

Information Strategy for Bus Services

Second Draft - November 2005

1. Background to this consultation

The importance of accurate and reliable information about public transport was recognised by national government as long ago as the 1990's. As part of the PTI2000 initiative (Public Transport Information 2000) it was proposed to establish a national public transport enquiry service before the end of the last century to replace the hitherto fragmented provision, which had been offered by a plethora of bus companies, local authorities and independent organisations.

The first step in this initiative was the creation of **traveline**, a regionally based telephone enquiry service designed to answer impartially enquiries about journeys between any two points within a region, regardless of the operator or the local authority area in which the service ran. Oxfordshire County Council is a member of the SELTA (South East Local Transport Authorities) consortium.

The initial set-up costs of the service are met by various regional consortia of local authorities, who also provide the timetable information, while day-to-day costs are supported by bus operators, who pay a fee based on the number of occasions their services are offered as part of journey solutions. The service currently offers only timetable information, but it is hoped that fares will also be offered in the near future.

traveline has now extended its service to internet enquiries, and has been complemented by Transport Direct, another government-sponsored service, which provides a web-based enquiry system offering journey times for all forms of transport, public or private, and allowing the customer to compare all options including driving. In due course it is hoped this, too, will offer price comparisons.

To supplement this telephone- and web-based information service, the Transport Act 2000 placed on local authorities a further duty to establish what information of any form they felt should be provided about local bus services ("the required information"), and also to determine how they felt that information should be provided ("the appropriate way"). This covered not only **traveline**, but also other, more traditional forms of paper information.

Oxfordshire County Council was one of the first local authorities to introduce an Information Strategy as a result of the powers granted by the Transport Act, and this came into force on and from January 2003.

During the intervening two years developments in other areas have made it apparent that the first strategy document was insufficiently specific, and while it clearly described the information which should be provided, it did not make

sufficiently clear how the costs of providing certain types of information should be met. Experience both in Oxfordshire and elsewhere has shown that, for any information strategy to be successful, it must clearly define not only "who does what", but also "who pays for it".

Other issues which have arisen include the relative costs of providing timetable cases on less frequent routes, sharing of timetable cases where one dominant operator provides the infrastructure along a route, and the responsibilities for publicising public transport in general terms.

This second draft attempts to clarify those issues, and is deliberately written to be more 'prescriptive'. Responsibilities are more clearly defined, and costs more precisely apportioned. It is intended to remove any doubt over responsibility for information provision, and to set out clearly who is expected to meet the cost of the various requirements of the Transport Act 2000.

In the interim period since the introduction of our first strategy, we have also now clearly defined a proposed hierarchy of services, from Premium Routes, which are expected to operate at 15-minute frequencies throughout the day to "local" services which will feed those fast, frequent services from smaller communities off the principal route.

The more frequent services are likely to be operated commercially by operators (i.e. without any subsidy from the County Council), and commercial services should meet the conditions imposed by the strategy in any case - it is sensible business practice for any company to publicise its wares if it expects more customers to use them.

Lower frequency, rural services have less potential to increase passenger numbers through improved information provision, so these services are likely to require greater support from the County Council. Many operators of contracted services have also expressed the feeling that the Council should publicise what they see as "its" services. However, while operators retain all of the fare revenue collected, as is the case in Oxfordshire, it is only reasonable for them to make some financial contribution towards increasing that revenue.

In order that the increased costs involved in information provision could be spread, the terms of the Information Strategy have been applied to contracted services as they were reviewed and renewed, and with effect from December 2005 almost all services operated under contract to Oxfordshire County Council are now subject to them. It is therefore appropriate to review the requirements of that strategy.

But it is important to remember that the Strategy applies equally to commercial services, and that standards will be enforced on all operators on a fair and equal basis.

2. Introduction

Information provision falls into a simple hierarchy -

- > Achieving initial awareness
- > Providing taster materials
- > Precise details
- > On-the-ground support

At all times, the purpose of information is to inspire confidence in the traveller. By making potential passengers aware of services it should be possible to sow the seed of public transport as an option at an early stage in their journey planning. Once that awareness has been created, it is important that the idea of public transport as a practical option is made clear. Precise details of when and where services operate must then be easily found, and those details must be confirmed by the presence of a timetable at the point of joining the journey.

The whole process should be designed to confirm at every stage what the potential passenger has already found out. Public transport as an option should become public transport as a possible choice through confirmation that the journey can be made; the possible journey should then become a realistic choice through convenient times and routes, and all the information gleaned prior to the journey must be substantiated at the start of the trip, both in the form of a timetable at the stop and on the vehicle itself in the form of a clearly displayed service number and destination on the front.

The County Council recognises that responsibility for increasing use of public transport and ensuring successful dissemination of transport information is shared between the operator and the County Council, and both operators and the Council produce information of differing types.

The Council strives to produce "general" information encouraging the use of public transport by running campaigns to increase public transport usage; it also has a role in improving infrastructure such as road layouts to make public transport operation easier and more reliable. It will continue to produce and fund the Public Transport Guide for Oxfordshire, which has a map of all bus services, and lists them with details of their route and frequency, or, should funding subsequently permit, more detailed Area Guides, giving details of all services in a specific area with full timetables.

Operators are required to produce all other, service-specific information. It is they who benefit from increases in fare revenues achieved from greater passenger numbers, so it is a reasonable expectation that they should meet the costs of achieving those greater numbers. Operators can agree in advance that the Council will produce information for them, and Council officers are happy to offer assistance, but the full costs would in all cases fall to the operator.

However, if any operator fails to produce information the Council has a legal duty to ensure it is produced on their behalf, and will recover those costs as a civil debt

if necessary. This is not a power the Council uses lightly, but it has a duty to ensure information is available for the benefit of passengers.

3. Local service registration

The process of information provision begins long before the service starts to operate. From the operator's initial decision to run a service, or, in the case of services subsidised by the County Council, a request to run a service and the award of a contract, information has to be passed between the operator and all other interested parties.

The operator is required to register the service with the appropriate Traffic Commissioner for the area in which the service will operate. This registration is a legally binding contract with a government appointee, and must describe the service they will operate, where it will go and at what times it will run. A copy of the registration for every service is sent to the local authority through whose area the service will run, but, with the exception of services operated under contract, the Council has no influence over either the route or the timetable.

The registration must be submitted, both to the Traffic Commissioner and the County Council, a minimum of 56 days before the service is due to commence. Shorter notice can be agreed by the Commissioner, but only if there is good reason, and, with the exception of emergency situations, short notice registrations are not encouraged. The 56-day time period enables the local authority to ensure details are available on **traveline**, to inform affected Parishes and others, and allows the operator time to produce publicity. Any curtailment of the registration period weakens this process.

While service details are never "set in stone", and can be changed at 56 days' notice at any time, operators are encouraged to keep changes to a minimum, and Oxfordshire County Council has endeavoured to agree a maximum of six dates per year when service changes are permitted. Further work is still required, but passenger confidence can only increase if they believe their service and the network as a whole is reasonably stable.

Initial agreed dates were the last Sunday in January, March, May, July, September and November, although subsequently the May date was moved to the second weekend in June and the November date to the second weekend in December to coincide with the Europe-wide change dates for rail services. Services operated under contract to the County Council will normally only change in June and December.

4. Hierarchy of services

The County Council has identified a hierarchy of services, described in more detail elsewhere in the Bus Strategy, but divided into three basic categories. As well as differing standards of service, it is anticipated that each category will have differing standards for information.

4.1 Premium Routes

These will provide services at a turn-up-and-go frequency - at least four services per hour during the daytime on Mondays to Saturdays, and at least every hour in the evening and on Sundays. Initially services on these routes may in some cases be "pump-primed" from County Council budgets, but they are expected to operate commercially in the long term.

High quality infrastructure will progressively be installed by the County Council, including bus priority measures where appropriate, improved shelters and new stops with timetable cases. These routes are also expected to include Real Time electronic information.

However, this sophisticated system must be backed up with the basic paper displays for all operators using that stop. This will be particularly important for those operators who do not feature in the Real Time displays. In the early roll-out of this concept, operators expressed a desire to provide at-stop information themselves, and this is expected to continue.

A separate Protocol for provision of information on Premium Routes has been produced, and will be circulated to operators by the County Council's Public Transport Development team, which is responsible for the infrastructure improvements on these routes. The requirements of this protocol form part of this Information Strategy.

4.2 Hourly or better services

These services are expected to reach all settlements of 1000 or over, and to run at least once every hour during the daytime on Mondays to Saturdays. These services will therefore have the potential for reasonable passenger numbers, and many of them will thus operate commercially without subsidy from the County Council.

In many places, these services will share Premium Route facilities, so will benefit in the longer term from timetable cases supplied by the County Council, but where they operate along routes with no other service, operators will be required to supply both cases and timetables.

4.3 Local services

These will provide links from remote areas, and will be less frequent, so less likely to achieve great increases in passenger numbers. They are expected to require subsidy, and are therefore likely to require greater council support for infrastructure and information.

5. What information should be provided?

5.1 The following information must be shown on any publicity materials, and forms the basic requirement of this Information Strategy:

- > The route the service follows - start and end points, major intermediate points, interchanges
- > The service identity - normally a number
- > The times at which the service operates - either precise times, or, if the service operates at a high frequency, the intervals ("every six minutes" or "at these minutes past each hour" with the repeating pattern)
- > Operator contact details - as well as, but not instead of ...
- > **traveline** contact details

5.2 Operators are not currently required to publicise details of fares on either leaflets or on roadside publicity, but if travelcard type passes are available, it is helpful to show these. As fares become more widely publicised, they should be included in single service leaflets, and once they are available through **traveline**, it will be a requirement to show them. It is nonetheless a legal requirement to carry a faretable on every vehicle, and this must be available for inspection on request.

6. How?

6.1 Research as part of the County Council's west Oxfordshire area guide project confirmed that printed information is still the most popular source for the great majority of bus passengers - 69% of respondents used either a timetable leaflet or a bus stop timetable to find out when their service operated.

6.2 All operators are required to produce a leaflet for a service or group of services. This can take the form of an individual service leaflet, a leaflet for all services along a particular corridor, or, in the case of smaller operators, a leaflet covering all their scheduled bus services.

6.3 All operators must also display timetables at all recognised boarding points along a route - these will normally be marked by a Bus Stop sign. However, where services or parts of services operate as "Hail&Ride" timetables must be located at convenient points along the route with a clear note stating that the service will pick up at any safe place.

- 6.4 The County Council will prepare and fund the general Public Transport Guide once a year, and will also produce "Where to Catch Your Bus" maps for larger locations. The County Council will fund the initial production of these maps, and will continue to do so if required to coincide with the two change dates for subsidised services in June and December; any updates required on other dates will be recharged to the operator(s) necessitating the change.
- 6.5 During 2005 a project was initiated to produce area guides, funded from the Government's Public Service Agreement. While they were extremely well received in the two areas which benefited, it has proved difficult to identify funding for the project to continue, but the Council will continue to try to identify other suitable projects, and possible funding sources.
- 6.6 Council officers inform Parishes of any changes to contracted services; however, operators are also encouraged to establish links with parishes through which their services operate, as Parish noticeboards and magazines can be a useful method of circulating information.
- 6.7 The Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO) has produced detailed guidance on the preferred standards for printed information in their "Printed Public Transport Information: A Code of Good Practice" (2002). They are also currently consulting on similar guidance for information at stops - "Printed Information at Bus Stops: Interim Good Practice Guidelines" (2004). Both these documents form annexes to this strategy, and operators will be expected to follow the standards laid down in this guidance.
- 6.8 All operators serving Oxfordshire are required to participate fully in **traveline**. The costs of the service are allocated to those operators whose services form part of a journey solution. Each operator is required to meet all costs attributed to it by **traveline**, but if an operator refuses to do so, the County Council will pay those costs on its behalf, and recover such sums with the addition of an administrative charge.
- 6.9 As previously mentioned, electronic Real Time information will be provided on some routes, and operators are encouraged to participate in this system. The cost of the equipment prohibits compulsion to do so, but as the system is expanded, it will be advantageous to include as many services as possible. This information is provided by signs at bus stops and elsewhere, and is also available on the www.oxontime.com website.
- 6.10 The data used to supply the Real Time system can also be used to provide "text messaging" information, and this, too, is seen as a desirable future development.
- 6.11 In addition, a national system of Electronic Bus Service Registration is being developed, and all operators will eventually be expected to participate in this. At the time of writing, further details are still awaited from the Department for Transport.

- 6.12 Operators are encouraged to offer information on their services via a web-site, and are welcome to link to the Oxfordshire County Council site subject to agreement. This site links in turn not only to individual operator sites where they are provided, but also to the national **traveline** and Transport Direct sites.
- 6.13 The Oxfordshire County Council site is progressively being updated, and will carry timetables for all contracted services in the course of 2006.
- 6.14 If they wish, operators may provide their own telephone enquiry service, but this must be in addition to, and not instead of, the **traveline** service.
- 6.15 And finally, but far from least importantly, drivers should undertake customer care training as a matter of course. Their interaction with passengers forms a vital link between the company and the customer, and in many instances they will be the first source of last-minute information.

7. Where?

- 7.1 Leaflets should be available through a network of local sources. Operators are encouraged to identify their own preferred distribution points, but Council officers will maintain a list of sources who have requested information, and this will form the basis of any network.
- 7.2 This will include as a minimum the operator's own offices, Tourist Information Centres, libraries, district council offices and Parish Councils. A more extensive network of village shops, pubs, post offices and community centres should also be considered.
- 7.3 Information can also be made available in the home - whether by a door-to-door delivery of timetable leaflets, or on a web-site - in the workplace and in schools as part of co-ordinated travel planning, or in hospitals for visitors.
- 7.4 Operators will be required to supply these, and any other sources who may request supplies. Where a local council has specifically requested information, either directly from the operator, or through the County Council, the operator must ensure that a regular supply is maintained.
- 7.5 Leaflets must be available on the vehicle.
- 7.6 Equally important on the vehicle is the final confirmation of information - the service number and route. The service number must be at least 200mm high, and the letters at least 125mm, and the display should be illuminated during the hours of darkness.
- 7.7 As previously described, a timetable must be displayed at every recognised boarding point along every route. As mentioned under the service hierarchy, the County Council will progressively provide timetable cases on Premium

Routes and on less than hourly routes. However, completion of the full Premium Routes project is not anticipated until after 2016, and operators will be required to provide cases on all routes with an hourly or better service unless and until a case is provided by the County Council.

- 7.8 In addition, where any single operator serves a boarding point which is not equipped with a County Council case with any combination of frequent and/or infrequent services at least 50 times per week, the operator will be required to supply a timetable case.
- 7.9 The County Council will progressively provide timetable cases at stops on routes with a less than hourly service in line with its programme of regular reviews of subsidised services; this will remove much of the financial burden from operators, but in return operators will be required to produce and display a timetable at every case along these routes.
- 7.10 In the interests of avoiding clutter and of improving the general street environment, the number of timetable cases at stops should be kept to a minimum. Where an operator, because of the frequency of his own services, is required to supply a case, he must also allow a summary display of up to two other infrequent services. If there are more than two infrequent services, or if the stop is served only by infrequent services, a case will be provided by the County Council.
- 7.11 Operators will be required to reach agreement on case-sharing, and on whether the operator of the less frequent services is allowed access to the timetable case, or is expected to supply timetables to the "owner". Keys to all County Council-owned cases will be supplied to operators on request.
- 7.12 All operators serving Oxford are required to supply leaflets to the Travel Shop at Gloucester Green bus station, and any operator serving a rail station is required to provide the Ticket Office with a supply to encourage integrated public transport usage.

8. When?

- 8.1 As already described, information is crucial at all stages of journey planning. It must be available before the journey, at the start of the journey and during the journey.
- 8.2 Leaflets must be available at all times, as must information at the roadside.
- 8.3 Service changes must be notified to the public at least two weeks in advance, by means of notices on vehicles and at stops, and on the operator's website if they have one. Full leaflets must be printed and available from one week before the change.

- 8.4 Fares changes must be notified one week in advance by means of notices on vehicles, and passengers must be given a telephone number or web-site address where full details can be obtained.
- 8.5 Where the operator of a service changes as a result of the County Council's re-tendering of a subsidy contract, the outgoing operator will be required to notify passengers of the forthcoming change by means of notices on all vehicles. There is no requirement to publicise another operator's service, but contact details for the incoming operator must be given.
- 8.6 Public Holiday service levels are only required to be notified to the Traffic Commissioner 21 days in advance, and publicised at least two weeks in advance. However, on-line journey planning systems now display timetables three months in advance, so operators are encouraged to include these details in their original service registration, or to notify changes with the standard 56-day advance period.
- 8.7 Any disruption to services must be notified to passengers, information systems and the County Council as soon as it is known. Clearly drivers have a crucial role to play in this process. If disruption is known in advance (for example, in the form of long-term roadworks) full details of the disruption and any service changes to accommodate it must be publicised at least one week in advance.

9. Conclusion

The importance of public transport information cannot be overstated. Growth in passenger numbers is unlikely to be achieved without knowledge of available services. While other measures such as bus priority are equally important to improvements in public transport usage, they are costly and take a long time to introduce. On the other hand, research suggests that for every £1 spent on improving information a £3 increase in fare revenue can be expected.

Oxfordshire County Council therefore encourages operators to recognise that any investment in improved information provision can result in a significant return. The Council is firmly committed to improving information, and hopes that transport operators share that commitment. Nonetheless, if necessary, the Council will not hesitate to use the powers granted by the Transport Act 2000 to achieve those improvements.

It should always be remembered that the Transport Act requires information to be made available for the benefit of the public, and if an operator fails to produce either the "required information", or fails to do so in the "appropriate way", without reaching prior agreement with the County Council, the Council has a legal obligation to do so on their behalf. The full cost of providing this information will be passed back to the operator, and this will include any reasonable overheads incurred in ensuring that provision and reclaiming the cost.

Annexes:

ATCO "Printed Public Transport Information: A Code of Good Practice" (2002)

ATCO "Printed Information at Bus Stops: Interim Good Practice Guidelines" (2004)