

TravelWatch NORTHWEST

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Photo Ian Watson

Information about Bus Fares revisited March 2014

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1. Introduction and Background

1.1 TravelWatch NorthWest (TWNW) dates back to October 2003 when the Rail Passengers Committee for North Western England (RPC), using its powers under section 228 of the Transport Act 2000, set up the North West Public Transport Users Forum (NWPTUF). This legislation required, inter alia, the RPC to co-operate with other bodies representing the interests of users of all public transport services. The RPC, alongside the North West Regional Assembly, identified a gap in the representation of public transport users across the region and across modes. Similar forums, now also under the TravelWatch banner, have been established in South West England, the West Midlands, the East Midlands and Southern England. With the demise of the regional RPCs TWNW has become an independent Community Interest Company limited by guarantee.

1.2 In June 2009 TWNW launched a report entitled Information about Bus Fares. This report concluded that there was some way to go before bus fares information was readily available to the prospective passenger. This new report seeks to measure what progress, if any, has been made in that regard in the last 4 years or so. For example we had been told before that time – in 2005 in fact – that a pilot scheme with Traveline South West would introduce fares information into its journey planning systems. Though this pilot had still not come to fruition in 2009 we said that it should be completed and transferred to other regions.

1.3 Bus fares were deregulated in 1986 but some non-commercial supported services have their fares set by their procurers, usually Local Transport Authorities. Which these are is determined by the nature (supply side versus demand side) of their supporting contracts. Perfect competition in the bus market cannot exist alongside an absence of price transparency. The commercial confidentiality which some Bus Operating Companies (BOCs) claim protects fares information begins to look patently anti-competitive. BOCs have maintained that there are so many different and competing fares that there would be a danger of impartial information not being given. It has also been contended that Competition Law prevents operators divulging their fares to each other ¹, and that it is hard to match timetables and fare tables as there are often more fare stages than timing points.

1.4 The Local Transport Act 2008 makes it possible for Local Transport Authorities to broker a consistent fare scale with operators through Statutory Quality Partnerships or Quality Contracts. They may also make a fares scheme ² themselves or agree one as part of a Voluntary Partnership. In 2009 there was little evidence of the emergence of such fare schemes or of multi

¹ However fares are obviously transparent should operators simply travel on competitors' services. Also the Local Transport Act 2008 removes the outright prohibition on inter operator agreements on fares and timetables where these can be shown to be in the public interest.

² Transport Act 2000

operator or multi modal fares. There were instances where operators' own multi journey tickets undercut collectively agreed prices.

2. Research Aims and Methodology

2.1 The research exercise in the North West was conducted to try to establish how easily, or not, passengers can obtain information on the fares for bus journeys which they are contemplating making.

2.2 The exercise was mainly desk based but also included visits to bus stations and some travelling on bus services.

2.3 22 randomly chosen and mainly multi operator urban, suburban, inter-urban and rural journey chains all within NW England were examined. This compares with 14 routes in the 2009 survey.

2.4 Information sources were asked for the price of a through Adult return fare between 2 locations after 09.30 hrs. If there was no through fare the cheapest option was requested; where the tickets could be obtained and where the information could be obtained if not available.

2.5 Information was sought from

- Traveline TEBx
- Traveline website
- Transport Direct website
- Bus Operating Companies phonedlines and web pages
- Information points/ offices at randomly chosen bus stations
- Some published timetables

2.6 The results were tabulated (see Appendix) and then analysed.

3. Survey Findings

3.1 The research essentially reiterated the findings of the 2009 report – that information about ordinary single and, where available, return fares on registered local bus services can in most cases only be established by making a journey or, where possible, contacting by phone the operator or operators where more than one is involved.

Traveline - phone

3.2 Landline calls are automatically routed to the local Traveline operator. From a mobile it is much more laborious. If you have called Traveline before the immediate option is to go back to the area you were enquiring about on that occasion. Otherwise there are 5 options (England being one) then 9 options – the North West being number 7, then 5 options – Lancashire, Cumbria, Merseyside and Halton, Greater Manchester and Cheshire.

3.3 Fares information is usually at best an add-on option and variable amongst different areas depending on which organisation runs Traveline locally. In many cases no fares information at all was forthcoming. In Greater Manchester however (where Traveline is operated by Transport for Greater Manchester) advice on multi journey tickets was given and in one instance the Day Saver was stated to be cheaper than 2 singles. Single fares were also quoted. Bus Companies are invariably referred to as the contact for fares information and in one instance (Merseyside) the call was transferred to the Bus Company. In 2009 Cumbria Traveline gave the fare from Carlisle to Alston – however, in the current survey this information was not forthcoming.

Traveline - website

3.4 The Traveline North West website does not include Cumbria, though it does provides a link to services through the journey planning option. There is however no link to the North East and Cumbria website or to the bordering county of Yorkshire. When planning journeys from the websites no fares information at all was available. ***There is no advice at all on the website, no links to operators or how to contact operators to find out about fares.*** Traveline NE and Cumbria website has links to bus station facilities in the NE but to none in Cumbria! Traveline NW has no such links.

3.5 We reported in 2009 that there had been plans by Traveline South West (TLSW) to introduce fare stages and tables onto its system. When we endeavoured to test this between Cheltenham and Gloucester the TLSW website stated that the “TLSW does not yet offer any fares information”. On revisiting this website in 2014 we found there was ***no reference at all to any fares information.*** Clearly progress here has been no existent and indeed with no reference to at all to how to find out about fares the position has worsened.

3.6 In 2009 we said that Traveline’s software appears to attempt to find the quickest journey. We assume this is still the case. However operator specific

tickets could well limit the choice of routes - but of course this information cannot be gleaned from Traveline as there is no reference to fares or tickets.

Transport Direct

3.7 The Transport Direct website continues to be rather user unfriendly. Initial options given for journeys are either “public transport” or “car route”. To drill down to bus only journeys involves seeking further options within public transport. When clicking on tickets/ costs the message is usually that Transport Direct does not currently have this information. Links are however often provided to Bus Companies or Local Transport Authorities (e.g. Merseytravel or TfGM) websites. There are also some links to multi journey/ operator tickets such as System One travel.

3.8 It was surprising to find that Piccadilly Gardens was not given as a Manchester destination on Transport Direct!

Bus Operating Companies Phone lines & websites

3.9 By and large Bus Companies are able to give individual fares information. In many cases it is cheaper to purchase a Day ticket for return journeys. However the large operators tend to promote their own day, weekly and monthly tickets quite heavily and do not mention the multi-operator ticket unless prompted. This is because they only receive a proportion of the revenue from these, whereas they obviously get 100% of the single-operator ticket revenue. For example Network Warrington did not mention on the phone or on its website the availability of a North West Wayfarer ticket for a Warrington to Atherton journey. This would be the cheapest option but the Wayfarer cannot be bought on the bus!

3.10 Single operator tickets do not always give the best choice of route. For example, the Preston - Rawtenstall journey is best made via Blackburn, whereas the Transdev-only ticket requires a detour via Burnley. Similarly the most direct Rawtenstall - Clitheroe journey is via Accrington, not via Burnley as required by the ticket (Transdev again). Conversely, the all-operator ticket may not offer best value for money. For the Burnley - Wigan journey, two separate Day tickets work out cheaper than the TfGM Wayfarer (which covers a large area and includes rail).

3.11 Some of the smaller operators are helpful and efficient in dealing with phone enquiries – examples are Kirkby Lonsdale Coaches and Telfords Coaches – and readily give fares information.

3.12 It is sometimes difficult to locate the correct option for fares information. For example having been put through to Arriva Merseyside from Traveline there was no option given for fares information just “comments and general enquiries” from where the information was obtained. On phoning RS Tyrer none of the 3 options given referred to bus services! On choosing the “day trips/ shows/holidays” option the caller was transferred to Lancashire County Council who were said to set the fares for the Chorley to Ormskirk service.

The relevant information was so obtained. To be fair RS Tyrer's website does give fares tables and details of weekly tickets.

3.13 In 2009 we reported that Arriva's website stated that the Company hoped to provide information about individual single and return fares in the future. We felt this was a positive declaration and looked forward to it happening. **However this has not happened.** The website asks prospective passengers to have the correct change for the driver but does not give any advice on the cost of ordinary single or return fares.

3.14 Stagecoach's website was found to be complex and difficult to navigate. The website only referred to Megarider and Unirider multi use tickets with no information about day or general fares.

3.15 The First Manchester website gives a link to System One travel (multi operator/multi modal tickets in Greater Manchester). However prominence is given to multi journey tickets available only on First services. System One was the cheapest option for the planned journey (Oldham to Glossop) but it was not obvious from First's website that this is the link needed to obtain a through ticket. This website also exhorts tendering the correct fare to the driver without advice of actual prices.

Published Timetables

3.16 Most timetables sampled had no fares information. Where it was provided the references were only to multi journey tickets. Rossendale Transport and Transdev used to include, until recently, sample single/return fares to main destinations in their timetable leaflets, but these are no longer shown in the current leaflets so we assume there has been a change of policy. The leaflets still include details of day, month and 12-journey tickets.

Bus stations and Travel Shops

3.17 22 bus stations were visited and where facilities were provided information was sought about fares. The bus stations visited were – Altrincham, Blackburn, Burnley, Carlisle, Chorley, Ellesmere Port, Heswall, Kendal, Knutsford, Lancaster, Liverpool (Queens Square), Macclesfield, Manchester Airport, Morecambe, Northwich, Oldham, Preston, Rawtenstall, Runcorn, St Helens, Skelmersdale and Warrington. Many were not able to provide information on fares at all.

3.18 When advice was available it was not always correct. For example advice given at Oldham bus station that separate tickets for an Oldham to Halifax journey were required was flawed. The First Day Ticket is valid on both First Greater Manchester and First Calderdale via a change at Rochdale (although not valid via Huddersfield). Indeed, First day tickets are valid on day of issue on all First buses within Greater Manchester, *including* cross-boundary services 100 to Warrington, 184 to Huddersfield, 589 to Burnley and 590 to Halifax, not, as advised in Oldham on First Manchester buses only. See also the experience at bus stations below.

3.19 The experience was as follows -

- Altrincham – temporarily closed due to rebuilding bus station/ interchange.
- Blackburn – no staff in attendance
- Burnley (operated by Lancs CC) – could give no advice on fares and suggested contact Traveline and operators. It was advised that tickets could be bought on the bus but no mention was made of TfGM Wayfarers tickets which are not sold on buses (journey to Wigan).
- Carlisle (operated by Stagecoach) – gave details of the fare to Alston even though the service is operated by Telfords Coaches. Helpful staff who also gave fare options to Silloth. Also a leaflet available entitled “Your guide to the best fares in Carlisle and surrounding area” which gave a lot of specimen single fares.
- Chorley (Stagecoach information office) - only able to give fares for Stagecoach services, no other operators. Information screens not working.
- Ellesmere Port – now closed.
- Heswall – no information office
- Kendal – No information point
- Knutsford – no information office
- Lancaster (information office operated by Stagecoach) – the electronic departure board is operational. Generally helpful but could only give fare details for buses that are operated out of Lancaster/ Morecambe depot. This suggests that all local fares information throughout the Stagecoach network is limited to the local depot.
- Liverpool (Queens Square, operated by Merseytravel) – information on Merseytravel multi-journey/ multi-operator tickets only, no individual fares information.
- Macclesfield – the enquiry office is now closed.
- Manchester Airport – a public enquiry window but no local bus fares information.
- Morecambe – no information point.
- Northwich – the enquiry office is now closed.
- Oldham – no fares information (see above)
- Preston (Lancs CC) – Limited and incorrect information about multi journey tickets (Silver). Stagecoach office referred back to LCC office.
- Rawtenstall – no staff.
- Runcorn (High Street) – no information office
- St.Helens – Advised no through fare to Southport and to contact the operator.
- Skelmersdale – no information office.
- Warrington – no information outside Network Warrington services. No mention of Wayfarer ticket which is valid from Warrington but cannot be purchased on the bus.

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

4.1 The following recommendations for areas to be explored were made in the 2009 report. *Italics show the lack of progress that has been made.*

- Local Transport Authorities should use their powers under the Transport Act 2000 to make ticketing schemes and/or their powers under the Local Transport Act 2008 to include ticketing agreements within Quality Partnerships. Such ticketing schemes should include an obligation to make fares information more widely available. *There has been some progress with Quality Partnerships but we do not have any evidence of obligations to make fares information more widely available .*
- A database of common timing points and fare stages should be created to assist the eventual electronic capture of fares information. *We do not have any evidence of this happening.*
- The promised pilot fares information scheme in one Traveline area (SW) should be completed. *This appears to have been abandoned altogether.*
- It would be helpful if timetables, including PDF versions on Traveline, were to contain relevant fare tables, although it is appreciated that rail timetables do not include such information. *From the limited sample studied there has been no progress on this.*
- The OFT should not continue to proscribe operators sharing information on frequencies, timetables and (maximum) fares. *This has not been taken up but there may be opportunities within Quality Partnership agreements.*
- Drivers should either carry relevant fare tables or be able to print these out on their Electronic Ticket Machines. *This has not happened.*
- Bus station information offices should be able to give fares information more readily - this should become easier with electronic capture. The example of Northwich appears to show that it can be done. *Northwich now closed! This situation has worsened with widespread closure of information offices (especially in Cheshire) and single operator offices only giving information on their own services.*

4.2 There is little evidence of significant change in the availability of multi operator tickets in the North West (there has been progress in other parts of the country) although many journeys involving a change of bus can be made using these or even single operator day tickets.

4.3 There has been no progress with web based fares information and in the case of Traveline the situation has, if anything, worsened.

4.4 Finally in 2009 we said that there was some way to go before bus fares information is readily available to the prospective passenger. We added that our view was that enhanced availability of this information should help to persuade more people to choose bus rather than car, wherever convenience is not an otherwise compelling deterrent. Our view is still the same but greater transparency is no nearer fruition and this is very disappointing.

4.5 Thanks are due to the survey team of Chris Dale, Geoff Kerr, John Owen and John Moorhouse and to Paul Fawcett for his advice.

4.6 For more information about TravelWatch NorthWest contact John Moorhouse, Company Secretary, at the registered office address, or email - admin@travelwatch-northwest.org.uk or visit the website – www.travelwatch-northwest.org.uk .