



## Item 5: Journey Planning – “I plan therefore I am”

### Background:

Two incidents in November led to questions about my previously unchallenged assumption that all journey planners whether on commercial or public sites or apps were much of a muchness in terms of commonality of results and quality of recommendations. First from the Polish based English CEO seeking journeys from Luton Airport to two separate family locations, second a journey as fast as possible from a Covid Vaccination Centre in South East London to Watford for an early kick off. In both cases getting acceptable answers was not as straightforward as expected, different planners gave different results and, in each case, better solutions were found from common sense and reasonable network knowledge.

My hypothesis is that it is still the case, as it was in the 1980s when web and touchscreen planners were being introduced, that the intended first point of contact with the public transport network for someone that does not normally use PT will be a journey planner (JP). Furthermore the familiar user will sometimes make unfamiliar journeys and a JP will be a useful aid in such circumstances.

An ATCO Drop In hosted by Passenger resulted in lively discussion and after correspondence involving several participants in the Drop In together with Anthony Smith of Transport Focus and the DfT National Bus Strategy and BODS teams it was agreed that reference to PTIC would provide a useful forum to discuss a specification for use research.

### What makes a good journey planner?

A useful starting point is to consider the National Bus Strategy. The delivery vehicles, BSIPs rest on three main pillars (franchise packages will follow similar principles):

- Agreeing and procuring a public transport network to meet the identified needs of an area;
- Taking short, medium and long term action to improve the speed and reliability of bus services – this encompasses far more than bus priority lanes;
- Communicating with the general public, before, during and after their public transport journeys – not forgetting to close the feedback loop! DfT is investing heavily in BODS to deliver this.

What do the public want to know first of all? Whether there is a public transport service or services to meet their travel need. Conventionally, printed maps and timetables have been provided for this, but back in the 1980s several of us active in ATCO were having success in using desktop journey planners, making them available in several authorities including Hertfordshire, West Yorkshire and (I think) Lancashire through touch screens in bus stations and other public areas as well as the fledgling internet.

A recent example, I needed to get fast from a vaccination clinic in Penge, SE London to Watford (no prizes for guessing why!). I tried 5 different journey planners, no names no pack drill. Only two offered me a choice. Three found an innovative trip that wasn't intuitively obvious and pretty good involving Thameslink and bus from Radlett, the most recently installed planner was hopeless, all fur coat and no underwear as we used to say “oop narth”, so I selected the one offering choice as it allowed me to plan for the likely event that the clinic was running late. After incurring the wrath of clinic staff for refusing to accept their advice to sit for 15 to 20 minutes before leaving I found myself on my third-choice journey. Reality then hit! There I was on a bus going to Brixton, terminus of TfL's Victoria line serving Euston with trains to two Watford stations. I was informed I should change in

Brixton – to another bus going through Euston bus station! Even allowing for interchange times with the Underground the Victoria line option at least halved the time for the Brixton – Euston leg and removed congestion uncertainty on a wet Saturday with central London very busy.

On the final leg, JPs couldn't really be blamed for not knowing about bus diversions on days when Watford FC plays at home (or could they?). That I was prepared for and minimised my walk time through local knowledge. More reprehensible is where buses are diverted because of road works performed under permit which are known in advance and more particularly where there is no suggestion of alternative permanent or temporary stops are located.

I understand (or did before machine learning and AI were prayed in aid!) how journey planners work. I was appalled to think back to our work in the 1980s and realise that, apart from slicker presentation, speed of answer and (variable) use of RTI to track the journey and suggest options to overcome lateness in some cases, there was little to commend some of the apps we have perhaps too easily accepted as state of the art.

### What to do?

Anthony Smith suggested the strap-line "I plan therefore I am" whilst also suggesting – somewhat cynically? – that many travellers just set off in hope. He also drew attention to a number of Passenger/Transport Focus reports that shed some further light on the issue. However, these were not specifically designed to obtain views on journey planning or were rather dated and Anthony felt further research would be useful. Clearly the Passenger Experience team at PF should be involved in the next steps, either directly if they have the capacity or at least in developing the specification. It may also be appropriate to involve Bus Users.

Having had a discussion at PTIC the next step, in my view, would be for Transport Focus, the Department, possibly Bus Users with myself and others representing PTIC to brainstorm a research brief and to request the Department to fund the study from their minor research budgets.

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