged.

However other than for positive promotion reasons numbers should be on a **standard format** to avoid duplication as is done now wherever possible.

## **TICKETING**

Joint ticketing is being developed by multi-modal operators now and should be encouraged with more **powers will assist** this, provided that full consultation with the operators takes place. We would also support the use of new technologies such as **smartcard** and, given that these have an identity card role, the incorporation of driving license and bus/rail smartcard may be an avenue, which exploits technology and breaks down barriers between image of private and public transport.

## **PENALTIES**

A fairer system of penalties using a '**points**' system will be better in future with the ability not just to remove FDR but also to affect a 'quality rating' which could be used in assessment of tender for subsidised work or participation in quality partnerships or even quality contracts. It may be that **the role of PTE's and transport co-ordinators could be strengthened** to reflect this. They know local market conditions and operator performance as well as in effect selecting operators for new work and can apply the 'carrot' and the 'stick' to operators.

## **TRAFFIC REGULATION CONDITIONS**

TPS supports all reasonable efforts to reduce vehicle emissions and improve air quality however we believe that, in the first instance, the Traffic Commissioners should use their position to encourage bus operators to 'clean' their buses.

It may be possible to delay the introduction of new TRC legislation in the short term as operators have already begun to buy new, and by default, cleaner vehicles to ensure their compliance with

the requirement that all mainstream public transport is accessible to disabled people as part of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

## **TIMETABLING**

TPS welcomes the attempts to improve the stability of bus timetables, particularly as it impacts on the provision of passenger information. However, we believe that some flexibility is needed to allow for changing demand such as during school holidays, and changing circumstances, such as during roadworks.

We suggest that operators should be permitted to make a limited number of changes during the year with other additional changes possible with the agreement of the Traffic Commissioners and the relevant local authorities.

## **CONCLUSION**

At this stage, many of the initiatives mentioned above will need to be seen as coming from the operating industry as well as the central and local government.

Perhaps the key role for the government would be to promote car restraint and an acceptance of radical bus priority which removes car capacity, and also provide the market framework for buses in terms of track/highways, planning constraints, and information systems. This is in contrast to an approach using on-going purchases of extra bus service in terms of subsidy, and it means that it will then be up to the supply side of the industry to prove they can exploit these by providing more and better services to attract a growing market for themselves and modal shift for the community as a whole.