



**JONATHAN
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The Dutch have their cake and eat it

Devolution and integration, good public policy outcomes and private sector innovation. The Dutch show you that can have it all

▶ The Netherlands has managed to pull off quite a feat. As a nation they have an integrated national public transport network whilst at the same time they have devolved responsibilities for its provision and allowed considerable scope for local innovation from both public and private sector.

Is it perfect? No.

Have they got further on devolution, integration than the UK as a whole has? Yes, they have.

With more devolution and more powers for local transport authorities on their way it's a good time to have a look at how the Dutch have done this and what lessons we could learn - which is why we have recently published a report from Netherlands-based consultants, inno-V, on *Devolution, Integration and franchising: Local public transport in the Netherlands*.

But although it's very worthwhile to understand and learn from the Dutch experience, straight comparisons with the UK are not always wise.

Firstly one thing we are better than the Dutch are, it seems, is the collection of statistics. This is part of a wider pattern, I suspect, of decision-making in mainland Europe, which rather than rely on stacks of appraisal manuals and long gestation periods, tends to apply the test of 'why on earth would we not do that?' to decision-making - and just gets on with it. So some of the metrics that are meat and drink to the UK transport debate (patronage stats,

for example), just don't seem to be there to the same extent.

There are also some cultural differences. It seems to me that the Dutch see public transport as part of society's plumbing: something you need unquestioningly if the rest of society is going to work. You don't build a house without plumbing (or do a cost benefit analysis of whether you need plumbing for the house), and you don't build a society and a successful economy without good public transport. And, like plumbing, Dutch public transport can seem more utilitarian at times - with less of the extremes we have in the UK (with Transdev's stunning Route 36 at one end of the spectrum and filthy buses with handwritten destination signs at the other).

Also, although the Dutch have embraced franchising (as indeed have familiar names like Arriva), it's not for the same reasons that some UK local transport authorities are doing. In the UK a key driver is the desire to create a more integrated public transport network. In the Netherlands integration was already there - part of the plumbing. They introduced franchising for reasons of efficiency and to some extent to stimulate greater innovation.

Other things are different in the Netherlands

“The Dutch see public transport as part of society's plumbing”

too in terms of the wider context in which local public transport is provided. Perhaps influenced by the fact that in part the Netherlands is a nation that was planned into existence through claiming land from the sea, planning is not the dirty word that some politicians see it as here.

There is a very strong tradition in the Netherlands of strong linkage between land use planning and transport. This planned approach extends into a degree of integration within transport provision in the Netherlands that can be startling in UK eyes. There is nothing strange to Dutch eyes of isolated rural bus interchanges in the middle of nowhere where a whole series of local services connect at the same time before leaving the interchange to its solitude and tranquility again.

Other aspects of integration in the Netherlands constitute far less of a culture clash. Integrated ticketing isn't a dream in the Netherlands - they've had it in paper form for years (the *strippenkaart*) and now they have it in digital form (the *OV-chipkaart*). Throughout the Netherlands you can use the same card wherever you go across the whole of the public transport network.

Not only that but the fares system is zonal which means wherever you are the fares are by and large comparable and consistent (though with some flex for local variation).

And, of course, there's the bicycle. The Dutch were less passive than the Brits were in accepting the high levels of casualties, severance and enforced car dependency that came with mass motorisation in the post-war period. The 1970s saw mass protest in favour of streets for people and bicycles, which in turn prevented the bicycle from being marginalised as happened in the UK, and instead turned cycle use into the global exemplar that it is now. There's an interesting video on the bicycledutch.wordpress.com website which confirms that it was politics rather than topography which is responsible.

The bus franchising part of the Dutch story came in as a result of legislation in 2000 which also decentralised the planning of local public transport networks. The format for franchising is down to the local transport authority and a wide range of different franchising models have been applied - from loose fit, incentive-based contracts which give the operator freedom to innovate, to tight fit, highly specified franchises. Whichever format

“You can combine good public policy outcomes with private sector innovation and delivery”



The demand responsive Texelhopper replaced conventional buses on the island of Texel



Arriva is among the private sector operators who operate franchises



A map of Texelhopper



The OV-chipkaart can be used throughout the Netherlands

is used, passenger advocate organisations have a right to be consulted and involved.

Meanwhile on the secondary rail network there has also been devolution and franchising initiatives - including coordination with the planning and franchising of local bus networks.

All of this has led to all sorts of innovative outcomes including the integration of community transport ('Buurtbus') into rural bus networks - with the franchisee for the mainstream bus network funding and maintaining the community transport vehicles which in turn supplement and integrate with the mainstream bus network.

Or the island of Texel where conventional bus services have been replaced with a flexible demand responsive Texelhopper bus (bookable one hour in advance).

Or the experiments in joint bus/rail franchises where bus services were re-routed to complement rather than duplicate train services as part of a single integrated network with staff working across both modes.

It has also made the Netherlands something of a laboratory for different approaches to franchises now that several rounds have been completed of differing types of franchises in different areas.

So what have the Dutch got from all of

this? On the buses they have significant investment in vehicles leading to a modern bus fleet which meets high emission and accessibility standards. There have also been significant enhancements in service levels and overall local public transport. Productivity and passenger satisfaction have risen and although fares have risen above inflation there is a high degree of fares integration but with space for local fares offers. The statistical base is not good on patronage but it appears that patronage remains stable.

All of this comes within the context of a very high level of integration across the country as a whole, land use planning that prioritises access by public transport, some of the best rail services in the world and a very high level of cycle use. Of course, in saying this, it's not possible to say that bus franchising would therefore have the same effect in the UK, as the Netherlands never went through the disintegrated, deregulated phase. Instead it went from integrated, municipal provision to franchising. It does however show some of the virtues of a franchised approach in terms of what you are able to specify under a franchised system which you cannot, by definition, guarantee under a deregulated system (the clue being the definition of the word 'deregulation').

However, for policy makers in the UK, the Netherlands still offers a lot to think about. Why does transport provision in British rural areas consist of fragments of expensive, separately procured and subsidised provision when the Dutch show how you can pool resources to buy a single network (including rail and community transport)? What are the pros and cons of different formats for franchising in practice? It also shows that a strong economy does not have to mean sprawl - it can have active travel and vibrant public transport as a cornerstone.

And the biggest lesson of all? Perhaps it is that if you are astute, through devolution and franchising, you can have national integration and devolved specification. You can combine good public policy outcomes with private sector innovation and delivery. You can have your cake and eat it too. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.