



## **The Links Effect Improving Accessibility – Beacon Workshop The Britannia Hotel, Nottingham NG1 6BN 11 February 2009**

**Chair:** Gary Smerdon-White, Greater Nottingham Transport Partnership

### **Welcome - Gary Smerdon-White of Greater Nottingham Transport Partnership**

Gary Smerdon-White set the scene for the day by explaining to delegates that Nottingham has a well-integrated public transport system, with very reasonable prices, but people need to know what is available to make full use of it.

### **Overview of Nottingham City's link bus network - Andy Gibbons, Public Transport Manager, Nottingham City Council**

- A high quality bus service requires careful planning from the early stages, with constant reviews to ensure that the funding, routes and prices remain exactly right. Patience allows services to develop. Investment in new products ensures future-proofing, as do regular surveys to check what the service users actually require.
- A query was raised about why there aren't timetables on Nottingham City Transport buses. It was explained that the Link bus services are delivered under contract with a number of providers and each service does have a timetable. However having information available on the buses at the point of travel is not very helpful for passengers planning journeys and bus timetable information is available in a number of different ways: Shelters in City Centres have mini-timetables and timetable information is available online, by phone, text, at city centre outlets and 200 libraries. Quarterly surveys show 95% satisfaction with information provided.
- One delegate would like to see a suburban rail network as a way to ease congestion on the roads from the smaller conurbations. The appropriate County Council officers were not available to respond on this matter as the focus of this workshop was the link bus network. In terms of improving the provision of local bus services AG explained that work to develop Statutory Bus Quality Partnerships within the City boundary will allow the City Council to have more control over the quality of buses that come into the city. There is also a move to increase the capacity of the city centre to accommodate more bus services from the conurbation.

**Access to Employment – Citylinks and Skylink - Jay Clifford, Public Transport Team, Nottingham City Council**

- The Citylink services have been developed from the Park & Ride schemes to improve access to the two main corridors, east and west of the city.
- They have looked at employers' needs and filled in the gaps left by the commercial services, without competing with them. The services need to remain flexible and adapt as the employers wish to change, just as long as the service provides the greatest benefit and is cost-effective. The offer of incentives for employer and employee ensure the services are well used to maintain sustainability.

**Access to Health – Medilink – Ian Combellack**

- Medilink had grown and developed by keeping in touch with the needs of the users and making sure problems have been dealt with.

**Access to food and services – Locallinks and shoplink – Mark Garlick**

- Locallink and Shoplink provide a very local, flexible service to fulfil specific needs in residential areas. They improve access to local services by looking at the requirements of the people they are serving and addressing those issues. Promotion of the services is important to maintain sustainability.

**Questions**

Q – Where are fare levels pitched and what is their affordability?

A – Providers contract on the City Council's behalf so the City Council is able to state ticket prices, keeping below subsidy level. For Park & Ride it is important to keep prices below the cost of parking in the City centre. When Skylink started it was priced too high and had hardly any take-up. The cost was reduced and now it has a hardcore of regular users. Pricing remains sensitive; when there is not an integrated package fares remain higher so there is less usage.

Q – Timetabling for shift patterns – what do employers say?

A – Targeted journeys are discussed with employers, for example Boots. Employers don't always tell the City Council or the operator when shift patterns change, so continuous dialogue is needed. Skylink have asked for a half-hourly service through the night but this is a question of cost. There is also a need to meet the needs of a number of companies with a single service so when the shift patterns change at one it can be difficult to change the bus service to match.

Q – How can the City Council be sure they are not stealing custom from the competition? Does growth in Nottingham City Transport mean that commercials are losing their custom?

A – NCT don't run buses along the same routes as the commercials. NCT buses may complete their routes but they have no wish to compete.

Q – 5% of buses are not accessible for the disabled and these tend to be on routes which do not change and therefore they remain inaccessible.

A – TrentBarton have 100% low-floor buses and all NCT will be 100% low-floor when the last batch of vehicles are delivered in the summer. Link buses are also low-floor. Some small contractors will have to improve with the introduction of the Statutory Bus Quality Partnership to be allowed into the city centre. There are probably only 10 vehicles in total which are not low-floor.

Q – Who are the most difficult people to get out of cars?

A – There has been no research on that particular subject, but the City Council are seeing increasing numbers on the Park & Ride sites and these are cars which would otherwise have gone into the congested areas. Proxy information suggests that attitudes are changing.

Q – Some villages have problems since Nottingham City Transport bought out private companies as the buses will no longer stop anywhere to pick someone up, and only stop at the designated bus stop. Elderly people can't necessarily walk the quarter mile to the village bus stop.

A – Andy Gibbons explained that this matter needed to be taken up with the Public Transport Development Officer at the County Council, Andy Buckland. Hail and ride services had been tried but they are very difficult to manage wrt timetabling and there is also a question of safety. Demand-responsive services have been very successful in Lincolnshire but each area needs to be looked at individually.

Q – Is there a need to encourage developers to ensure that some bus facilities are available from the start otherwise people will use their cars, and stick with it even if the bus is put in place later?

A – Andy Gibbons gave an example of a development where the funding was put in place, and a bus service available to start with, but when more people were on the site the money had run out! Park & Ride sites help to with sustainability as there is two-way boarding.

One delegate expressed how impressed he was with the public transport development in both City and County areas as other shires have not been able to develop the Park & Ride sites.

### **Discussion session**

The delegates broke into small groups to discuss some of the key issues and challenges for developing a link bus approach to improve access to services. The following points were fed back:

- Influence with PCTs/ NHS/ health services can be hard to maintain as there can be a number of personnel changes within these areas so you can't always get back to the same person you dealt with previously.
- Big out-of-town medical centres don't always have bus services in place. It can also be

hard to run a service to supermarkets if the stores are not interested in getting involved.

- In all cases get hold of the top people, in the right place, and get the money and commitment out of them.
- The problem can be in getting joint working with PCT as there is a need to engage people in several different areas, for example, strategic planning as well as budget holders. Older Persons Advisory Group have found problems in this respect.
- Demand-responsive might be more cost-effective way of providing a service but that involves convincing the PCTs to put funding towards this. There is a latent demand for new services and finding what people want and then informing them of what is available can be difficult.
- The quality of vehicles and accessibility to various areas is key. Continual consultation with regard to developing services means people will be getting what they want. Infrastructure at bus stops eg raised kerbs, lighting, CCTV etc make people more confident to use the service.
- Medilink could be improved by extending the service into the evening for visitors to the hospitals. Generally there is a need for the Transport Authorities and LAs to respond to people's varying needs.
- There is a tendency to assume that no-one has a disability. Hail and ride should be a right!
- It is a challenge to know how well you are engaging with all sectors of the community – latent demand means that people are not using a service so it is possible to monitor the problems they face and what is needed to overcome these. Bus passes for over 60s or disabled people do track usage, both sectors of the community have high numbers of passes and are using them, which does indicate that needs are being met. The disabled person's forum also meets 2-monthly and provides feedback.
- Electronic information in different forms, like audio announcements on buses will be introduced. The same type of bus always running on the same route would aid people with visual impairments, too many types of vehicles makes it difficult for people to pick out the right bus to use.
- Private companies can be slow to get involved. TrentBarton are only partnered with regard to day tickets, not season tickets, this is not due to reluctance on their part, but they were already pushing ahead with smartcards in a slightly different direction which meant that the card base infrastructure would have had to go back. There are only 3 partners involved – NCT, tram and TrentBarton. The partnership took 18 months to set up. The tram is contractually obliged to do through-ticketing with NCT at present. They were allocated £100,000 marketing research money and employed an independent researcher sanctioned by TrentBarton and NCT to prove that there was a market, within boundaries and price, which wouldn't detract from operator tickets. A bid was put to IDeA to underwrite an experiment at a price which would be attractive, although more than a single operator price. Once both NCT and TrentBarton smartcards are in place it may be possible to integrate the different types in the back office.