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Time to kiss smart ticketing better

What do we mean by 'smart ticketing'? We need greater clarity about what it is, where we've got to and what we need to do next

► Keep it simple stupid (kiss) is good advice in general in life and certainly as far as smart ticketing is concerned. But the bus ticketing that passengers are getting outside London can be far from simple - and neither are the terms of the political and professional debate about smart ticketing.

Just as ticketing for passengers should be simple it would be better if the debate was too. That way there would be greater clarity about where we have got to on smart and what we need to do next in order to give passengers the simple ticketing they want. Indeed there's a tendency for people to declare they've cracked it rather too prematurely on smart outside London - complete with cooing feature articles in the trade press. So that whenever a new ticket is launched, or one or two of those tickets appear on a smartcard, the bunting is put out and victory declared. The high water mark to this approach being last year's announcement by operators that within a year they would deliver Oyster-style ticketing by themselves for all the city regions. So let's step back from the spin and obfuscation and be clear about what the terms of that debate should be.

Ticketing by smart media (the means) is one thing and the ticketing products (the outcome for passengers) that are carried on smart media are another. Neither - necessarily - add up to something that could fairly be described as the 'Oyster-like' outcome that passengers want. And even if there is a ticketing system that is both smart and simple, it is still not 'Oyster-like'

if other companies have their own cards and ticketing products in the same area and if there is another ticketing structure for multi-operator tickets layered on top of it.

This is not Oyster-style ticketing, what it is, is the same old confusing, disintegrated ticketing system that used to be on bits of paper but is now being delivered by smart means. In short it may be smart but it isn't clever. It may protect operators' market dominance, but it is not what passengers want. And it could still mean that passengers will need two smartcards in their pocket to be sure of getting the best deal. And that's assuming that they can work out what the best deal is in the first place given that in 2015 there is still no guarantee that fares information will be

available to passengers via the internet, or any other means, prior to them getting on the bus. If this is supposed to be Oyster you should send it back - it's gone off.

Take the much lauded Oxford scheme as an example of how spin on smart can lose touch with reality. Operators have used Oxford as an example of how they are delivering smart and integrated ticketing by themselves and without the need for regulation or government interventions. New ministers are taken to Oxford, Passenger Focus (as was) praised it - and so did the House of Commons Transport Select Committee. Bus operators took rightly sceptical councillors from some of our areas to see it - to prove to them that franchising wasn't necessary to achieve smart and integrated ticketing.

Now there's no doubt that the Oxford SmartZone scheme has benefits but Oyster-like it is not. It's immensely complicated to understand (there is no simple and independent source of information about ticketing in Oxford) but in essence there is no multi-operator smartcard or product in Oxford - there are SmartZone ticketing products that can be used on the two dominant operators for some of their joint operating area which can be loaded onto their different smartcards at a premia. The complexity of the scheme must be an advantage in one respect as one can only conclude that the great and the good on their day trip to Oxford didn't actually understand what the scheme does in any detail, as far from being the ground-breaking innovation that is sometimes claimed, its benefits are lower overall than the multi-operator schemes that PTEs and others have been running for years.

In some equally lauded areas ticketing complexity is actually getting worse and the premia on multi-operator products is increasing. Take Nottingham as an example. There are now five different smartcard ticketing systems - only one of which is to the ITSO standard for all products. Whilst the premia for multi-operator day and season tickets is now at 30%, and for day carnets aimed at part time workers it's 47%. As a consequence the use of the Kangaroo multi-operator scheme has fallen from 7.0 million trips per annum to 5.2 million. In short, in one of England's leading cities for the implementation of pro-public transport





“Smart, simple, integrated and ready for the future - that’s what ticketing should be”

policies, ticketing is getting more complex rather than less.

Simple, integrated, ready for the future - our vision for smart ticketing in the city regions, which we launched this week, is our attempt to get the debate on smart back to first principles. What is it that passengers want? How far are we in giving them what they want? And how can government, public and private sector work together to deliver it? A new legislative framework is a key element as franchising guarantees you smart and simple ticketing, and outside of franchising stronger powers are needed to ensure that the premia on multi-operator tickets is reasonable and that those tickets are both properly promoted and readily available. Otherwise there is nothing to prevent half-hearted schemes like Oxford becoming the best it gets, or existing schemes falling apart as is happening in Nottingham.

There’s also a need for government to show the same ambition they have shown in funding smart in London (for all public transport) and the South East (for rail) for the largest urban areas outside London. The Department for Transport-led Smart Cities Partnership demonstrated an appetite to encourage the public and private sector to work together to crack technical barriers to smart outside London, but it lacked both the scale and clarity over what constituted success on smart that DfT applied to its home territory of London and the South East.

There’s also a need to ensure the dots are joined between what’s going on for bus and what’s going on for rail on smart ticketing - which is belatedly beginning to happen through initiatives like Rail North and Transport for the North.

Finally, there’s a need to be alive to how the landscape for ticketing is being remade by transformative technological and social change. It is of course the case that while herculean struggles are going on to get comprehensive smartcard systems in place in the city regions, London is migrating to bankcards. This doesn’t necessarily mean that London’s strategic choices on the smart media format for integrated ticketing is the one that other city regions should also follow, but it does show the pace of change and how technological change is opening up new options and the consequent risks of delivering yesterday’s solutions to yesterday’s problems.

Oxford SmartZone has its benefits, but it is not ‘Oyster-like’



Meanwhile the rise and rise of the smart device, and of apps that can tell you how to get from A-to-B via an A-to-Z of possible transport modes could also be transformative, if those apps can also sell you access to those travel modes - from public transport to hire cars, car share, car clubs and bike hire. In places like Germany public sector city region transport authorities are well down the road towards being able to offer this.

Back in Britain we need to nail down a simple proposition on the public transport fares offer first before the add-ons can wash their face and contribute to a total mobility package that is

more than the sum of its parts. Smart, simple, integrated and ready for the future - that’s what public transport ticketing should be, and can be, if we can ditch the spin and obfuscation and concentrate on keeping it simple stupid for both passengers and ourselves. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► Jonathan Bray is director of the PTEG Support Unit. Before joining PTEG in 2003, his background was a mix of transport policy and transport campaigning.