

TravelWatch NORTHWEST

promoting quality public transport.....



Information about Bus Fares

June 2009

*Working for an integrated and
seamless public transport network
across the North West of England*

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(Cover Photo: Ian Watson)

TravelWatch NorthWest wishes to thank Passenger Focus for its financial support towards the preparation of this report

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, were established in South West England, the West Midlands, and in the East Midlands. With the demise of the regional RPCs TWNW has become an independent Community Interest Company limited by guarantee.

1.2 Unlike many rail fares, bus fares are unregulated. This has not always been the case. Bus services and fares were licenced and controlled by the Road Traffic Act 1930 which required that Traffic Commissioners must ensure that “fares are not unreasonable”. With the deregulation of bus services in the 1980s¹ this control was partially replaced by a requirement that fares must be transparent and operators were required to display fare tables and time tables or to make these available on their vehicles.²

1.3 TravelWatch NorthWest (TWNW) has been concerned for some time that information about bus fares is not at a level which passengers should expect. That this issue is of concern to many passengers and prospective passengers became very evident in debate following presentations on behalf of Traveline at the TWNW (then North West Public Transport Users Forum) conference at Preston on 18th June 2005³. Nor does the issue seem to have gone away and this has prompted this exercise which attempts to gather evidence to test the available level of information on bus fares. At the same time the exercise has been designed to test what progress, if any, has been made against the undertakings given at the 2005 conference⁴.

1.4 The Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT) and Bus Operating Companies (BOCs) maintain that there are so many different and competing fares that there is a danger of impartial information not being given. They further contend that Competition Law prevents operators divulging their fares to each other⁵, and that it is hard to match timetables and fare tables as there are often more fare stages than timing points.

¹ Transport Acts 1980 and 1985

² PSV (Registration of Local Services) Regulations 1986 – 2004. A CPT Code of Practice requires drivers to provide a telephone number (not a fare table, which is often nowadays programmed into the ticket machine) where the information can be had in working hours.

³ Ref NWPTUF minute 05/2/7F 180605 Preston

⁴ See Annexes 1 and 2.

⁵ 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.

1.5 The Local Transport Act 2008 now 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 scheme⁶ themselves or agree one as part of a Voluntary Partnership. Despite these new freedoms there is little evidence of the emergence of such fare schemes or of multi operator or multi modal fares. There are instances where operators' own multi journey tickets undercut collectively agreed prices. The inference is that such fares are at a level below cost and, as such, constitute anti competitive practice.

⁶ Transport Act 2000

2. Research Aims and Methodology

2.1 The, mainly desk based, 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 also designed to test the effects of Traveline's promised actions to improve the "unsatisfactory" situation noted by TOWNW in 2005. **(see ANNEXES 1 and 2).**

2.3 Fourteen randomly chosen and mainly multi operator urban, suburban, inter-urban and rural journey chains all within NW England were examined. 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.

2.4 As a control mechanism two random journeys, in Scotland and SW England, were examined ⁷.

2.5 Information was sought from

- Traveline TEBx
- Traveline website
- Transport Direct website
- Bus Operating Companies phonedlines and web pages
- Published timetables
- 'Travel Shops' in randomly chosen bus stations

2.6 The results were tabulated ⁸ and then analysed.

⁷ Perth - Dundee and Cheltenham – Gloucester.

⁸ See Annex 3

3. Survey Findings

3.1 The research confirms what has long been obvious from abundant anecdotal evidence - 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 the operator or operators where more than one is involved.

3.2 Even 'on bus' passengers have difficulty obtaining and comparing fares ⁹.

Traveline - TEBx

3.3 When telephoning Traveline from a landline the call is automatically routed to the local Traveline operator. In the North West there are 5 – located in Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Cheshire. If calling from a Mobile phone options of any bureau throughout England are offered.

3.4 In general, the Traveline Telephone Enquiry Bureaux (TEBx) can only supply bus fares as an 'add on' to their main journey planning function. The availability and extent of information varies with which organisation runs Traveline locally e.g. our sample intimated that Greater Manchester PTE will give some fares within Greater Manchester (only for First Group and Stagecoach services) and some multi journey tickets that go beyond the boundary. They will supply BOC telephone nos within and outside GMcr. Merseyside & Lancashire refer to the BOC for all fares information, whereas Cumbria can give fares for through services. In Cheshire and Warrington, following local government reorganisation, Traveline is operated by the Cheshire Integrated Transport Group who refer to the BOC for all fares information.

Traveline - website

3.5 There is no information at all on the web about bus fares. Links within Traveline's (TL) journey planner may be inaccurate or outdated, e.g. Lancashire United Transport 's Blackburn TEBx number was "not recognised" by British Telecom.

3.6 TWNW was informed that during 2006 Traveline South West (TLSW) expected to introduce fare stages and tables onto its system, although pointing out the 'complexity' of the problem ¹⁰. However, on endeavouring to determine the fare between Cheltenham and Gloucester the TLSW website stated that "TLSW does not yet offer any fares information". Also TL home page stated "some TL call centres give fares information, others can give bus

⁹ CPT Code of Practice requires drivers to provide a telephone number (not a fare table, which is often nowadays programmed into the ticket machine) where the information can be had in working hours

¹⁰ Annexes 1 and 2 give more details of the background to TL's attempts to provide fares information on line.

operators' telephone numbers" TL Scotland gives journey plans but no links to fares.

3.7 Traveline's journey planner software appears to attempt to find the quickest journey. Thus the ways a passenger is routed when, for example, making an outward and a return journey may be different. This can happen when an earlier running connecting service taking a different route is found. The passenger may then find a return or day ticket issue by the operator providing the outward service not to be valid on the return service. Conversely a passenger may deliberately seek to use the same operators' services out and back in order to minimise the return bus fare. It can even be the case that different subsidiaries of the same BOC do not honour each others' tickets. That situation can result in passengers having to make needlessly longer journeys to obtain the cheapest fare.

3.8 For example, a First Yorkshire Day ticket is valid from Halifax to Rochdale, but not on changing to a First Manchester bus at Rochdale to travel to Manchester. However, the First Yorkshire ticket would be valid both ways if the journey were made between Halifax and Manchester via Huddersfield when a through service is taken from Huddersfield to Manchester, with no need to transfer to a First Manchester Bus within Greater Manchester. A parallel case on rail would be the cheaper fares offered between Birmingham and London on Chiltern Rail (which is longer and slower).

Transport Direct

3.9 Searching for bus journey information specifically on Transport Direct is not easy for the uninitiated. To obtain bus as opposed to public transport options an "advanced" button has to be pressed and the bus /coach option chosen. There are links to BOC websites from the journey information given. There is also a "tickets/costs" button which reveals that Transport Direct does not have fares information. There are also links to some BOC websites from here or to multi journey ticket information such as System1 Travelcards.

Bus Operating Companies' Phone lines and Web Sites

3.10 In general BOCs' cannot or will not give fares information other than for their own or jointly operated services. In addition routing options where more than one service is involved are likely to follow their own services wherever possible, e.g Preston to Rawtenstall via Burnley (both legs TransDev) rather than via Blackburn (TransDev and Rossendale Transport). A longer journey time may mean a cheaper fare but it is not easy to make the comparison to allow informed choice.

3.11 First's website only gives the Traveline telephone number for information. Other operators do have internal telephone enquiry numbers.

3.12 BOC's web pages often make much of their great value multi journey daily, weekly and monthly tickets. However a prospective passenger planning

a series of linked bus journeys (even on the same BOC's buses) is not able to compare these in advance with the aggregate cost of the single or return fares other than by telephoning the operator (**not** by visiting BOC websites). The situation is clearly unsatisfactory. Rail journey planning websites (National Rail Enquiries) are usually better and give cheapest fares including, generally, multi journey tickets.

3.13 Arriva's website states that the Company hopes to provide information about individual single and return fares in the future. This is a positive declaration and TravelWatch NorthWest looks forward to it being implemented and to its emulation on other BOCs websites.

Published timetables

3.14 Where PDF Timetable leaflets can be downloaded these often only contain links (via fares buttons) to information about BOC's own multi journey tickets. The same was true of hard copy (printed) timetables found.

Bus stations and Travel Shops

3.15 A number of bus station information offices were visited - at Burnley, Preston, Rochdale, Stockport, Chorley, Lancaster and Northwich. Most of those sampled were owned and staffed by the Local Transport Authorities. Some were not able to provide information on fares charged by the buses using the bus station. For multi leg journeys routing information obtained was sometimes at variance with that advised by Traveline, Transport Direct or BOCs.

3.16 The experience was as follows -

- Burnley (operated by Lancs CC) – could only give fares for the first leg i.e. services using the bus station. Routing at variance with Traveline GMPTE.
- Preston (Lancs CC) – would/ could not give any fares – referred to BOC. The Stagecoach office at Preston was unhelpful.
- Rochdale (GMPTE) - bus station travel centre referred to BOC for individual fares & did not promote GMTL multi use tickets despite being owned and managed by GMPTE.
- Stockport (GMPTE) – referred to BOC for fares but did give multi use ticket information.
- Chorley (Lancs CC) – poor information about multi leg/operator journey. Fares information not available for other BOCs.
- Lancaster (Stagecoach) – through (Stagecoach) service fare given but this has very limited frequency. No advice on other, more conveniently timed journey options or fares where change involved.
- Northwich (Cheshire West & Chester Council) – full fare information given for a multi operator journey.

3.17 Only Northwich bus station gave fares information about a service forming a second leg of the journey and this with a different BOC than the initial leg.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations.

4.1 There is some way to go before bus fares information is readily available to the prospective passenger. Our view is 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.

4.2 Day tickets, often confined to use on specific operators' services, and less often Local Transport Authorities' multi operator tickets, appear to be the only way to obtain a through ticket where a journey involves a change(s) of bus.

4.3 We were assured in 2005 that Traveline SW was planning to incorporate fares information systematically into its journey planning systems. It is regrettable therefore that this has not yet come to fruition, particularly so as Traveline NW accepted that the lack of fares information was "not satisfactory" and that the SW application would be transferable to other regions.

Recommendations

4.3 TravelWatch NorthWest would recommend that the following recommendations are explored -

- 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.
- A database of common timing points and fare stages should be created to assist the eventual electronic capture of fares information.
- The promised pilot fares information scheme in one Traveline area (SW) should be completed.
- 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.
- The OFT should not continue to proscribe operators sharing information on frequencies, timetables and (maximum) fares¹¹
- Drivers should either carry relevant fare tables or be able to print these out on their Electronic Ticket Machines
- 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.

¹¹ Now permitted in the context of Quality Partnerships

ANNEX 1: REPORT TO NORTH WEST PUBLIC TRANSPORT USERS' FORUM

Subject: Information on Bus Fares.

Date/venue: 18th June 2005 Preston

At the NWPTUF held at Liverpool in October 2004 concern was expressed that information on bus fares was not at a level that passengers would expect.

In January 2005 the Administrator wrote to operator Arriva NW and to the trade association CPT NW to seek their responses to this concern.

Both replied by letter and both agreed that whilst fares are generally stable and that reasonable notice of alterations can be given, there are nevertheless many different and competing fares, including day and period tickets, often for the same journey.

There was also agreement that providing fares information through Traveline could be problematic, for various reasons:

- There are so many fares that there would be a danger of giving partial information (Arriva NW)
- On some routes there are more fare stages than timetable points and advisors would need to know the stops being used. (CPT NW).
- Legislation does require that drivers should make fare tables available to passengers and a CPT Code of Practice states that operators should provide a telephone information service (which would include timetable and fares enquiries) during the working day (CPT NW).

The letters did point out that the matter would be on the Agendas both of the (then) next meetings of the NW Bus Commission and of Traveline.

The matter was therefore also raised later with Bill Tyson, GMPTE, the Chair of NW Traveline. The other two Public Transport Fora (for the South West and Midlands) were also contacted to obtain their views on the matter.

Two further e-mailed replies were received, from Bill Tyson on behalf of the Traveline NW Board (TLNWB - with whom he had raised the matter at their meeting on the 16th May 2005) and from SWPTUF. Both were encouraging.

- As Traveline's primary function is journey planning it will only be able to supply fares as an "add on" to a planned journey. It would be very difficult

for it to be used as a price comparator or to select a “cheapest” journey (SWPTUF)

- The issues identified by the operator (Arriva) and trade association (CPT) are real issues and the NW Traveline Board made similar comments, pointing out that call centres run several risks (listed below) when supplying fares information: (TLNW)
- fares could change between giving out the information and making a journey; (TLNW)
- Call Centres may not be aware of all fares for a journey and could be giving partial information; (TLNW)
- Call Centres would need to be very careful to avoid bias. (TLNW)
- The present situation is nevertheless not satisfactory. (TLNW)
- Traveline SW expects during 2006 to be the first to introduce fares information. The software for this is already being developed with a “confidentiality” process to prevent an operator gaining a competitive advantage by accessing advance information on any new fares. Once the system is working operators will supply Traveline with their fare tables just as they currently do with timetables. (SWPTUF)
- Traveline NW’s view is that the way forward is that being developed in the South West. This is to incorporate fares information systematically into the journey planning systems. Traveline NW uses the same journey planner as the South West (and a number of other regions) and the SW application that is underway will be transferable to other regions. (TLNW)
- The Traveline regions as a whole have agreed that the SW would be the best region to pilot this application. (TLNW)
- The work is underway, but the complexity of the task that the SW are undertaking must not be underestimated (TLNW)
- The fares stages are due to be loaded onto the Traveline SW system in June 2005 and will be followed by the fare tables. This will be very difficult as the software systems which operators use for fares and ticketing and to produce timetables are often different. (SWPTUF)
- In addition, though clearly alluded to by all four respondents but never specifically mentioned, Office of Fair Trading (OFT) “competition” rules require that operators do not divulge their fares to each other, and it is hard to see how this can be avoided once fares information is placed in the public domain and thus freely available.

The tabulation over the page below shows the extent to which the four respondents were able to agree. Overall the information providers seemed slightly more optimistic than the operators did of there being an eventual useful outcome.

Comment	Arriva	CPT	SW PTUF	TLNW
Fares generally stable but operators free to change these at any time	x	x		x
Many different and competing fares over same routes	x	x		x
Giving fares information problematical :	x	x	x	x
May be unable to supply impartial information	x			x
Not all fare stages shown in timetables		x		
Software unable to compare fares for similar journeys			x	
Fares and ticketing software is not compatible with timetabling software			x	

Bill Tyson in his response on behalf of Traveline NW undertook to keep the NWPTUF informed of progress.

ANNEX 2 : Email received from Traveline NW in May 2005

As promised, I raised this matter at the North West Traveline Board on 16 May. As this was on the same day as the meeting referred to in the e-mail I did not feel that I could add anything at this stage.

The issues you identified in the e-mail are real issues and the NW Board made similar comments. The call centre run several risks with giving out fares information:

- fares could change between giving out the information and making a journey;
- we may not be aware of all fares for a journey and could be giving partial information;
- we would need to be very careful to avoid bias.

Nevertheless we agree that the present situation is not satisfactory.

Our view is that the way forward is that being developed in the South West. This is to incorporate fares information systematically into the journey planning systems. We use the same journey planner as the South West (and a number of other regions) and the SW application that is underway will be transferable to other regions. Indeed the regions as a whole agreed that the SW would be the best region to pilot this application.

Although the work is underway, we must not underestimate the complexity of the task that the SW are undertaking. I will keep you informed of progress.

(From Bill Tyson – Traveline NW)