

Oxford Bus Conference - Another View

Noam Bleicher of the National Federation of Bus Users (NFBU) provides an alternative view.

I was fortunate enough to be asked to speak, on behalf of the National Federation of Bus Users, at the Centre of Excellence Conference in Oxford earlier this year.

The conference was held jointly by the Department of Transport and Oxfordshire County Council. The theme of the conference was *Buses – from Last Resort to Natural Choice*. The County Council are justifiably proud of the rise in bus patronage in the area in the last decade, against a background, nationally, of decline. The conference was an opportunity to share ideas, and was well attended by staff from other local authorities.

Following a welcome address by Cllr David Robinson, the keynote speech, by Prof David Begg of the Commission for Integrated Transport, was entitled *Why Must Buses Be a Real Success?*. Those who have seen Prof Begg speak, or seen him in the media, will know his inspiring style and forceful arguments in favour of bus investment. In a humorous way, Prof Begg reminded delegates that buses represent many more journeys and more mileage than rail travel and yet receive far less subsidy. Partly as a result of this, motoring costs have stayed broadly constant in real terms over the past twenty years whereas bus fares have more than doubled. The rise in bus fares has led to social exclusion among lower-income groups and the rise in traffic has led to higher child RTA fatality figures in the same groups. This was used as a powerful argument to promote the Commission for Integrated Transport's message that, for social reasons, higher bus investment is a "must". Finally, on the question of bus priority, Prof Begg reminded delegates that in many cities buses carry 50% of commuters on principal corridors – yet are seldom given anything like 50% of the road space. It was suggested that delegates bear this in mind when planning bus priority measures.

Having to follow such an inspirational presentation was not going to be easy, but Roger Williams, former Chief Transport Planner at the County Council, coped admirably with his talk – *The Oxford Story* – giving some background to the current situation. Delegates heard how, following rejection of extensive city-centre road-building schemes in the 1960s, Oxford was possibly the first city to actively discourage private traffic. Starting in the

early 1970s, the pioneering Park-and-Ride scheme was closely followed by bus lanes in principal corridors, cycle lanes and city centre cycle racks. A steady increase in bus provision had led to a "virtuous circle" whereby increased patronage led to increased revenue which was invested in further increases in provision.

An insight into how this has been achieved in the current deregulated environment was given by the following speaker, Philip Kirk, the Managing Director of the Oxford Bus Company. In his presentation – *Making Partnerships Work* – Mr Kirk briefly described how OBC, Stagecoach Oxford (the other principal operator in the city) and the County Council have co-operated to bring improvements in services and infrastructure. One of the ways of ensuring the continued success of such partnerships is to present a united front – a generally hostile local press is always ready to expose publicised differences between partners.

The following two speakers focused on bus priority – an essential element in the provision within this over-crowded city. Eddie Luck, the Assistant Director of Transport Development at the County Council, showed slides of some of the differing examples of bus priority at work in the city. In addition to standard bus lanes on local roads, Oxford has bus lanes on trunk roads, which had to be designed in conjunction with the Highways Agency. One of these ends in a signal-controlled gate to allow buses to join the main carriageway ahead of queuing traffic. On the city centre's main street, the High Street, a camera-enforced bus gate is closed to through traffic eleven hours per day. John Gant of the Department of Transport then gave a frankly fairly dry talk about the bus priority enforcement – it appeared he was more enthused by the legal aspect of enforcement than the underlying issues of helping users by speeding bus journeys. Still, it was welcome to hear that, due to a recent change in the law, it will soon be possible to fine offenders for bus priority violations in the same way as parking offenders.

Following lunch, two speakers outlined the county's strategy for buses in the county area in general, and not just within the city. Malcolm Buchanan of Colin Buchanan & Partners talked about two major projects being implemented by the county on interurban corridors – Premium Routes and Guided

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Transit Express (GTE). Premium Routes are *commercially operated*, running at fifteen-minute frequencies between Oxford and all of the closely surrounding towns. These are projected to be introduced within the next eight-to-ten years.

To aid these, and other routes, a Guided Transit Express scheme is also to be implemented. Two concrete guideways for guided buses are to be constructed, linking the City Centre with the northern and southern bypass roads. These will speed journeys from county towns, and Park-and-Ride sites, into the City Centre.

Tony Van Emst of Halcrow Group spoke about the Rural Bus Review which Halcrow had undertaken on behalf of the county. A three-tier strategy will be adopted. Commercially operated *Premium* routes as outlined earlier will be complemented by hourly *Interlink* services which will link other centres to those supported by the Premium routes, in some cases benefiting from the enhanced infrastructure on those routes. Local *Feeder* services will link smaller centres to these routes – often Feeders will be financially supported, and will include community transport schemes.



Park & Ride service operated by the Oxford Bus Company

To finish two dissenting voices were heard!

I spoke on behalf of the NFBU, and started by agreeing that services in the Oxford area are excellent. I cited high-frequency day services and late night services as examples of bus transport being practical for all purposes and for all citizens in

the area. This is an example of where competition between operators has benefited users. I went on to say however that the standard of information provided is very poor – where it is provided it is done so by operators, who only advertise their own services. I also said that there is sometimes little co-operation between operators on joint ticketing and timing on parallel services. The last two examples clearly show where competition works against users' interest. To sum up I suggested that, in order to retain the benefits of competition whilst losing the drawbacks, it may be necessary to introduce a transport authority co-ordinating information and ticketing, and also providing services by competitive tender, like Transport for London.

Peter Headicar, Reader in Transport Studies at Oxford Brookes University, closed the conference with further examples of the flaws in provision. Peter started with some analysis, to show that passenger waiting times were higher when two rival operators run identical services on the same corridor than if one operator ran a co-ordinated service a corridor with the same number of buses. This was supported with data gathered in the field, along the Iffley Road corridor in Oxford. Delegates were then shown slides of some of the less inviting sides to bus travel in Oxford. A slide of the regular stationary traffic tailing the length of the Abingdon Road (a main radial road to the south) was shown – Peter pointed out that this was not uncommon, in fact it is such a regular occurrence that bus routes had been altered to avoid it. This illustrated that The Oxford Transport Strategy, has succeeded in cutting City Centre traffic but had not addressed congestion in the suburbs. A slide of a drab, uninviting Gloucester Green Bus Station was then shown. Then an example of confusing information was shown – delegates were amused by a slide of a stop on a the busy London Road corridor adorned with several flags and three timetable cases, provided by the several operators on that corridor.

Despite the mention at the close of the conference of shortcomings of bus provision in the area, the note of the conference was upbeat. I hope that delegates, from operators and local authorities in particular, will take with them ideas for implementation around the country.

See main *YHTAR Focus* for further details of the conference.