OMNIBUS: FOR ALL

WE MUST ENSURE IT REALLY IS ‘FOR ALL’
Ensuring buses really are ‘for all’

On 28 November our chair, Gillian Merron officially launched five new Enviro400 buses for Newport Transport at Chepstow Racecourse. The buses are quite striking and feature 71 comfortable leather seats with seatbelts, four tables on the upper deck, LED reactive lighting and a straight staircase for safety.

Additionally the buses feature audio announcements and Newport Transport has become the first operator in Wales to sign a commitment to agree to install this technology on all of its new buses, which sets a benchmark for other operators to follow.

The launch was also attended by local visually-impaired bus users and Scott Pearson, managing director of Newport Transport (behind Gillian in the photo) who all welcomed this initiative.

This launch underlines the importance of ensuring that bus travel should be convenient and easy-to-use for all bus passengers, the main theme of this issue of Bus User.

On other pages you will find details of an important campaign launched by the Royal National Institute of Blind People, as well as bus company initiatives to help disabled and visually-impaired passengers, and we look at how we can make bus travel attractive to younger people.
From the Chair

One of the many strengths we have at Bus Users UK is our ability to relate not only to bus users but also to those responsible for providing bus services, at all levels. That enables us to make our influence felt in all aspects of bus travel.

One of the big events for the bus industry is the Euro Bus Expo exhibition in Birmingham and this year was a good opportunity to tour the exhibition with our new chief executive Claire Walters and to introduce her to many of the senior people in the industry. The exhibition is a showcase for the newest developments in the bus world, but it’s always good to cut through some of the razzmatazz and bring people back to basics. Those basic issues include the annoyance and discomfort many of us endure because drivers aren’t given any means of controlling the heaters on a bus, so we freeze in winter and cook in the summer! I took the opportunity to discuss the simple issue of heating controls with manufacturers. They say they do what their customer, the bus operator, wants and tell us all the technology is there – it’s down to the bus companies to pay for it! We can help them to understand that the bus company may be their customer but you and I are actually paying or their products, directly or indirectly.

We also had conversations about with operators about what happens when these nice, shiny new buses get older and need refurbishment to keep the standards up, and we found that operators vary greatly in their approach to this.

As well as talking to bus builders at the show, I appeared on a panel discussing the role of bus services in contributing to economic growth and carbon reduction at the conference for local authority people run by ATCO, the Association of Transport Coordinating Officers, and along with Claire Walters I had a very useful meeting with Beverley Bell, the Senior Traffic Commissioner. The Traffic Commissioners, who have the power to give or take away bus companies’ licences, are keen to have more dialogue with us, particularly on complaints, and the meeting has helped us forge a closer relationship with them which can only be good news for bus users. The Traffic Commissioners are keen to take bus users’ issues into account in their dealings with operators, and we are equally keen to help them.

We’ve been influencing the work of some of the major operators too. I addressed the Confederation of Passenger Transport’s conference in Scotland in October, and also made our views known to First at their stakeholder panel, where I was able to remind their top management of what it really means to put the customer at the heart of what they do. Our General Manager Stephen Morris and Julian Osborne, who helps us with some of our complaints work, had a similar opportunity with Arriva recently: our voice is being heard where it counts.

Gillian Merron
Chair

The Latin word ‘omnibus’ means ‘for all’, and this issue looks at ways we can help to ensure that young people and people with a range of disabilities are able to make full use of bus services.
Suddenly – and not before time, many would argue – there is a recognition that young people deserve a better deal when they use public transport if they are to remain committed users as they grow older. For many younger people, public transport is seen as something they have to put up with until they are ready to pass their driving tests, buy a car and join the other car users on our already overcrowded roads.

Transport Minister Norman Baker recently launched BUSFORUS, a new and interactive website designed to help 16-25-year olds get the very best from buses.

BUSFORUS, produced by the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK on behalf of the UK bus industry, details a whole host of information on the various services, facilities and tickets types available from bus operators across the country. The site – available on PC, smartphone and tablet – also uses sophisticated mapping tools to locate and direct visitors to their nearest bus stops.

Speaking at the launch, Norman Baker said: ‘The launch of this site is really great news for young people. When asked about what matters to them, good public transport tops the list time and again. I have spoken with the industry about what might be done to provide better information and am very pleased to see that they have responded positively.

‘As well as being a win for young people, it makes commercial sense to encourage the next generation of passengers to get online and make the most of their local bus services.’

At the same time, PTEG, representing the PTEs, published a report aimed at getting local transport authorities thinking about how they can provide the best deal for young people on transport in a difficult economic climate.

It describes how the bus is central to young people’s ability to access vital opportunities for education, training, work and leisure. Despite this, young people have been particularly hard hit by the financial challenges facing bus services, which have seen fare offers compromised and valued evening and weekend services cut back.

The report suggests that there is still much that local transport authorities can do to support young people. With the aim of stimulating thinking and debate, it presents a range of ideas to improve the affordability, availability and acceptability of bus services, without breaking the bank. It emphasises the importance of actively engaging young people in the process – it is essential, the report says, to develop an offer on public transport with, rather than for, young people.

There is a need for a package of measures that covers the availability, affordability, accessibility and acceptability of socially-inclusive public transport and recognises the differences and similarities in the needs of young people of different ages. And there is a need to maintain a focus on simplicity – straightforward fares, networks and information benefit all passengers.

One way £1
A ‘One Way £1’ scheme for under-19s was introduced by the Dales Integrated Transport Alliance (DITA) on 27 October across the Yorkshire Dales, to provide more independence for social activities as well as better access to work opportunities in the school holidays and weekends. It means that young people will pay a fare of £1 on both outward and return bus journeys at specified times.
The scheme is available after 5.00pm on weekdays and at any time at weekends and during all school holidays. Young people will need to have ID with them to prove they are under 19. Full details of the scheme are available at www.dalesconnect.net. Where local buses are participating in the scheme, they will have the ‘One Way £1’ logo on the front window.

Young people living in rural areas have a limited choice of bus travel and where it exists the fares are often variable from operator to operator and can be expensive. This means that the ‘taxi of mum and dad’ is often the only choice for young people to access social activities and casual work after school and at weekends, and sometimes for school and college leavers to access work.

A recent from the Commission for Rural Communities highlighted the transport problems faced by young people in rural areas: ‘Public transport is key for many young people in rural areas trying to access education or training. Running a car and insuring it can be a costly alternative. Yet often public transport availability is inadequate.’

Pupils of Aireville College Skipton help to launch the One Way £1 fares scheme for buses in the Yorkshire Dales.

**Future Commuter?**

So all the bus companies want to attract more passengers to travel with them, especially those who can pay their own way so the companies aren’t at the mercy of whatever recalculation gets done with concessionary fare schemes (writes Claire Walters of Bus Users UK). There are lots of interesting and appealing marketing schemes being developed and plenty of design input to make the buses as attractive as possible.

But what about the commuter of the future?

Most kids use buses as pretty much their only travel option most of the time, getting to and from school/college/work, meeting friends and carrying on any kind of social life – especially if the parental chauffeurs aren’t available or it becomes just too cringe-making to be dropped off by Mum.

Buses are free for children in most places until they reach a particular age (which can vary wildly), at which point the majority of bus routes charge the full adult fare. This can come as a massive blow to the pocket and has the potential to put the next generation of bus users off permanently. It can also make it uneconomic to undertake training courses or take an entry level job if most or all of your income goes on getting there and back, which then has a knock-on effect on local businesses if they’re not spending their wages in the shops/bars/clubs and so on. If you live in a rural area or have additional barriers like mental ill-health or physical disability, getting out and about as an independent young person gets even harder.

There are some innovative and interesting schemes in place, some statutory and some by far-sighted operators, but the picture is decidedly patchy. I would have thought that bus companies might want to put some serious brain power behind building brand (or at least bus) loyalty among young people by phasing in adult fares over the ages of 17-25 and offering discounts/partner schemes for continued use of the buses after each birthday passes.

With smart ticketing on the up and the propensity of young people to give out their personal details in return for good deals, it shouldn’t be hard to use the technology and get feedback from young bus users about what would make them use the buses more regularly.

If there are night buses running in and out of a town near you, the bus company might consider hiring a young DJ to make one of them a party bus so that young people will be drawn to travelling home on it and it will get them on to the bus where they will be safe and supervised, possibly with some community police on board so it doesn’t get out of hand. (The driver might need earplugs though!)

Given the outrageous cost of insuring young drivers, fuel and servicing costs along with the reduction in benefits and options for young people, this would seem a great time to get 17-25-year olds to look around from the rite of passage of car ownership and get them into the bus habit.

Bus companies may not have the market share of commuters that they’d all like now, but with a bit of investment now, they can grow their own!
Community Transport: a rural lifeline?
One of the solutions suggested for rural and other lightly-used bus services that local authorities can no longer afford to support is to use Community Transport. But what does this actually mean? Our General Manager STEPHEN MORRIS has been finding out.

**Since** the Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review reduced the money available from local authorities to support uneconomic bus services, there has been a lot of talk of different ways of providing bus services that meet a social need but can’t stand on their own feet.

Community transport is one possible solution. The Government allocated £10 million to local transport authorities to kick-start the development of community transport in 2011/12, mainly in rural areas, and a further £10 million in 2012/13 for both rural and urban services, although this money has not been ‘ring fenced’. Some of the bus companies think it’s a cheap way to get round all the safety requirements they have to have in place, and the whole idea conjures up thoughts of well-meaning members of the Women’s Institute taking time off jam-making to drive people around in an old minibus.

That’s a terribly stereotyped view, which is likely to get floods of letters to the editor, so perhaps we’d better take a more objective view of what community transport is really all about and how it could help by providing a realistic alternative to keep bus services going to remote villages, and indeed to urban housing estates where conventional bus services can no longer be made to work.

**What is Community Transport?**

Our stereotype of volunteers driving around in minibuses may be part of the story, but by no means all of it. Community transport can be all things from retired folk with a car volunteering to give people a lift to hospital to full-sized buses on regular routes. Indeed a major business has grown out of one community transport operation that now runs nine London bus routes, schoolbuses in West Yorkshire and is taking over the entire bus service in Jersey in January.

As chairman of a local scout group and elder of a local church, I’ve had a little involvement in community transport at one end of the scale. I’ve been able to apply to the Traffic Commissioner on behalf of both organisations and obtain what’s called a Section 19 permit. That means that if we transport people belonging to the scouts or the church in a minibus we can charge them enough to cover the costs.

That concept has grown in many cases; residents in an area without a bus service may have got together, formed a club and set up a bus service using volunteers to take them to hospitals, day centres, the shops or to offer pleasure trips, for which people can be charged: sometimes scheduled services are run that way, but only for the people who have joined up as members.

Now however the law has been amended to make it easier for community buses to run services that anyone can use.

**Section 22**

Just as local groups can obtain a Section 19 permit to run a minibus, Section 22 permits can be obtained to carry the general public. Under the 2008 Local Transport Act drivers on services using Section 22 permits can be paid: previously they had to be volunteers, and this change in the legislation has increased the number of bus services provided by community transport.

Naturally the conditions are more onerous for Section 22 permits: the Traffic Commissioners, who license bus companies, have to be satisfied with the competence of the people running it, and that they have proper maintenance facilities and safety...
A The East Sussex town of Rye has local community bus service, open to all and it takes concessionary passes too. With its small buses it can serve the town centre, inaccessible to full-size buses.

measures in place. It doesn’t mean you have to have your own workshops, but there have to be proper arrangements in place with, for instance, a suitable garage that can maintain the vehicle on a regular basis.

So long as the bus has no more than 16 seats you don’t need a PCV licence to drive it, but drivers do have to have a minibus entitlement. This used to be automatically granted to car drivers, but drivers whose licences were issued after 1997 have to be properly trained. Bigger buses do need drivers with PCV licences.

If a community transport operator has a Section 22 permit, it can register a public bus service, just like a bus operator. However Section 22 operators do have to be not-for-profit organisations. That immediately makes them a cheaper option for running local bus services as does the fact that the conditions they have to meet are not quite so onerous as those for licensed bus operators. And they can be run by volunteers too.

A number of community transport operators are already providing rural bus services, and indeed some urban routes, both on fixed routes and on demand-responsive services, where passengers can book for the service and ask for it to deviate and pick them up at home. Community transport can also offer services that feed people into main bus services from areas that could never support a commercial bus route.

CT Plus
CT Plus is the operator that runs big buses on London bus routes as part of the Transport for London network, and is soon to take over bus services in Jersey. How does this fit into the mix?

In fact CT Plus is not strictly a community transport operation; it is a fully-licensed bus operator. However its origins were in Hackney Community Transport, which is a community transport operator, and CT Plus is a separate profit-making subsidiary, though its profits are used to support the not-for-profit Hackney Community Transport. Possibly the most high-profile operator in the community sector, CT Plus is a licensed bus operator and no longer strictly within the definition of community transport, though as a social enterprise the Community Transport Association recognises it as part of the community transport mix.

So does Community Transport have a role?
With its lower cost base and not-for-profit ethos, community transport can certainly play a part in providing bus services where conventional bus services no longer make economic sense. Numerous ‘closed’ schemes already exist for the benefit of members only, and increasingly community transport is providing demand-responsive services, predominantly, though not exclusively, in deeply rural areas.

But it also has the scope to provide proper, scheduled bus services that anyone can use. It is likely to become a more popular option as local authority budgets come under increasing pressure; and where it is used as a feeder service to main routes it could actually contribute to the main bus network. And being run by local people for local people, it could prove a popular alternative, responsive to the needs of the local community.

For more information see the Community Transport Association’s websites, www.ctauk.org
A university study suggests we do more than just gaze out of the window

You might be surprised to learn what people do on buses – and Billy Clayton of the Centre for Transport & Society at the University of the West of England has researched this. He looked at how people spend their time on the bus – looking at their journey experiences, how they perceive the bus, how people use their time and technology on buses, and the differences that affect the journey experience.

He used a Facebook discussion group, focus groups, and a large-scale survey of 840 passengers on five bus routes in Bristol and found that there are similar levels of travel-time activity on buses and trains.

The tables show the main findings, but in general bus passengers most enjoy window-gazing/people-watching, followed by reading for leisure and texting/making phone calls; on trains it’s the same top three but in a different order.

More bus passengers like riding in buses than dislike it, but the majority are indifferent. It is probably no surprise to learn that older passengers (55+) have a more positive view of buses than 16-24-year olds, and that the older passengers find their time on the bus to be significantly more enjoyable, relaxing and useful than younger passengers.

Equally, it is probably no surprise to learn that 16-24-year olds spend most time texting, phoning and daydreaming, while the over-25s spend their time window-gazing and contemplating, with reading Metro also important for 25-54-year olds. A third of the youngest age group say their normal activity is ‘being bored’.

Younger passengers are more comfortable listening to music, making phone-calls and eating and drinking, while older passengers are more comfortable talking to strangers on the bus.

Although this was a survey specific to one area, bus users will recognise common threads throughout the country. For many of us, bus travel can represent relaxation, time out, an opportunity for personal tasks and socialising, while for others travel time on the bus is used to shut-out the bus environment with music and phones; the use of information and communications technology, unsurprisingly, is particularly high among younger passengers. And younger people, it seems, have significantly worse perceptions and experiences of buses than older passengers, and different ideas of what is socially acceptable.

As operators strive to make their buses accessible to all, we were encouraged to hear of a new campaign launched by the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) – Stop for me, Speak to me. This calls on bus operators to remove the barriers blind and partially-sighted people face when making a bus journey.

An RNIB survey has shown that six in ten people said buses that stopped away from the official bus stop often caused them to miss their bus or step off the bus into hazards such as bins and lampposts. Over half of respondents said they had difficulty obtaining spoken information from the driver such as the bus number and destination. And many respondents found it difficult to hear the bus driver through the assault screens meaning they couldn’t obtain the necessary verbal information they needed to make their journey.

To help overcome these issues RNIB is calling on bus operators to remember one simple rule: Stop for me, Speak to me.

Phil Lee from Colchester is registered blind. He said: ‘I have good days and bad days with the buses. Recently I had a bad day as I had to wait ages for one to stop for me and not go whizzing past. They don’t always tell you what number their bus is, which isn’t very helpful. If a bus is right next to me then I can just about make out the number but I can’t see if it’s far away or approaching.’
Shirley Grisedale from Penrith is registered blind. She said: ‘I have been left stranded at the bus stop when buses have sailed past me and not stopped. Because I live in quite a rural area, a lot of the stops are not compulsory stops and therefore the drivers won’t stop if you don’t stick out your arm. Once I am on the bus, it can be frustrating as the drivers often don’t talk to you and stay silent. It can be frightening when they forget to tell you when your stop is and you end up in an unfamiliar place or at the station and a friend has to come and get you.’

The RNIB report is calling on bus operators to ensure all drivers stop for blind and partially sighted people waiting at a bus stop because nine in ten cannot see to hail it; to ensure all drivers speak to blind and partially-sighted people boarding the bus because the majority struggle to get clear information from the driver – without accessible information many cannot travel; to ensure all drivers always check the official bus stop for waiting blind and partially-sighted customers and provide clear spoken information to them – nods and gestures are not helpful to someone with sight loss; to include a slide-open section in any new or replacement assault screens to enable drivers to clearly speak to customers with sight loss.

Fazilet Hadi, RNIB’s Director of Inclusive Society, said: ‘Catching a bus should not be a sight test. Local bus travel is a lifeline, providing an important means of transport within the community for those who are not able to drive. Buses are often the only affordable way to travel independently to work, appointments or to visit friends and family. However, the difficulties blind and partially-sighted people face in making journeys that other people often take for granted, are unacceptable and often unnecessary. We want operators to remember one simple principle: Stop for me, Speak to me.

New EU Regulations on passenger rights in bus and coach transport come into force on 1 March 2013. The new rights awarded by the EU to disabled people offer more protection than the Equality Act, in particular in terms of access to travel information and assistance.

James Freeman, CEO of Reading Transport, welcomes RNIB’s report and fully supports the campaign. He said: ‘I think treating every stop as a request stop is not the right way to run a service, not just because of people with sight loss who may not be able to see the bus, but for anyone who might be unsure. At Reading Buses the rule is that drivers should stop when someone is standing at a bus stop. This is a simple rule that benefits all users.’

RNIB’s research found request stops, which put the onus on the customer to signal they want an approaching bus, are in use by most bus operators across the UK. However the report shows that they significantly disadvantage people with sight loss. Request stops can mean that a blind person has to travel with a friend, ask strangers for help, hold up a large sign with the bus number, or risk missing the bus they want.

Survey respondents told how it’s vital for bus drivers to speak to passengers with sight loss so they can make their journey. However, the survey
revealed nearly seven out of ten people said their driver failed to tell them when their stop was approaching.

Ms Hadi added: ‘We do not believe any driver wants to leave anyone behind at a bus stop or ignore a blind customer’s request for spoken information. RNIB has heard from many blind and partially-sighted people who have good experiences on buses, and with drivers, but there are too many having bad experiences and having their independence limited which is putting them off using their local bus service.’

You can join the RNIB campaign. If you think blind or partially-sighted people shouldn’t be left behind at bus stops visit www.rnib.org.uk/bus or call the RNIB helpline on 0303 123 9999.

What bus companies are doing?

Two bus companies have told us what they are doing to help blind and partially-sighted passengers.

Network Warrington has teamed up with Guide Dogs to give puppy walkers free travel. Managing Director, David Squire explained: ‘We were approached by Guide Dogs who advised us that they need to train future Guide Dogs in real scenarios and would it be possible to use our buses. We were delighted to support this very worthwhile project; the provision of new guide dogs is important to give people their independence and this initiative builds on the work we have done through the wider disabled community with the Warrington Disability Partnership. Our new buses will also feature next stop visual and talking announcements to aid travellers.’

Elaine Webster from Guide Dogs said: ‘The role of a puppy walker is to expose the pup to lots of different environments and public transport is a vital part of this, to ensure we have a confident young dog ready to start its training at around 12 months of age. We are pleased to be able to work in partnership with Network Warrington in order to train our puppies locally and we are always eager to hear from people who want to support blind and partially-sighted people by becoming a puppy walker or sponsoring a puppy.’

In the north-east of England the needs of disabled and visually-impaired customers has prompted Go North East to become the first public transport company to invest in the innovative Recite web accessibility platform.

The bus company enjoys a massive online following with thousands of people accessing tickets and services each day. A significant number of these customers may be living with a visual disability or learning impairment and so Go North East invited Gateshead-based company Recite to add their product to the company’s online platforms.

Recite is a unique system that allows any person with visual impairments, learning difficulties like dyslexia or literacy issues to use any computer/smartphone/WAP-enabled device anywhere in the world to access a website in a personalised way. The key is that no software needs to be installed, so it is a fully portable solution.

Stephen King, Marketing & Sales Manager for Go North East, explained: ‘With the introduction of smart ticketing, online sales, online journey planning and live travel updates, our website is now much more than simply a static source of information. In particular, the availability of online discounts for some products make it important that everyone can use the site. By adding Recite, we are giving visually-impaired and dyslexic users the tools they need to enjoy all the benefits that the website can offer.’

Ross Linnett, Managing Director of Recite, said: ‘For a company like Go North East, an effective and accessible web presence is now a necessity and, with many bus customers having special needs, the site needs to be fully optimised for all users.’
Imagine a large hall full of bright shiny new buses and coaches, attended by eager salespeople with bright shiny smiles and wearing bright shiny suits. That was what greeted visitors to the Euro Bus Expo at the NEC, Birmingham in November. At a time of economic hardship you might wonder if the UK’s bus builders were simply putting on a brave face or if the hardware on show is actually relevant to cash-strapped bus passengers. The answer is a cautious ‘yes’.

Look at the hard facts and figures. In 2011/12 in England outside London mileage on supported services in non-metropolitan areas dropped by 10% and supported mileage in metropolitan areas fell by an estimated 7%. These reductions, says the Campaign for Better Transport, ‘are affecting the weakest most. Concessionary journeys made up 35% of all bus passenger journeys in Great Britain in 2011/12’. And for fare-paying passengers there was an above-inflation increase in bus fares of 6.5% in England (5.4% in London, 6.8% in metropolitan areas and 7.6% in non-metropolitan areas). ‘Our concern’, says Stephen Joseph of CBT, ‘is that there’s more to come. These figures only show the impact of cuts on local authority supported services. In April this year there was a further 20% cut which we would expect to hit commercial services. That will show up in next year’s figures making them equally grim reading.’

The Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review reduced the budgets available for local councils and as a consequence also for local transport authorities. To meet the budgetary challenges, publicly-supported bus services (ie those not operated on a full commercial basis), have been removed, reduced, or the network altered.

The best outcome for passengers
Passenger Focus wants to ensure the best outcome is achieved for passengers following such decisions. It commissioned research to provide an evidence base of the impact on passengers of changes/reductions to their publicly-supported bus services and found there were four main types of impact on people’s quality of life and lifestyle. These are that passengers could not travel like they used to and made fewer discretionary trips; that dependency on others increased with awkwardness about asking for lifts and their travel
plans depended on others; sometimes passengers chose instead to pay for taxis or other paid means of transport; and there was a lack of spontaneity because fewer services on fewer days reduced the opportunity to decide on the day to go out.

And it’s not just bus services. There are fears that Government cuts to concessionary coach fares are reducing mobility of the elderly and the disabled. National Express has reported an anticipated fall of a million coach journeys in 2012 for those passengers eligible for concessionary fares. Prior to the 2010 Spending Review, older people and those with disabilities were entitled to a half price discount on long distance coach fares.

And to emphasise the funding gap between transport spending in London and the regions, an analysis of Treasury public spending figures by PTEG, representing the PTEs, reveals that spending on transport in London has now risen to £644 per head compared with £243 per head for the West Midlands and the North of England combined. The figures in the regions range from £198 per head for the West Midlands to £279 for the North West.

Few people would argue that the public transport spend in London is necessary and benefits passengers, but the huge disparity is hurting the regions.

What are the builders doing for passengers?

None of this makes comfortable reading, so what are the bus builders doing to look after the passengers who will travel on their products, and ensure that bus companies will continue to invest in new buses, which will in turn help to keep the builders in business?

Well, quite a lot. We have gone through the low-floor revolution, so that every new bus – and an increasing proportion of existing buses – is a low-floor easy access type. That was in itself a revolution, powered by upcoming legislation but recognising that making buses more attractive for passengers might actually hold on to existing passengers and attract some new ones. This in turn led to an increasing realisation that – gasp – operators should try to make buses more attractive for their customers, with bright interiors, attractive (even leather) seating, WiFi connections, visual and aural next stop announcements and the like. Instead of leaving it to the engineers to cram as many seats as possible into a bus that required us to scale several deep steps before we reached these seats, marketers recognised that one way to persuade people to leave their cars at home was to offer buses that were attractive to travel in and easy to use. Just like their cars, except of course there is considerably more room in a bus and you usually get a better view.

Today bus builders are concerned about Euro 6, the latest and most stringent exhaust emission legislation that comes into force over the next year for new buses. As citizens, this is a good thing as it will lead to cleaner air in our towns and cities and will protect the environment. But how will it affect us as passengers?

You won’t necessarily know you’re on a bus that meets Euro 6 standards, but you might like to know that Euro 6 has caused much head-scratching for our bus builders. The extra gubbins (excuse the technical term) needed for Euro 6 threatens to make buses more complicated, more expensive, heavier and thus less fuel-efficient. And of course for passengers that could mean higher fares because your friendly local bus operator will have to pay more to buy the bus, maintain the bus and run the bus. All of
this on top of the recent cuts in the Bus Service Operators Grant (which refunds some of the fuel tax bus companies pay) and Concessionary fare reimbursement, and of course the swingeing cuts to supported bus services.

**Are fares increases inevitable?**

The natural consequence of all of these actions is that we all end up paying higher bus fares. Now you may not believe this – but most bus operators really don’t want to increase fares as they know this leads to fewer passengers, but have they any choice?

Well, yes, as Euro Bus Expo demonstrated.

Although the bulk of the UK’s bus fleet is diesel-powered, there are practical alternatives, and these were on display at the show. Diesel-electric hybrid buses have taken off in a big way and ‘pure’ zero-emission electric buses are not far behind, as manufacturers get to grips with increasing their useful range and reducing battery size. And there is a fresh interest in buses powered by Compressed Natural Gas.

But most buses will still be diesel-powered and so manufacturers have been busy tackling one area that they can influence – weight. Buses have got heavier and heavier as they include more gubbins, to the situation today where double-deckers routinely weigh up to 12tonnes and big single-deckers are not far behind. There is a suggestion that the next generation of double-deckers, to Euro 6 standards, will be lighter and there was evidence at the show that ‘stretched midibuses’ with as many seats as a heavyweight single-decker could offer performance and passenger capacity, if not necessarily as long a life as their chunkier brothers; time will tell on that. But with several models weighing around 7.5tonnes and offering up to 45 seats (and up to 70 passengers including standees), we might see a move to contain costs this way.

Inside the buses there were quite a few leather seats and a few extras like tables and visual/aural next stop information. How the buses are specified is largely down to the customers, who will determine things like the number of seated and standing passengers, the seat spacing, etc, within legal boundaries. One measure that tells you a lot about how attractive buses will be to passengers is the number of seats on the low floor area. In the UK we tend to go for low-entry buses, which have a flat floor ahead of the rear wheels, but then steps often rising quite steeply towards the rear. For less mobile passengers, it’s the low-floor section that matters, and the best single-decker offered an impressive 29 seats in this area, with the rest averaging an acceptable 25.

Bus operators sometimes try to tell me that passengers don’t really care about many of these whistles and bells as long as a bus turns up on time at the bus stop. But isn’t it so much better when that bus is clean, welcoming, easy to use, comfortable and bright?

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**Bus Users UK Chief Executive, Claire Walters, has been out and about asking questions about bus design**

In the last month, I met a lot of people in the bus industry and asked a million questions about why buses are laid out the way they are and why we can’t have flexible seating in buses the way they do in the relentless TV ads for cars – you know the ones, where an eight-year old reconfigures all the seats to fit in five people and three suitcases, a small tank and several giraffes – that kind of thing.

That got me thinking about the problems on buses that are reported fairly regularly between people with buggies and people in wheelchairs and how there’s never enough room and so I asked the manufacturers why they don’t do that. The answer is they could do it if the bus companies wanted it and in Washington DC they already do! I’m told that DASH buses there have seats that drivers can fold up/down/turn around etc if more than one wheelchair user/buggy-pusher wants to come on and they have room for bicycles too. I’m not sure if there are any seats on them mind…

So it’s up to us to tell bus companies what we want our buses to look like and how they should be arranged – anyone want to help us design the perfect bus?!
Brighton Area Buswatch formally launched

Brighton Area Buswatch was formally launched by Norman Baker, Under Secretary of State for the Department for Transport and MP for Lewes on 5 October.

Brighton Area Buswatch is the new name for Bus Users UK, Central Sussex Group which represents bus users in and around Brighton from Worthing in the west to Lewes and Newhaven in the east and Haywards Heath in the north.

The group deals mostly with strategic issues affecting lots of people. It will campaign for improvements to bus services and fares on behalf of bus users of all local bus companies. It is working closely with local authorities, bus companies and local interest groups to build relationships and ensure that the interests of bus users are taken into account.

Speaking at the launch event, Chair Andrew Boag, said ‘We are lucky to have an excellent bus service in this area. This is reflected in well-used buses that are popular with all age groups. Our bus users have high expectations and we aim to ensure their requirements and aspirations are recognised.’

Norman Baker described Brighton Area Buswatch as ‘a great example of an organisation that helps get passengers the service they deserve by giving them a strong voice.’

On-line membership of Brighton Area Buswatch is free; go to www.brightonbuswatch.org. They’re also on Facebook.

Information blow for Devizes Passengers

Since Wiltshire Council closed the Devizes Tourist Information Centre in September 2011, our local group, Association of Devizes Passengers, has been trying to provide travel information. A café in the Market Place, right by the bus stops, agreed to give them space for a travel information desk, but sadly, the café closed in November, leaving the community and its visitors without a functioning travel information point. (The tourist information centre had been handling up to 20,000 travel inquiries in the year 2010/11.) The council’s Public Transport Unit had been providing local timetable leaflets, which had been distributed at the rate of about 150 per month through the cafe. The freephone for the Connect2Wiltshire bus service had also been in the cafe.

Wiltshire has a plethora of operators, 10 of which serve Devizes. Some duplicate routes, and others are reluctant to publish timetable information. The Association is looking into ways of producing its own integrated timetables and its most spectacular achievement so far has been a London-style spider map, displayed at each of the Market Place bus stops, showing all the places served by bus and coach from the town, and onward bus and rail connections. This has proved very popular, and they are working on a folded version to sell, with other travel information on the reverse.

The Association was nominated for an award from Wiltshire Council for working in partnership with other organisations, and was declared runner-up.

The group is also involved in saving the through train service from Westbury, Pewsey and Bedwyn to London. The pause in reviewing the Great Western franchise is giving the opportunity to mount an effective campaign, including planning better bus links to local stations.

See www.facebook.com/DevizesPassengers

Local Groups are essential to the success of Bus Users UK as the passengers’ champion, and we are keen to hear of local initiatives and successes that we can feature in the pages of Bus User. Send your news and photos to the editor (gavin@bususers.org).
A warm welcome to our new employees

We are delighted to announce the employment of three full-time Bus Compliance Officers for Wales with effect from 5 November 2012, monitoring bus services and reporting on performance. They are Michael Anderson, Nesta Jones and Sian Thomas.

Although the three Bus Compliance Officers will be employed by Bus Users UK in Wales, their posts are supported financially by the Welsh Government to help Bus Users UK to represent the interests of bus passengers, and to work more effectively with bus operators, local authorities and others to improve bus services and facilities.

Carl Sargeant, the Welsh Government’s Minister for Local Government and Communities said: ‘I am pleased to be supporting the effective scrutiny of public funding in support of bus services throughout Wales. All three Bus Compliance Officers bring a wealth of experience and enthusiasm to their roles, along with a keenness to work with bus operators and local authorities in an effective partnership.’

It is envisaged that the Bus Compliance Officers will be monitoring local bus and TrawsCymru services, working with local authorities, to help ensure that those services comply with the details that operators have registered with the Traffic Commissioners. The aim is not to catch out operators, but to help them also to identify where services could be improved. The Confederation of Passenger Transport in Wales – representing bus operators - welcomes the Welsh Government support for this compliance activity – as do the local authorities and the Public Transport Users’ Committee.

Their duties will include recording the timeliness of bus services at timing points; identifying if bus stops are fully accessible and have up-to-date information; travelling on buses to monitor the quality of driving, and whether the route taken complies with the service registration; monitoring and auditing concessionary bus journeys; monitoring and auditing funding support for the bus industry; promoting best practice in handling and investigation of complaints and providing a more joined up approach to representing the interests of bus passengers generally.

Margaret Everson, Bus Users UK Senior Officer for Wales, said, ‘I welcome the appointment of the Bus Compliance Officers which will add considerable weight to our team’s capabilities in improving the bus passenger’s experience of public transport in Wales.’

If any members are aware of any issues that our colleagues should be aware of in Wales, please contact us at wales@bususers.org.

Well done, Caerphilly!

Bus Users UK in Wales was the proud sponsor of the CILT Cymru (UK) Wales National Transport award this year for the category of Excellence in Passenger Transport. The award was won by Caerphilly County Borough Council for its Enhanced Sunday Network project. The photograph shows our chair, Gillian Merron presenting the award.

The revised Sunday network in Caerphilly is a good example of a council getting the maximum benefit out of the money it already has and illustrates what can be achieved working in partnership with stakeholders and developing an understanding of passenger needs and aspirations.
These events are an important part of the work of Bus Users UK, bringing bus passengers in direct contact with bus company managers and local authority officials, and providing a useful exchange of views that bus companies acknowledge provides invaluable feedback that can help to shape local bus networks.

*Your bus matters* events can take place indoors, where there is a suitable central site, or centred around buses outside, as these photos from recent events illustrate.
Roller coaster

My grandchildren live in a county south of the Thames that has some excellent buses and bus services but, during a recent visit, too many miles of bad road surfaces. This is no doubt the result of budget cuts, but it makes a ride more of a roller coaster than the smooth transport experience one would like (and can enjoy on the equally excellent trains in the area). It is particularly tiresome if you have to stand, or when making your way to or from a seat. There is perhaps not much the bus company can do to influence it; after all, as I pointed out a while back, they pay little for use of the roads. Some years ago I received a pamphlet from the AA Federation arguing for more money to be spent on repairs to road surfaces, suggesting that smoother roads would reduce accidents. I asked them whether they would increase taxation to pay for it, or reduce government spending elsewhere, perhaps on the NHS, who on their argument should have a reduced workload of injuries to deal with. (I’m not sure this logic would have persuaded MPs!) But it does underline the point that many lobby groups (including our own?) have apparently compelling arguments for more public money to be spent and rarely suggest where this money should come from. Perhaps Bus Users UK, like the AA Federation at the time, should reflect on this?

Are hospitals fertile ground for buses?

Talking of the NHS, I was pleased to find, opposite the canteen (sorry, coffee shop) in the local large hospital, a ‘live’ departure screen for buses. Not that it would have been obvious to non-bus-minded patients and visitors what it was. There was no reference to buses, no directions as to where to catch them, and the ultimate (suburban) destinations only shown with no indication of which ones went via the town centre. But it is a start. With new, bigger hospitals serving a wider region, located often on the edge of town where land is doubtless cheaper to buy and with high car-park charges to raise money for the cash-strapped NHS, travel to/from hospitals should be fertile ground for bus companies. Some do try, but others seem reluctant to stray from time-honoured routes. On evenings and at weekends, the best times for children and working-age relations to visit, hospitals are even less well served. But these days hospitals are often the largest employer in town, as local factories were at one time, and with variable shift patterns, carryings are less likely to ‘peak’ than they did for factory workers. Hospitals may not be a goldmine for bus operators, but surely offer the opportunity to make money by providing better services for staff, visitors and patients (especially out-patients) alike. (As an aside, I was once asked in a survey by a hospital trust to suggest ways in which transport could improve the health of staff. Only half tongue-in-cheek, I suggested abolishing their free car park spaces. They didn’t reply…)

This is David’s last At Large contribution, and we thank him for his well-reasoned and thought-provoking articles over the past few years. Ed
Have your say

Getting off
Stephen Morris calls (BU48) for as much attention to be given to facilitating getting off buses as there has been to getting on them. I would like to add a further consideration.

Most bus stops and their infrastructure were designed (if designed at all) for vehicles with a single entrance/exit at the front, or in some cases via a rear platform. Increasingly in recent years buses with centre exit doors have come into use, for good reasons: speeding up ingress and egress and serving to admit wheelchairs when the front entrance is too narrow or awkward for turning.

Except where drivers can draw up right along the length of pavement or build-out, there can be difficulties for many passengers, as my arthritic knees know well. To get off they may have to step down to road level, especially if there is just a short build-out for the entrance only, then climb up to the path, or even further, to a dropped pavement created for cars to drive out of garden gates, or they may be faced by the back wall of a shelter.

It would be unrealistic, practically and financially, to expect mandatory reconstruction, but all new stops should be designed to cater for centre exits, even when as yet no such vehicles use the routes that call at them. Existing stops should, as far as possible, be redesigned or perhaps moved slightly when roadworks of any kind are taking place in their vicinity and can absorb a portion of the costs.

M J Leppard, Public Transport Co-ordinator for East Grinstead

Continental blessings
I don’t know about Germany in general (‘Britain’s Blessings, BU48), but I’ve been very impressed with bus services around Freiburg (Guildford’s twin city which I visit from time to time) and the adjacent Black Forest. Two years ago on a churches’ visit I remember being impressed to find a bus back from an outlying village at around 22:00 on a Sunday or Bank Holiday after a wine-tasting evening. There wouldn’t be one at the equivalent outside Guildford unless it just happened to be on a main route to somewhere else, which I don’t think the German village was. I have also used rural buses in France on which my railway ticket was valid, but they were probably more part of the railway timetable than a comprehensive road network, which I agree is probably lacking. But I understand that Spain has quite a comprehensive long-distance bus network, and I’ve got the impression that parts of Portugal in the rural hinterlands of Lisbon and Porto have quite good bus networks, which I’ve used. But I agree we also have a good network in the UK, where timetable info is much better than Portugal (except when Stagecoach for a while ran buses to the west of Lisbon and introduced good timetable info). But German timetable info is good.

H Trevor Jones, Guildford

It is fair to say that, outside London, very few operators now specify separate entrance doors on their buses, and several have abandoned these in recent years, citing increased insurance costs and evidence of false injury claims from passengers using centre exits. — Ed

Recent personal experience supports the view that Spain and Portugal both have extremely well-developed long-distance coach networks, with high-quality vehicles (see photo), using motorway-standard roads to achieve times that can rival railway services. — Ed
Are vans being used as buses?

My photo shows possibly the worst example of an overall advert bus operated by Maytree Travel, Greater Manchester!

Malcolm Flynn, Manchester

In my emails to managing directors, I always ask why bus CCTV is not used for checking on driver behaviour at random. That simple step would deter poor attitude as well as poor driving. I have yet to be told why this cannot be done. Another management tool could be to require that all deficient drivers write a letter of apology to the passenger. You would soon have better drivers with this simple, cheap measure. Apart from the obvious benefits of improved passenger relations, a great deal of management time, and hence money, would be saved in investigating complaints. We all have a part to play too. If we witness poor driving standards, we must make the effort to complain.

I challenge the big three in West Yorkshire, namely Transdev, First and Arriva, to implement at least one of the measures above and see if the number of complaints/accidents is affected. Something must be done about this elephant in the room that no one seems to talk about. I fear that it is far more common than anyone will admit.

Paul Kirby, Wetherby

This is certainly concerning if it endangers the lives of passengers. As always, bus passengers who are not satisfied with the way complaints are handled by bus companies can contact the Bus Appeals Body (www.busappealsbody.co.uk) in England and Wales or Bus Passengers’ Platform (http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/public-transport/PVS/bus-complaints). Contact details for Traffic Commissioners can be found on www.gov.uk/trafficcommissioners. — Ed

Single-handed

I have just experienced a young driver on one of the Big Five buses doing everything possible to avoid using both hands on the wheel of a bus service. Either his right hand was on the window ledge or the left hand on his cab door (see photo). This was not just for a few seconds at a time; he was driving with only one hand at least 95% of the time through villages, towns and narrow bendy country lanes. He did this for a whole two hours with a full bus (of mainly elderly people).

Surely this is ‘driving without due care and attention’ and unlawful. If he has an accident, whoever was at fault and however minor, I would be the first in the queue to sue that company for negligence. My photos and on-bus CCTV would provide clear evidence of liability.

So you would expect bus companies to take this matter particularly seriously. I wrote to the same company last year on the same issue. On that occasion one-handed driving occurred on a full double-decker though to a much lesser extent than the driver described above. But it only takes a second for a child to run out and be killed because the driver’s reactions weren’t quick enough. I was given clear assurance by management that the driver would be dealt with appropriately. On the same day, unbelievably, it also happened on buses of another major company and an independent. Again my emails received appropriate responses so I did not publicise the matter. I did try to contact the Traffic Commissioner for my area but could not even find his name, let alone email address.
Choices for Tyne and Wear

I’d like to comment on the discussion on Quality Contracts and the privatisation v public ownership debate and ask that we take a closer look of different methods of operation between different areas, particularly between PTE and non-PTE areas, and the effects in those particular areas.

Firstly, regarding the article in BU48 by Kevin Carr, Managing Director of Go North East about Quality Contracts and bus operation in Tyne and Wear. He comments that there was no evidence to support the claim that national and local authority ownership before 1985/86 produced a better bus service than privatisation after that year. In fact as Kevin Carr is arguing against the case for Quality Contracts in Tyne and Wear, then I think he should look at the local situation rather than national statistics when he says that ‘the UK bus industry saw a period of dramatic entrenchment and decline’.

In England bus passenger numbers dropped 21% (7.1 to 5.5 billion) between 1976 and 1986; in the following 10 years of privatisation until 1996 they dropped a further 28% (5.5 to 3.9 billion), so in fact fared a bit worse under privatisation than under public. However, in the Tyne and Wear PTE area, there was an increase in bus passenger numbers when bus operations were controlled and largely owned by the PTE. For the same period (1976-86), bus passenger numbers went up by 18% against the national trend.

There was a great difference between how buses were operated in the metropolitan (PTE) areas, and the non-metropolitan counties of England that were largely provided for by the National Bus Company. Kevin Carr fails to look at the positive things that happened in Tyne and Wear and other PTE areas under integrated networks prior to 1986.

In Tyne and Wear we lost one of the most integrated networks in the UK. Fares shot up and driver’s wages came down, and there have been cutbacks to services in less populated areas, particularly on evenings and Sundays. Passenger numbers dropped by 60% between 1986 and 2010/11 (320 million to 141 million) and that’s still with about 45% of operating costs coming from the public purse, while profits of the companies are about 13% on average here. Go North East bus company, admittedly better than some operators, has recently introduced a ‘Smartcard’ similar to the London Oyster card on their own services; before 1985, we had fully integrated ticketing. Talk about ‘re-inventing the wheel’!

Some bus companies, in some areas, have some people who have quite a lot of expertise in providing some services that people want; they realise that this makes good business sense, and its a ‘win-win’ situation when it does happen – but I emphasise the word ‘some’, and it is something of a lottery whether you are in one of these areas and getting this service, or in an area where the operator is looking to make the most of a captive ‘user’ through fares and then move into a different sector.

Yes, I know that in one or two areas – perhaps Nottinghamshire where a rather stagnating subsidiary of the National Bus Company that didn’t want to talk to the public has been replaced by one of the better operators – things aren’t so bad (and note that the Nottingham City council still owns most of its bus company!). However, in most cases, and particularly in the PTE areas where we had integrated networks, things have seriously deteriorated.

In addition, it is interesting to note that the Competition Commission in its report on the Local Bus Market found that the system of tendering for loss-making bus services by local authorities ‘works well compared to the normal competitive market’. Lastly, while bus operators like Go-Ahead are highly critical of regulation under quality contracts, it is interesting that they are still keen to bid for tenders in the only place to have maintained a regulated network since 1985, which is London, and interestingly Go-Ahead is now the largest operator there, so why are they so against it?

Dan Alliband, Newcastle upon Tyne
Welcome

To new members
Arthur Alexander, Sandhurst; Corina Christie-Paige, Plymouth; Phillip Davis, Birmingham; Steven Dinage, Brighton; John Gray, Maidenhead; David Greening, Sherborne; Garth Hancock, Oxford; Julia Hayward, Eaton Socon; J G Jenner, Guildford; Gillian R Lynch, Gillingham; Richard I J Morgan, Luton; Madeleine Parkyn, Henham; Frederick Pearce, Twickenham; Derek Potts, Poole; David Smith, Bristol; Ian Robert Thomson, Cardiff; Charles Wenmoth, Penryn; Claire Walters, Bromley.

To new group
Radstock Public Transport Group
George Bailey, The Gables, Whitecross, Hallatrow, Bristol, BS39
6ER Email:george@whitecsl.demon.co.uk

Bus Users UK LOCAL GROUPS
Age UK Colchester peter@ageconcern.org.uk
Association of Devizes Passengers
www.facebook.com/Devizes Passengers
BABUS (Bedford Area Bus User’s Society)
www.babus.org.uk
BBUG (Bath Bus Users Group) chair@bath-bus-users.org.uk
Bradford & District Older People’s Alliance (BOPA)
www.bopabradford.org.uk
Brighton Area Buswatch brightonbuswatch@gmail.com
BUGS Bus Users Group Stevenage www.betterbuses.org.uk
Bus Users Shropshire bususersshropshire@hotmail.co.uk
Bus Users UK Northampton
13 Dryden Avenue, Daventry NN11 9DJ
Bus Users UK Oxford hugh Jaeger@hotmail.com
Bus Watch West Haringey c.barker@lineone.net
Campaign for Better Transport – Cambs
6 Hertford Street, Cambridge CB4 3AG
Campaign for Better Transport – West Yorkshire
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Cardiff People First cardiffpeople1st@btconnect.com
Christian Peoples Alliance Party (Northampton Branch)
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City of Hull & Humber Environment Forum
info@hullenvironmentforum.org.uk
Colchester Bus Users Support Group
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Dengie Hundred Bus Users’ Group (DBUG)
sarah@burnhamtowntcouncil.com
Ealing Passenger Transport Users Group www.egtug.org
Footprint Trust www.footprint-trust.co.uk
I.W. Bus & Rail Users Group iwbususers@fsmail.net
Kendal & District Bus Users (KADBUS) 01539 740761
Milton Keynes Bus Users Group
peter.ballantyne@btinternet.com
North Herts Bus Users Group (NHBUG)
marilyn.kirkland@north-herts.gov.uk
North Pembrokeshire Transport Forum www.nptf.co.uk
North West Surrey Bus Users Group
mjworley@btopenworld.com
Oxfordshire Unlimited daveholmes.home@btinternet.com

LOCAL GROUPS continued
Pattishall Parish Council ann.atkin51@btinternet.com
Penllwyn Community Partnership Sian Woosnam,
c/o 12 Highmead, Penllwyn, Blackwood, Gwent NP12 2PE
Radstock Public Transport Group
gleorge@whitecsl.demon.co.uk
Railfuture 0113 286 4844
Rame Peninsula Public Transport Users Group
j.cadwallader@btinternet.com
Rural East Lothian Bus Users www.rebus.org.uk
The Senior Council for Devon Transport
andrea@scfd.org.uk
Southend Area Bus User Group
donaldfraser17@btinternet.com
St Neots Area Bus Users Society info@snabus.org.uk
Swindon Climate Action Network
www.swindonclimate.org.uk
TravelWatch NorthWest
admin@travelwatch-northwest.org.uk
TravelWatch SouthWest www.travelwatchsouthwest.org
Tyne and Wear Public Transport Users Group
ne11ee@fsmail.net
West Leigh Residents Association
donaldfraser17@btinternet.com
Wirral Transport Users Association
17 Poulton Road, Bebington, Wirral CH63 9LA
Yorkshire Dales Public Transport Users Group
www.dalesbus.org

Joining Bus Users UK
We always welcome new members; membership is available to anyone who uses buses for whatever purpose. It doesn’t matter if you only use them occasionally. It’s also open to groups of bus users and organisations that share our concern for better public transport.

If you wish to join please write to us at Bus Users UK, Terminal House, Station Approach, Shepperton TW17 8AS, or visit our website, www.bususers.org to download a printable membership form or to join online using PayPal.

You can also subscribe using on-line banking; please email our financial administrator, Bill Wright, on finance@bususers.org, who will provide the bank details to be used and a reference to quote. Members can now pay by Direct Debit – forms accompany subscription renewal notices and can also be downloaded from www.bususers.org.

Annual subscriptions
£15 for individuals
£10 for senior citizens, under-18s and unwaged.
The subscription for local groups is £18.50.

Bus companies and local authorities that share our desire to improve communication with passengers and who support the Confederation of Passenger Transport’s Code of Good Practice can take out associate membership; please contact us for details at the Shepperton address or email enquiries@bususers.org.
RAY WILKES pleads for joined-up thinking for seamless travel

In National Bus Company (NBC) days you could go to your local bus station or library to look up any bus on the NBC network because they had a full collection of NBC timetables. I wonder how many people knew this? Now the Internet gives thorough access to travel times if only you know where to look.

If you ask your local bus company for advice on travelling elsewhere, too often you will be told ‘we don’t run there’ which is very unhelpful! The long defunct Keswick bus office, when run by NBC’s Cumberland company, used to give this response for the local NBC Ribble journeys which served the Keswick bus station. That’s how good regulated state ownership was! They did get it right in the end though.

In my view it is now so easy to help passengers with digital information that bus companies should seize any opportunity to make customers feel that the world, or at least the UK, is their oyster, and that bus companies will within reason be supportive of any traveller.

Of course we have a plethora of journey planners now; each rail and bus company may have its own, but rarely do they cross company boundaries. Some websites have journey planners; for instance First Yorkshire websites link to the Metro or the South Yorkshire journey planner which will tell you how to get around England even outside the ITA areas – but do not even ask for a bus journey in Scotland! Until recently the First site took you to a cut-down journey planner that only included journeys on First buses, so it is good to see this improvement. However, we should be able to find Scottish bus details as well.

It would be easy for bus companies to link their websites to Transport Direct or Xephos and bus timetables could then promote this facility. Those with smartphones have access to journey planners all the time, but may still need advice on which site to go to.

Would the Competition Commission (CC) complain if bus companies decided to give impartial advice? I fear they might. As it is I could travel from Malton to Leeds by train and get a PlusBus ticket to allow me to travel anywhere in Leeds for only a little extra. But if I made the same trip by Coastliner, PlusBus is not available. If the bus company wanted to offer this facility then it might have to get clearance from the CC. That would take too long and cost too much.

It would be very much in the interests of bus and train companies to promote seamless travel. Some bus companies are very dependent on tourists and all bus companies can benefit from visitor income. Despite PlusBus many people will use their car to reach a holiday destination because they lack access to information about local travel on arrival. The bus and train companies lose fares while the environment suffers and congestion is made worse by unnecessary car travel. There is every reason to start making local bus company websites useful for longer distance travellers.

PlusBus has been a major step forward and some bus companies are providing other helpful offers. Stagecoach Bluebird offers a half-price Explorer ticket for English and Welsh concession holders and Arriva Wales offers half-price day rovers to English and Scottish concession holders. But do enough people know? And are there any other schemes? I think we should be told!

And we love those few bus companies that still provide comprehensive timetable booklets!