

# JONATHAN BRAY



## Is the bus sector young at heart?

Young people are the most regular users of buses and they are the future - yet their needs are too often overlooked by operators

If the young people category breaks down at all, it breaks down like this: under 5s; 5-to-11 year olds; 11-to-16 year olds; post-16. And post-16 fragments again into those in work, those in full or part time education and those without work. Layer in the complexities around local education authority supported travel and it starts to feel like a complicated maths exam question as to who should get what.

Here's the revision aid. First of all, accept that young people are not an undifferentiated mass but still apply a basic principle on fares. Keep it simple, keep it consistent and keep it flat. Because that's what works: and that's what the evidence shows gets the take up.

When Nexus went flat with their Child All-day Ticket (CAT) they saw a 15% increase in journeys by under-16s.

Merseytravel's £2 all-day ticket for the under 16s has also been a runaway success since it was launched last year. You can buy it on the bus. You can use it on any bus. It costs £2. That's it. A million were sold in the first year.

When young people in Barnsley's Youth Council were given the tough choices about what to do with what had previously been a free scheme they overwhelmingly chose a simple, flat fare scheme. Emily Rogerson, elected to represent St Michael's Catholic and Church of England High School, said: "This option is easiest to understand and means that young people won't have to travel between certain times of the day to get cheap fares."

But all too often flat, simple and consistent is not what young people are given. Too often they are given the exact opposite - variable,

▶ 17-to-20 year olds are more frequent bus users than anybody else - more frequent by far than even older people - to whom bus travel is given away for nothing. 17-to-20 year olds make nearly double the number of bus trips than the average. They never start to increase the number of journeys they make by bus again until they get their older persons' bus pass.

For many young people as a whole public transport is a big issue for them and their families. When asked what issues affect them, public transport is frequently at the top of young people's list of concerns. They rely upon public transport, and the bus in particular, not only to get to education and employment, but also to reach a whole host of valuable opportunities, from attainment-boosting, after-school activities and weekend jobs to visiting friends and volunteering in the community. Access to these opportunities is crucial to their growth and development.

For transport authorities and operators seeking to encourage more people to travel by bus, cultivating this young market is important. Positive experiences of using the bus from an early age make it more likely that young people will keep up the bus habit into adulthood and, in turn, pass this on to their own children. Young people can be powerful advocates for bus travel when we get it right - or damning critics when we get it wrong. In the age of social media, their experiences - whether good or bad - have the potential to spread rapidly to their peers, their extended

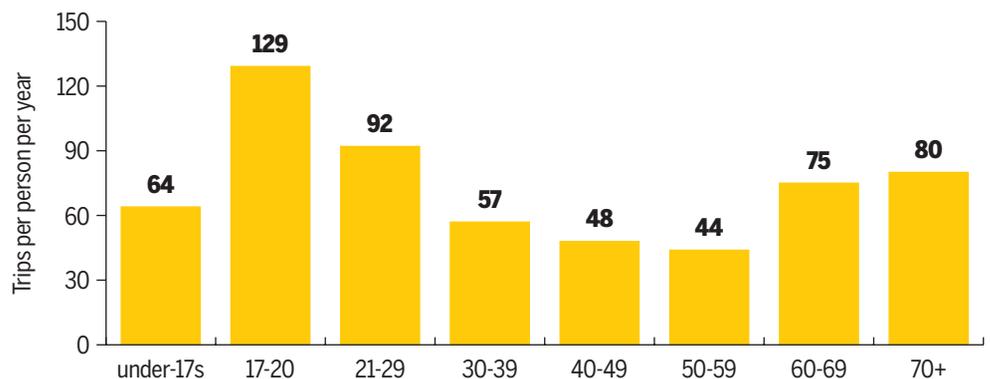
networks and beyond.

And with the world shifting under the bus industry's feet - through the implications of far reaching transformative technological change that young people embrace first - it pays to have young people on side.

OK, so buses are important to young people and vice versa - but there's a definition problem. In some ways there's no such thing as a young person. An under-16 scholar is a young person, but then so is a university student or a school-leaver looking for their first job. Their needs, the money in their pocket, and who has put it there, are very different. For example, under-17s are most likely to be travelling for education and 17-to-20s most likely to be travelling to visit friends.

### BUS TRIPS BY AGE (2010)

Source: DfT National Travel Survey, table NTS0601



**“Keep it simple, keep it consistent and keep it flat. Because that’s what works”**



**Leaders and transport operators in Merseyside signed a pledge to develop a landmark £2 bus fare for young people last year. A million of these tickets were sold in the first year**

complicated and constantly changing. Partly because, for some reason, whereas much thought is given to the needs of other categories of bus users, fares for young people often result from a book balancing exercise, afterthoughts and side deals - made worse, much worse, by the spending cuts of course.

And looming over all of this is the simple fact that there is a statutory duty to provide the older and disabled persons pass - but young people have been effectively cut adrift on bus fares by central government. With no statutory schemes young peoples’ fares inhabit a strange hinterland where in some parts of the country, multi-nationals sit back and expect to be paid by the local transport authority to do anything for the young people market, where elsewhere (Brighton and Hove, for example) the private sector can see a growth market and go out there and grab it, without expecting a local government subsidy to even consider it.

All of these factors mean that in many areas young persons’ fares are often set as a percentage of the adult fare (creating unpredictability and confusion). And with those percentages getting bigger, and with adult fares rising, this means the cost of bus travel for young people is on the increase (at one extreme in some areas educational attendance can tail off near the end of the week because kids can’t afford to get there).

The ‘busforus’ website illustrates what

a mess young peoples’ fares are in from a national perspective. In 2012, then transport minister Norman Baker told a Youth Select Committee inquiry that he was working with the industry on a website that, in the absence of any consistency on young peoples’ concessionary schemes, would at least let young people know what the concessions were. Fast forward to 2015 and the bespoke busforus website provides no meaningful fares information for young people other than to say there are fares. And for a website that says it is “helping 16-25 year olds get the very best from buses” it has nothing to say about the good value multi-operator offers that are available in some of Britain’s largest city regions.

So where do we go from here? Firstly, there needs to be more of a dialogue between transport providers and young people about what kind of fares offer works best for them in local circumstances. But this dialogue also needs to be about more than just fares - it also needs to take in the wider thorny issue that sometimes bus operators (and their drivers), and young people, just don’t get each other.

At its simplest bus drivers and operators can find young people a pain to deal with and young people think the same about bus drivers and operators. For example over half of under-19s surveyed by the British Youth Council and National Childrens Bureau found bus drivers rude (reversing the survey could

well come up with similar results). This is why the dialogue about fares needs to extend into a wider package that goes beyond a fares offer that responds to what young people want, but also into wider engagement - of which there is plenty of good practice out there on engagement with schools in particular.

Many operators, if they have got this far, are probably thinking this a lot of PTEG do-goodery. But think about this. Young people are your most regular users, they are your future users, and those operators that have thought through their needs and come up with the right products have made money by growing a market. And for local transport authorities - these are tough times, of course. But we know what works on young peoples’ fares so why not look ahead on a three-year cycle for what might balance the books, but also still sticks to the flat, simple and consistent rule? PTEG’s 2012 report - *Moving on: Working towards a better public transport offer for young people in tough times* - is a good place to start on what works and why. ■

**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.