

A less-than-ideal journey: the introduction of commercial smart ticketing for local bus services in England

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Received 25 January 2025
Revised 1 April 2025
Accepted 1 May 2025

Abstract

Purpose – In the broader context of the pursuit of a more sustainable transport policy in the United Kingdom, the paper aims to explore issues that emerged during the instigation, development and implementation of a national smart ticketing policy for England.

Design/methodology/approach – The primary empirical information in this paper was derived from 51 semi-structured interviews with 61 key stakeholders in the process of developing and implementing a smart ticketing policy. Participants were identified through a purposive sampling approach designed to engage respondents because of the position they occupy and the quality of information they can provide.

Findings – Difficulties emerged in the partnership approach to policy delivery made necessary by the privatised and deregulated operating environment, and a national smartcard scheme is still not in place. The Department for Transport appears to have struggled to resolve tensions between imposing the government's will on the one hand, and not wanting to be seen to interfere with the functioning of the market on the other.

Originality/value – A detailed insight into the difficulties of a previously unreported aspect of sustainable transport policy delivery in the UK, and an under-reported aspect of public transport smart card use internationally. The findings point to particular cultural and institutional difficulties that prevented successful policy rollout, and the implications of failure are considered in the context of attempts to promote modal shift from private cars to public transport.

Keywords Deregulation, Great Britain, Privatisation, Bus industry, Smart ticketing

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

An effective and efficient public transport system is an essential part of a successful sustainable transport strategy. Over recent decades, the transport system in much of Great Britain has been characterised by high levels of private car use, public transport privatisation

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We would like to thank Paul Simpson, Simon Kingham, Mark Holton and two anonymous referees for their comments which have very much improved the paper. Mistakes are of course all our own work.

Funding: This work was supported by the UK Department for Transport and Smart Applications Management Ltd.

Ethics: The research in the paper was conducted with approval from the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Plymouth.



and, certainly by comparison with key European competitor economies, limited provision of significant new infrastructure (Docherty and Shaw, 2019). Although the policy rhetoric of successive governments has recognised the importance of promoting more sustainable transport approaches – the sector has become the largest carbon emitter in the UK economy, at 28% (Anable and Brand, 2019) – little has been accomplished “on the ground” in relation either to uptake of technological innovation or behaviour change (Department for Transport (DfT), 2023, Parkhurst 2025). One attempt made by both Labour and Conservative governments to promote more sustainable transport has been to address shortcomings in bus service provision that persist after 40 years of privatisation. Among a range of issues resulting from the way in which previously nationalised or municipally owned bus companies were sold off, integrated ticketing – between buses and other modes, but also between competing bus services operating along the same routes – had all but disappeared. Because this made public transport journeys more difficult, and thus less likely to be conducive to modal shift than they might otherwise have been, the implementation of smart, multi-operator ticketing across England became government policy (DfT, 2009). In 2011, the minister responsible set a target for the scheme to be fully rolled out by 2020.

There is an extensive international literature on the use of smart cards in a public transport context (see Mulley *et al.*, 2021, chapters 33–39). Researchers have provided insight into various aspects of its big data generation and capture qualities (Yap and Munizaga, 2018) such as building user behaviour profiles (e.g. Cats, 2024), shaping demand forecasting (e.g. Liyanage, 2022), estimating carbon implications (e.g. Shang *et al.*, 2023) and calculating the patronage impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Lizana *et al.*, 2023). Less attention has been paid to in-depth analyses of how bodies responsible for public transport instigate, develop, adopt and implement smart ticketing systems (although see Yoh *et al.*, 2006; Iseki *et al.*, 2007; Cotias Vasconcellos *et al.*, 2007; Kinnunen *et al.*, 2016). Our paper addresses this gap by way of a study using detailed, semi-structured interviews with 61 representatives of government, bus companies and industry suppliers in England. Our findings suggest a general consensus among respondents, including those in the DfT itself, that efforts to develop a smart, multi-operator ticketing system were compromised by the privatised and – highly unusually in international terms – deregulated nature of the British bus industry. We argue that officials were forced to rely on partnership working because organisational or contractual mechanisms of policy delivery (Sørensen and Longva, 2011) were not compatible with the industry’s structure. In so doing, they struggled to resolve the competing tensions of imposing the government’s will on the one hand, and not wanting to be seen to interfere with the functioning of a privatised and deregulated market on the other. A national scheme is still not in place.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2 we review the bus sector in England and explain why smart ticketing rose to prominence as a policy priority. Section 3 contains a discussion of smart ticketing technology and the need for standard technical specifications and universal take-up among operators. After outlining our methods in Section 4, we present and discuss our data; Sections 5 and 6 relate to preparations for policy roll-out, developing trust between stakeholders, leadership and broader strategic sustainable transport policy considerations. A short conclusion in Section 7 brings the paper to a close.

2. Bus policy in England and the need for smart ticketing

The bus sector in England has been struggling for decades. Notwithstanding local success stories, largely but not exclusively in London, patronage outside of the capital had dropped from 4.5 billion journeys in 1985/86 to around 2.5 billion in 2018/19 (DfT, 2019a); by the year ending March 2023, it had started to recover post-lockdown and stood at 1.7 billion (DfT, 2024a). Reasons for the provincial bus sector’s decline are numerous. Some are socio-economic and reflect the increasing structural and spatial inequalities of the UK (Docherty *et al.*, 2019). Others are cultural, associated with the status of the bus in UK society. Since the Thatcher era of the 1980s, large sections of an increasingly individualist population have seen

their transport needs best met by the car, “the principal icon of contemporary experiences of mobility, embodying freedom, control, privacy, and convenience” (Clayton *et al.*, 2017, p. 708; see also Fitt, 2018 on the “loser cruiser”). By the start of the 2010s, fully 66% of bus non-users would only consider taking the bus if there were no other option available and 50% of those who did use the bus said the same thing (DfT, 2013). Relatedly, bus patronage has also been impacted by a radical policy of privatisation and deregulation (Preston and Almutairi, 2014). Designed to subject the industry to market discipline and largely ignoring broader socio-economic and environmental benefits of public transport (Docherty and Shaw, 2019), the policy resulted in the sale of most British bus companies before 1990 and the removal of service coordination powers from local authorities. Councils could identify gaps in commercially determined service patterns and pay bus companies to fill them (although they were under no statutory obligation to do so), but any prospect of running an “integrated” public transport network was lost as bus companies became required to compete with each other on the road. Overall bus subsidies were reduced considerably – one of the principal objectives of the reforms – but the financial benefits were generally not passed on to users who experienced fare increases, decreasing network stability and contraction of service provision (Della Porta *et al.*, 2019; Glaister *et al.*, 2006).

In London, by contrast, local buses were privatised through franchising – competition *for* the market rather than *in* the market as elsewhere – and thus remained subject to significant regulation. While there were also early operating cost reductions in the capital (Preston and Almutairi, 2014), Transport for London (TfL) chose to invest heavily in a high-quality bus network that is integrated with other public transport modes (and indeed policies: the investment was possible in part because of revenue derived from congestion charging). The number of annual passenger journeys since privatisation had doubled pre-COVID to more than 2 billion (and had returned to 1.8 billion by March 2023), almost half of all those taken in Britain [1]. Importantly the bus is less of a “last resort” mode of transport in London than in much of the rest of England, with 59% of residents using the bus at least once a week and 71% at least monthly, and bus use spread fairly evenly across age groups (London Travelwatch, 2022). Although across the country there has been sustained evidence of lower car use among younger cohorts (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2018), London remains the best example of large-scale bus (and public transport generally) use in the UK.

In the face of cultural and policy barriers to bus use, the Labour governments of 1997–2010 attempted to reinvigorate the capacity of local authorities to re-regulate and re-integrate their bus networks. Ministers emphasised both the vital role still played by buses in British public transport (notwithstanding declining patronage they still carried 2.5 times more passengers than the railways) and the need to improve the image of the bus in the minds of the travelling public (DETR, 1998, 1999). They proposed Statutory Quality Partnerships (SQPs), voluntary agreements between councils and bus companies, and mandatory equivalents that councils could choose to pursue in the form of Quality Contracts (QCs). One common thread across these arrangements was the need for local authorities to work in partnership with bus companies in pursuit of improvements in infrastructure, vehicle quality and network integration. Another was that they were not widely taken up (Knowles and Abrantes, 2008) [2]. One reason for this was the known antipathy among Britain’s big bus companies to formal re-regulation (e.g. *The Guardian*, 2013), but in the context of ongoing patronage decline and worsening urban traffic congestion, even the Conservatives legislated in 2017 to allow certain large urban authorities the right to introduce full-blown franchising akin to that used in London (DfT, 2017). Della Porta *et al.* (2019) characterised this as a move towards the “rehabilitation” of integrated transport planning in the UK, a process continued by the incoming Labour government of 2024 by extending franchising rights to all local authorities in England (DfT, 2024b).

It has been challenging for local and regional policymakers outside of London to deliver what Stradling (2007) and subsequently Clayton *et al.* (2017) have termed the “ideal” bus journey. To these authors, if it is to promote a modal shift away from the car such a journey

must be a pleasant experience as well as instrumentally attractive. Drivers place a lot of store in what [Steg \(2005\)](#) calls the symbolic and affective motives for car use – in short, how their car makes them feel. Especially in the context of an individualist culture, because it is comfortable, provides status, allows people to determine who they ride with and reflects/reinforces certain aspects of people’s character, using their car often makes people feel *good*, or at least better than their perception of what travelling in the absence of these things would be like (see also [Wilson, 2011](#)). It follows that if buses are to compete with the private car, they too must tick “feel good” boxes, which is why there is an increasing number of “better-looking” vehicles with comfortable seats, free on-board wifi and inventive liveries appearing in cities around the country. Like other public transport journeys, bus trips also have the potential to provide people with the time and space to do a whole range of activities – read, catch up on emails and social media, etc. – that are not possible when driving a car ([Jain, 2009, 2011](#); [Jain and Clayton, 2019](#); although see [Laurier, 2004](#)).

At the same time, as [Clayton et al. \(2017\)](#) point out, it is not enough to be affectively pleasant: the instrumental attractiveness of punctuality, reliability, cleanliness, safety, value for money – not to mention awareness that services actually exist and go where people want to travel – remains very important ([Sloman et al., 2010](#); [Mahmoud and Hine, 2016](#); [White, 2017](#); [van Lierop et al., 2018](#); see also [Transport Focus, 2020](#)). As does the ease of use. In part, this is determined by straightforward route networks, clock-face timetables, effective communication and so on. But it is also contingent on simple, good value and multi-operator ticketing, casualties of bus privatisation and deregulation that outside of London resulted in bus companies only selling tickets for their own services. By 2009 the [DfT \(2009, p. 1\)](#) had come to recognise that the “right ticketing ‘offer’” would be needed to “help deliver a move away from private cars towards public transport combating both congestion and climate change.” [Transport Focus \(2016, 2020\)](#) found not only that many people regard the privatised bus operators’ tickets as too expensive (with 48% in a 2016 survey saying that cheaper fares would be the single biggest factor encouraging them to use buses more often), but also that the complexity of existing ticketing and the need for “smart” ticketing was raised by over a quarter of respondents.

It is in this context that across England central government began working with local authorities and bus (and rail) operators to make ticketing smarter and more integrated. Building on the previous Labour government’s *Smart and Integrated Ticketing Strategy* ([DfT, 2009](#)), the incoming Transport Minister in the 2010 Conservative / Liberal Democrat Coalition government, Norman Baker, noted that: “Public transport should be the veins that transport the lifeblood of our economy, the people, around the country. It should be simple, and by making it simple and convenient more people will use it” ([Liberal Democrat Voice 2011](#), unpaginated). The [DfT \(2012, p. 5\)](#) elaborated:

This isn’t simply about providing more reliable, more frequent and more affordable services but making the best use of smartcards and multi-operator ticketing. In the years to come, we want any bus traveller to purchase tickets quickly and conveniently while seamlessly moving from one operator, or mode of transport, to another.

Baker’s point about convenience is easily understood in the context of promoting more sustainable transport, as it enhances the quality of bus travel from the user’s perspective and as such constitutes one part of a broader push to secure modal shift through service improvement. But his point about speed was also significant: smart ticketing can reduce dwell time at bus stops – the [DfT’s National Smartcard Business Model](#) assumed an average of two seconds per passenger – which reduces overall journey duration. This would have obvious appeal to passengers but would also impact positively on the economic efficiency of the fleet and on CO₂ emissions, as lower dwell times mean that fewer buses are needed to work the routes on which they operate [3].

Ultimately Baker’s ambition was to deliver seamless travel “by 2020 on one smartcard throughout the country” ([Liberal Democrat Voice, 2011](#), unpaginated), but other than for

retirees and people with disabilities, this target was missed. We examine key aspects of the policy development process over the decade from 2010 after considering smart ticketing as a concept and its interface with the British governance environment.

3. Smart ticketing: technology, specifications, inducements

A smart ticket is one stored electronically on a microchip rather than printed on a piece of paper or card (DfT, 2009). As technology has progressed, it has become possible to offer any number of ticket types (often referred to as “products”) – single tickets, return tickets, weekly travelcards, carnets, multi-modal and/or door-to-door tickets – across different transport providers in an increasing number of ways. Dedicated smartcards, which themselves became powerful and secure “computing objects” allowing for multiple applications (Markantonakis *et al.*, 2009; Sauveron, 2009), are now used alongside contactless Europay, Mastercard and Visa (cEMV) bank cards and mobile phones to register journeys. Time-of-day- and area-specific, as well as daily / weekly, maximums can be programmed in to ensure what passengers pay is capped at the cheapest available rate for their journey or combination of journeys. While early experiments in smart ticketing were focused on developing the necessary technology rather than as a response to any “market pull” effect (Blythe, 2004, p. 47), its benefits in making public transport more attractive to users quickly became widely recognised (Bryan and Blythe, 2007; Pelletier *et al.*, 2011; DfT, 2012).

Technical and other challenges make rolling out the introduction of smart and integrated ticketing a difficult task even in the most straightforward of operating environments (e.g. Yoh, 2006). Such challenges are amplified in a completely privatised and deregulated bus sector (Rumbles, 2018). Successive rounds of privatisation, local government reorganisation and outsourcing initiatives had seen the state hollow itself out to the point where it depended heavily upon independent providers to run, and in many cases determine the nature of, services on the ground (Fenwick and Bailey, 1999; Lowndes and Gardner, 2016; Shutt and Liddle, 2019). As such:

This vision [for smart and integrated ticketing] cannot be delivered alone and requires considerable partnership working between the public sector and transport operators ... A primary role of Government is not to deliver the infrastructure or develop ticket types, but to provide strategic leadership to deliver the vision, liaising with key stakeholders and looking to unblock barriers to delivery (DfT, 2009, p. 3).

It is important not to understate how considerable the scale of and reach partnership working to which the DfT referred would be: the “public sector and transport operators” here comprise at least central government, local (and increasingly sub-regional and regional) government, bus companies of varying sizes from small local concerns to huge multinational interests like First, Stagecoach and Go-Ahead, technology suppliers, and “broker” companies that have emerged to bring these various partners together by providing delivery frameworks and back-office capabilities.

Sørensen and Longva (2011) discuss partnership working as one of four different coordination mechanisms for delivering sustainable transport objectives (they also include organisational, contractual and discursive mechanisms). According to their conceptualisation, partnerships are characterised by a reliance upon trust and communication between members, who enter into any agreement as equal partners without the prospect of formal penalties for failing to meet specified obligations. Such arrangements are quite different to, for example, organisational coordination that works on command and hierarchy, or contractual coordination which derives its legitimacy from binding commitments and the threat of sanction for non-delivery. A system based on franchised operations can work very effectively in this way – in London, for example, where the Oyster smartcard system was rolled out in 2003, its use by operators was a stated condition of their franchise contracts. Unable to rely on this mechanism in the rest of the country, the DfT would quickly need to adopt the role of “first among equals”

within its partnership network, and three foundational interventions stand out in this regard: the insistence on a standard technical specification for smart ticketing, the deployment of indirect legislative measures and the use of financial inducements.

With so many stakeholders involved, the need for a standard technical specification was identified some way in advance of the publication of the *Smart and Integrated Ticketing Strategy*. By this point, a small number of geographically specific schemes had already been launched, but the high number of independent operating companies across England meant a lack of common infrastructure would be an obvious impediment to the development of a national programme. The DfT and its forerunner department provided “generous” funding (Blythe, 2004, p. 51) to support the development of a standard technical specification by a group containing representation from across the transport industry, ITSO (originally the Integrated Transport Smartcard Organisation). Work began in 1999 and a stable version of the ITSO platform was published by the DfT in 2004 (Oyster has now also been made ITSO-compatible).

It is one thing to adopt a standard technical specification, but in the absence of formal organisational or contractual coordination mechanisms, it is quite another to ensure it is actually used by everyone. A second crucial intervention was therefore legislation for the extension in 2008 of the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS) to include nationwide free bus travel for older and disabled people, paid for by the UK government via local authorities (Andrews *et al.*, 2012). The legislation was important because it would require the use of smartcards using the ITSO platform as the means of enabling interoperability across all bus companies up and down the country (Turner and Wilson, 2010). This cemented the place of ITSO as the standard technical specification for smartcards in the deregulated bus sector, and its role in any future development of smart ticketing in England was confirmed in the *Smart and Integrated Ticketing Strategy*.

Thirdly, the problem of encouraging bus operators to use ticket machines capable of reading ITSO smartcards (and now contactless bank cards and mobile phones) was addressed via a number of financial incentives – more “generous funding”. Pilot studies were set up to demonstrate the advantages of smartcards for local authorities and operators alike, and grants were made available to organisations developing necessary backroom technology to support industry stakeholders. The biggest financial carrots were the uplift by 8% of the Bus Service Operators’ Grant (BSOG) for those companies installing and operating ITSO-compatible ticket machines and, separately, a 2% uplift for the fitting of automatic vehicle location apparatus on their buses. BSOG is paid to bus companies to offset much of the cost of the duty paid on their fuel, and over time has become especially significant in relation to their bottom line: Rumbles (2018) calculates that at roughly 6% of industry turnover, BSOG payments became comparable to reported industry financial surpluses of 8.3% in urban areas and 6.7% in rural areas. Unsurprisingly given its significance to bus companies’ profitability, the rate of installation of compatible ticket machines was high. The roll-out of the ENCTS smartcards was completed relatively quickly and now accounts for around one-third of bus patronage in England. The next step would be to deliver a national smartcard for commercial trips, alongside the so-called “entitlement” ENCTS provision.

4. Methods

The bulk of the empirical information in this paper was derived from semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the process of developing and implementing smart ticketing policy in England, between 2016 and 2018. We devised interview schedules to contain a common set of questions, although a degree of flexibility was inevitable in order to allow each interview to take a natural course (Holton, 2025; see Table 1). Participants were identified through a purposive sampling approach designed to engage respondents because of the position they occupy and the quality of information they can provide (Baxter and Eyles, 1997). An element of “snowballing” (Crang and Cook, 2007) enabled a further round of interviews that increased the number and diversity of respondents. In all, 61 people took part in

Table 1. Common question set discussed with all respondents

- 1 When did you first encounter smart ticketing in your organisation, and in what capacity?
 - Did you have a decision-making role?
 - If so, can you describe it?
- 2 What was your initial reaction to the concept of smart ticketing?
 - Were you in favour or a reluctant participant?
 - Has your view changed? If so, why?
- 3 What is your opinion of ITSO?
 - What is it?
 - Why is it needed?
 - What is it achieving?
- 4 We are particularly interested in assessing the benefits or otherwise derived from the take-up of ITSO smart ticketing. What is your view in relation to smart ticketing schemes?
 - Benefit or otherwise to passengers?
 - Benefit or otherwise to the environment?
- 5 The delivery of the government's policy on smart ticketing in the public sector hinges on partnership working. Can you describe your experience of partnership working in relation to smart ticketing schemes?
 - How do you think partnership working works in practice?
 - In your view, could anything be done to improve it?
 - If so, what?
- 6 Have you worked with any partners such as government organisations, agencies or other, commercial organisations?
 - Who were they?
 - How did this work?
- 7 In your view, were there any lessons to be drawn from that?
 - With the benefit of hindsight, what would you have done differently?
- 8 Do you have any sage advice for other authorities / organisations wishing to
 - Engage in partnership working?
 - Implement ITSO smart ticketing schemes?
- 9 Is there anything else relating to this subject which you feel is relevant to our research?

Source(s): Authors' own work

51 interviews and to guarantee anonymity we divided for presentation the complement of respondents into four categories (Table 2). Data analysis employed NVivo software that extended to 15 subject areas and generated a top tier of 23 nodes with a further 146 nodes in lower tiers (Table 3). Each of the sub-nodes was populated with pieces of coded text that numbered 5,379 in total.

Table 2. Number and categories of interviewees

	Category	Interviews	Participants
Bus operators	Operator	13	15
Local authorities	Policy maker	7	10
Passenger Transport Executives	Policy maker	5	8
Transport for London	Operator	2	2
Department for Transport	Policy maker	3	3
Passenger Focus	Commentator	1	2
ITSO	Commentator	2	2
Consultants	Commentator	8	8
Suppliers	Supplier	9	10
Academics	Commentator	1	1
Total number of interviews		51	
Total number of participants			61

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3. Principal NVivo nodes. The top seven principal nodes accounted for 71% of the total coded texts

Principal node name	# of sub-nodes	# of coded texts
Benefits of smart	3	81
Bus operations	19	662
Clear objectives	1	38
Communication	1	26
Consultants	1	94
Customer proposition	12	474
Financial	6	240
Future proofing	1	47
Gaps	2	94
Governance	17	716
History	1	153
ITSO	33	1,238
Legal issues	5	49
Partnership working	3	342
Politics	1	163
Products	5	187
Seamless vision	1	51
Staged implementation	11	282
Suppliers	6	209
Sustainable transport	1	11
Technology	12	333
TfL	3	198
Worldwide smart ticketing	1	51
<i>Totals</i>	<i>146</i>	<i>5,739</i>

Source(s): Authors' own work

5. Participants' experiences of implementing smart ticketing policy

In this section, we develop a narrative from participants' responses in specific relation to the early stages of policy implementation, the development (or otherwise) of trust as partnerships developed, and leadership (or lack thereof) shown by the DfT.

5.1 Laying the groundwork

In her welcoming speech to the Transport and Ticketing 2015 Conference, the then Minister of State for Transport, Baroness Kramer, recognised the significance of partnerships in rolling out smart ticketing policy, making reference to [Tuckman's \(1965\)](#) notion of team development stages. The idea is that personal relationships mature during the development of the team, enabling achievements from the identification of problems, through agreement over roles and processes, to the ultimate delivery of solutions. Our data suggest the Tuckman model was perhaps an optimistic parallel to draw: whereas in a business context teams often come from within the same organisation to pursue a mutually desired objective with a common acceptance of risk, in the world of ITSO the teams were made up of representatives from different and often competing organisations coming together to realise someone else's priorities. Although SQPs and QCs had reintroduced the idea of formal partnership working, it remained an unfamiliar concept within the sector:

One of the experiences that we gained from our Statutory Quality Partnership scheme . . . is [that it was] the first Statutory scheme that obligated operators to do *anything* in this region since 1986. (Operator)

This spartan immediate background of intra-sectoral collaboration served to highlight what one (policy maker) respondent referred to as the "amazing range of possibilities" of things that could go wrong, or at least fail to come to fruition in the way that the DfT intended. While it is

true that some operators understood the potential advantages to be gained from multi-operator ticketing arrangements, such comprehension was by no means universal. The ongoing opposition of senior bus industry figures to disturbing the established competitive operating landscape emerged very clearly:

If it's about competing in a free market, then why would we share tickets? I mean you don't go to Tesco's and get a Sainsbury's voucher [4]. (Operator)

If you believe in competitive economics, the idea that [the] improvements you have got in this conurbation are because we have got two quality bus companies competing. So you have got lower fares, you have got quality in vehicles and you have got frequent reliable services; it's because you have got competition. Why would you want to take that away and say, "well OK, now let's all just work together?" I don't know if that makes any sense to me really. (Operator)

We will leave aside for the purposes of this discussion the extent to which lower fares, quality vehicles, frequent and reliable services and for that matter competition have been common outcomes of British bus policy since 1985 (see [Preston and Almutairi, 2014](#); [Knowles and Abrantes, 2008](#) for critical analyses).

Local authorities were expected by the DfT to lead day-to-day negotiations at the sub-national level, and in so doing councils became acutely aware of the divergent viewpoints of partners with whom they were working. Further complicating matters was the reality that, like operators, local authorities come in different shapes, sizes and political persuasions and possess accordingly different levels of resource, confidence and willingness in their capacity to deliver. On the one hand was the view that the public sector started from a significant disadvantage at the local level:

If I am being frank, I think bus companies like to use the word partnership because it sounds nice. I personally have talked to our chair about, do we really mean a non-aggression treaty? Because if you look at any kind of definition of partnership it typically involves shared risk and reward. Where is that *actually* shared risk and reward in any bus partnership in the country? (Policy Maker)

On the other hand, some officials, especially within the larger authorities, displayed a far more relaxed attitude towards the bus operators, recognising their legal responsibilities as private companies in a competitive environment and thus the need to demonstrate an understanding of their situation if any partnership was going to stand a chance of success:

Bus companies do what they have to do because that's what the law says. Their job is to reward their shareholders, so they do things to reward their shareholders – now get over it! . . . [A]ctually if I was a shareholder of First and they did some altruistic things to be nice to their councillors, I would go, "come on, this is my money you are playing with." (Policy Maker)

With the DfT's wish to see smart, multi-operator ticketing rolled out across the country not going away, a more widespread degree of pragmatism among bus operators appears to have taken hold that in turn had a galvanising effect across the emerging partnerships:

You have got to be realistic about what you are giving up and what you are getting in return . . . It is also bad news to have a bad relationship with somebody who is running a lot of your infrastructure. (Operator)

If you work well with somebody, like a local government or a local authority, they are more likely to give you advantages here and there, and I am not talking about turkeys at Christmas. I am talking, maybe they will – if you are co-operating with them, then maybe they will - pay for something that they wouldn't ordinarily have done, which is helpful. (Operator)

Pragmatism may well have been in evidence, although none of our respondents described this as representing (for example) the kind of agreement over roles and processes suggested by Tuckman's team development model.

5.2 *A matter of trust*

Consistent with [Sørensen and Longva's \(2011\)](#) discussion of partnership working as a coordination mechanism, virtually all of our respondents spoke at some length about the importance of building and maintaining trust between partners if the momentum gained from emerging pragmatism was to be sustained. [Yang \(2014\)](#) identifies differing forms of trust, from “swift trust based on shared team membership . . . at the team formation stage” (p. 860), to that which is borne out of history and practical experience. In the context of a privatised bus industry unused to working to others’ agendas, this latter form of trust was in short supply and the experience of those who had been involved in one of the few successful multi-operator smart ticketing schemes in the UK outside of London, in Oxford, was instructive:

First of all, I think you have got to have in partnership – you need history, you need to be able to draw on things that you trust . . . I say you trust everybody once don’t you, and if you get let down or basically shafted by someone, it’s going to be a really difficult relationship to build back up again. (Policy Maker)

There is nothing holding it together so that is why it does require a great deal of trust and confidence in your partner . . . We had to find a way through it . . . so it was the high-level people in the business that were doing it. (Operator)

In other words, trust had to be built swiftly through shared team membership to *create* a history of mutual dependability (see also [Austin et al., 2016](#) on the significance of historical relationships in partnership working). The involvement of senior executives was important because of the need for each organisation to project credibility – in the form of capacity actually to deliver on what was agreed between partners – around the negotiating table; the partnership would only work if each member demonstrated a track record of being true to their word.

Where “dependability capital” was beginning to be established, changes in personnel at the partnership board level needed to be carefully managed. Industry consultants/observers we interviewed noted the huge significance of “small p” politics as they recounted their experience of working with several partnerships across the industry:

It’s the personalities that drive the project, not necessarily anything else. If people are involved that want to deliver, it will be delivered come hell or high water. But if you have people who just think, “well, you know, we’ll get around to it,” [then] not a chance. You need to get the right people geared up to do it and that’s difficult. (Policy maker)

It’s the politics; politics rules everything. I think that is one of the most frustrating things when you have got this technology that is difficult enough to implement and then you have got personalities and politics. If you have the wrong people on a call, you are going to get nowhere. (Commentator)

In some instances, partnerships were constructed across the jurisdictions of several local authorities. This introduced the additional complication of potentially differing views and levels of commitment among the supposedly joint voice chairing the partnership board – effectively a partnership within a partnership, subject to the same dynamic pressures as the larger entity it was attempting to lead. It is difficult enough to establish the momentum necessary to deliver smart, multi-operator ticketing within a defined area controlled by one authority, but the patchwork nature of English local transport government arrangements brought further challenges:

The problem with transport is it spans boundaries and having a totally local decision could mean that you have got an extremely nice network with a hole in the middle because this local authority gives it zero priority and the others give it massive [priority] and so the whole thing is ruined. I think localism in transport, broadly speaking, is a disaster. (Policy maker)

A parallel but related development in the 2010s saw the devolution of some powers, including over bus transport, from the government in London to Combined (local) Authority areas in large urban areas – e.g. the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire – and some

attempt to coordinate transport services on a pan-regional basis (e.g. Transport for the North) (see also [Section 6](#)). From an operational point such moves are welcome because they allow transport to be organised at the scale of the “travel-to-work-area”, although more than one of our respondents flagged up the potential to create new arenas for squabbles as difficulties inherited from entrenched dislike and mistrust between cities/authorities used to competing with each other played out (see [Mackinnon, 2021](#)).

5.3 Leadership

Against this background, it was perhaps to be expected that the need for leadership from the DfT appeared consistently in the interviews with our respondents. Despite its own observation that a key role of government would be to “provide strategic leadership to deliver the vision” ([DfT, 2009](#), p. 3), not least by assuming as noted earlier the position of “first among equals”, the overwhelmingly dominant perception among respondents was that very little was ever forthcoming. From the operators’ perspective especially, the sentiment came through that the DfT’s approach to strategic leadership amounted to leaving things to local authorities and/or making the technical, indirect legislative and financial interventions described in [Section 3](#), and then letting the market respond accordingly:

We were being steered in that direction with 8% uplift on BSOG which is a not an insubstantial sum of money for operators to benefit from. (Operator)

The BSOG was the bribe that DfT has used to get people onto it. (Operator)

We have no enthusiasm for it. We are doing it because we are being pushed into doing it by BSOG, by political relationships that we would always want to keep. So I wouldn’t want to be the one that spoils it. [But] the incentives . . . [we’re] just being seen to do the right thing. (Operator)

Given the initial level of ministerial enthusiasm for smart and multi-operator ticketing, it might seem risky to rely heavily on others, and on “sticks and carrots” (see [Goodwin, 1999](#)), to achieve flagship policy aims. Underlining this point is the [OECD’s \(2001, p. 15\)](#) observation that improving governance through partnerships is not an easy task and requires leadership that makes policy goals consistent, strengthens accountability and provides flexibility in the management of public programmes (see also [May et al., 2008](#)). None of this chimes with the dominant perception that the DfT was generally “hands off” in its approach; local authorities and bus companies alike portrayed a vacuum of effective leadership at the national level from very early on in the process:

I don’t think the DfT have really covered themselves in glory over smart ticketing from the word go, but you can’t change . . . the past. (Policy Maker)

I can see that if you are going to dream about one system for everything then someone has got to make that happen and probably the DfT is the only organisation that exists that is able to do that. (Operator)

DfT should have taken a much stronger line with ITSO – where it was going – and looked in a much stronger way about how it was being managed. [But] they tended to try and keep at arm’s length from it on the basis that they liked to let a thousand flowers bloom and see which ones come to fruition, and I think they have done that too long in the case of ITSO. Well they have missed the boat. (Operator)

Respondents from within the DfT itself offered a candid analysis of their involvement in the process. More than one official confirmed the interpretation of colleagues from local authorities and operators through a more-or-less open admission that engagement with partners was pursued in neither an overtly active nor an ongoing manner:

It’s (ITSO is) owned by its members and [this] makes the governance of the organisation very, very tricky for them to be tough and business-focused and kind of move things beyond where they were when it was established. So that kind of structural thing I think was perhaps a bit of a . . . derogation of responsibility by the Department in saying, “ah well, we won’t be the bad guys, we will push it over there [to the ITSO partnership] – they can do all the enforcement stuff”. (Policy Maker)

This is not to say there wasn't a recognition among officials that they should be trying to match the words they had published in policy statements with effective actions. One told us that he had favoured an arrangement whereby the DfT would set up and run a direct smartcard partnership that could nevertheless have been owned jointly by the bus companies and the local authorities. Ultimately, though, there was insufficient support within the hierarchy: "I will probably start by saying the Department I see is not a Department that is religiously kind of focused . . . on ITSO" (Policy Maker). This civil servant's perception was underlined in 2016 when the DfT closed and disbanded its Smart and Integrated Ticketing Team, leaving no one individual or team responsible for delivering the policy despite the smart ticketing commitment staying live.

Left tending to the blooming of "a thousand flowers" were the local authorities, as the institutions chairing partnership discussions at the sub-national level. Although often seeking to address the vacuum created by the DfT's "hands off" approach, respondents articulated their view that a crucial opportunity to make progress early in the piece had been compromised:

[We needed to] identify some strong leaders, ideally at least one from the operator's side and at least one from the authorities' side and build partnerships round them. In other words what I am saying is we were really too late in recognising that what we needed was smartcard champions. (Policy Maker)

Ultimately, delay was inevitable, and, in the absence of an effective leader to nurture and develop "dependability capital" between partners, recurring:

Don't underestimate the amount of time it will take, has got to be [the] number one [takeaway]. You go at the pace of the slowest . . . Just to elaborate on why . . . You can't control everything, it is not like you are delivering the project on your own, with your own paid staff, because if you are, obviously you can be very clear about what the priorities are and you know what else they are doing. Whereas if you are working with third parties who are external to [for example] the County Council, particularly if you haven't had a relationship with them before, and you are building up a whole new relationship, with no real history at all, you have to take people at face value, and you have to assume that if they say they are going to do things by a certain deadline that they will. If that doesn't come to fruition, and that is a key deliverable, then it tends to push other things in the project back . . . If you think it is going to take six months, it is probably going to take eighteen (Policy Maker)

Referring back to [Stradling \(2007\)](#) and [Clayton *et al.*'s \(2017\)](#) phraseology, the evidence presented in this section does not suggest an "ideal journey" in policy-making terms, either in the way in which the national smartcard strategy was implemented or in the impact it had on most passengers' experience of actually using buses. By 2020, nearly ten years after Norman Baker had set out his vision of delivering seamless travel for commercial – as opposed to ENCTS-funded "entitlement" – bus trips on one smartcard throughout England, and fully 21 years since the DfT initiated work on ITSO, this element of a broader package of service improvements capable of underpinning modal shift had not been widely delivered.

6. A less-than-ideal journey

Having presented and discussed evidence from our interviews, we consider implications for the delivery of broader sustainable transport policy. Our first observation is that we do not consider it inevitable that partnership working as a mechanism *per se* led to this outcome (although there are acknowledged difficulties with the practice in British public policy delivery: see [Asthana *et al.*, 2002](#); [Johnstone *et al.*, 2009](#); [Wildridge *et al.*, 2008](#) for reviews of/evaluation frameworks for UK partnership working). While other mechanisms may offer stronger institutional framing and sanction – organisational mechanisms can command coordination and cooperation by design, and contractual mechanisms can specify how cooperation is to take place with resort to court ([Sørensen and Longva, 2011](#)) – they still rely to some extent or another on people working together. Here, though, without such organisational or contractual mechanisms, the absence of effective leadership and management was critical.

Reflecting upon partnership working in a different policy context, National Parks, [Austin et al. \(2016, p. 122\)](#) question whether it can ever be a science but suggest that in complex webs of relationships between organisations their research went “somehow to show that it is most definitely an art”. The DfT had acknowledged it was “first among equals” and intervened in this guise to ensure a standard technical specification and indirect legislative and financial inducements but seems to have lacked the support, willingness and / or capacity to lead and manage its partnerships effectively in a situation where the privatised and deregulated environment in which they were operating required it. It did not, in other words, master the art. “Muddling through” ([Lindblom, 1959](#)), depending upon negotiations crafted through the development of personal relationships at the local level, was not enough to compensate for an absence of effective leadership in clear support of a national-level strategy. The delivery of the ENCTS scheme had been more straightforward following the adoption of a standard technical specification because the DfT was able to incentivise the use of compatible ticket machines with the “bribe” of a generous BSOG uplift, but the challenge of introducing nationwide smart ticketing for commercial journeys was altogether different in scope and scale.

In specific relation to the question of *why* the DfT failed to provide leadership, one respondent tapped squarely into themes already identified in the existing literature on British transport governance (and indeed governance more generally), namely ideology and the nature of the civil service:

I think there are two things here about DfT. One is it doesn't provide leadership, and two it doesn't understand the problem. So one of the things that we get upset about is we say, “the reason we keep shouting at you is because we actually know what it takes to run a smartcard scheme. Sorry but this is the latest DfT official who is on the fast-track civil service route where you do six months here and then you do a year here and then you go off to [wherever] . . . Is this any way to run a country?” . . . There are cases when people turn up and do their six-month stints in the smart ticketing unit, then move on. (Operator)

The DfT and its predecessors have a decades-old pedigree of failing to deliver on significant parts of their strategies ([Docherty and Shaw, 2011](#); [Docherty et al., 2018](#)), and here this can be seen in the context of successive UK governments' ideological drives to neoliberalise, fragment and hollow out the apparatus of the state ([Mackinnon et al., 2008](#)). As one of our respondents put it, “[t]he government would like a public service but offered by commercial organisations”. Aligning the now considerable array of public, private and voluntary sector actors, even for relatively modest policy interventions, is difficult and relies heavily on building, and the effective management of, partnerships. The second point about the civil service's hierarchical structures and employment policies refers to its conception of civil servants as generalists who move between posts since their transferable skills are considered applicable across numerous policy disciplines (a point also applicable to government ministers); transport has been no exception in this regard ([Docherty and Shaw, 2011](#)). Such practice can militate against deep subject knowledge, despite the negative connotations of the so-called “cult of the generalist” having been apparent for decades (see [Fulton, 1968](#)). Compounding matters are frequent political reorganisations of departments and their responsibilities that distract staff from their principal business ([Better Government Initiative, 2010](#)). Indeed, one implication of the respondent's commentary is that officials might have struggled to provide the kind of strategic leadership the [DfT \(2009\)](#) had itself identified as necessary even in the context of a less overtly “new public management” policy environment [5].

In the ongoing absence of a national smartcard, Metro mayors are pressing ahead with proprietary schemes in their own urban areas. All large metropolitan combined authorities in England are now in the process of rolling out, developing following adoption, or actively considering bus franchising to obtain the same coordinating powers as held by TfL [6]. This would bring around 75% of all bus journeys in England within publicly-controlled networks ([Passenger Transport, 2024](#)) and signals a complete change of direction from that which has

prevailed since 1985. It seems a popular one among user groups: Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, the first to deliver large-scale franchising outside of London, found significant public and institutional support for his plans when undertaking an official consultation exercise ([Local Transport Today, 2020](#)). Whilst at least one large operator used to working in franchised environments in London and elsewhere in Europe expressed support for Burnham's proposals ([Pilbeam, 2019](#)), the most notable opponents of the proposals remained other bus companies including Stagecoach and Arriva. But it is now almost certain, especially given the new Labour government's Buses Bill, that these companies will have to adjust to regulated markets becoming the norm across much of England. Whether a national smartcard for non-"entitlement" journeys – as opposed to bus companies' own and/or numerous proprietary regional ones developed largely separately from each other – will materialise remains to be seen [7].

7. Conclusion

In the context of encouraging more sustainable transport behaviour through modal shift, initiatives to improve both the affective and the instrumental qualities of bus travel are important. One aspect of the "ideal" bus journey ([Stradling, 2007](#); [Clayton et al., 2017](#)) is smart, multi-operator ticketing that allows passengers to take advantage of easier, better value and more integrated journey opportunities. A lot has been written in the international literature about the use of smart ticketing in public transport but less attention has been paid to how delivery bodies bring their schemes to fruition. In this paper, we have explored the development and implementation of a smart ticketing policy for commercial bus trips in England. At the time of writing, it is more than 25 years since the DfT began work on ITSO and nearly a decade and a half since the Minister of State for Transport announced his intention to have "one smartcard throughout the country" by 2020. In 2025, the project remains incomplete. Our findings highlight difficulties that emerged in the partnership approach to policy delivery made necessary by the privatised and deregulated context of the British bus market outside of London; the DfT struggled to resolve tensions between imposing the government's will on the one hand, and not wanting to be seen to interfere with the functioning of the market on the other. Experience elsewhere, including in London, suggests that smart ticketing systems are rather more straightforward to realise in regulated markets, although troubles are not unheard of (e.g. myki in Melbourne) and the technological complexity of delivering *any* scheme of this nature was regularly acknowledged by our respondents. There is certainly scope for more detailed investigation of the kind reported here to tell a broader story of smart ticketing scheme implementation.

Time has now moved on to the point where it is worth asking whether a nationwide smartcard is still worth pursuing in England. Easy-to-use, good value and multi-operator ticketing remain an important part of the ideal bus journey, but passengers now use bank cards or mobile phones when boarding buses, and it is possible without a national smartcard to cap their expenditure to the cheapest available means of conveyance over a specified time period. There was a laudable ambition to ministers' vision that recognised potential marketing, loyalty and other such benefits associated with a national smart ticketing scheme, but in delivering the ideal bus journey there was only ever so much a national smartcard would have been able to achieve in the deregulated industry structure it was designed for. Franchising instead brings with it the opportunity for Combined and other local authorities to specify all, or at least more, of the aspects of the ideal bus journey on the services that operate within their areas. Differences in the nature and size of the franchised networks that are supported by different authorities, or groups of authorities, will of course emerge, but in relation to ticketing "mostly nationwide" benefits will be possible if each jurisdiction subscribes to a consistent basic framework in relation to features like fares capping. In any event, it is unfortunate that the benefits of multi-operator, smart ticketing will have come to most bus users in provincial England much later than they should have done.

Notes

1. Annual bus subsidy in London went from under £300m in 1997/98 to around £800 m in 2018/19, topping out at over £1bn in the late 2000s (DfT, 2019b).
2. Informal partnerships were much more freely entered into, however: Sørensen and Longva report some 380 quality bus partnerships in existence by 2001, as opposed to only 1 SQP and no QCs by 2007 (Knowles and Abrantes, 2008).
3. And, at least before the widespread use of automatic engine cut-out/electric traction, more time at termini with their engines switched off.
4. Tesco and Sainsbury's are UK supermarket chains.
5. See Lapuente and Van de Walle (2020) for a discussion of how "the success (or failure) [of NPM reforms] depends on the administrative, political and policy context those reforms take place [in]".
6. Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, North East, South Yorkshire, West of England, West Midlands, West Yorkshire.
7. In Scotland where the devolved government has not (yet) followed the English push to franchising, a partnership framework for the introduction of a national smartcard has been enshrined in legislation.

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