

ITSO 'approaching tipping point'

Take-up and use of ITSO smartcards is about to reach critical mass, says the organisation's head.

In an interview with *Transport Times* Michael Leach said: "Stagecoach, Go-Ahead and National Express will have 16,000 buses on ITSO in the next 12-18 months. It will be a tipping point."

Other developments outside the bus industry are adding to the momentum. London's network of Oyster card readers is due to be made ITSO compatible by 2013.

Meanwhile next month the long-awaited bus quality partnership for Oxford goes live (see opposite), under which Stagecoach and Go-Ahead will accept each other's tickets. This follows last December's landmark in which Cardiff Bus and Newport Bus began accepting each other's smartcards on a combined total of 350 buses. Since then there has been an increase in public transport use in Newport of 13%.

"Oxford is critical to ITSO," said Mr Leach. Agreement has been reached between Stagecoach and Go-Ahead's Oxford Bus Company, under the qualifying agreement process brokered by Oxfordshire County Council, covering the exchange of data and a settlement scheme to apportion revenue at the end of each day.

"For the first time it's true interoperability, with the opportunity to extend it to all the operators in Oxford. Previously, with existing multi-operator tickets such as those in some PTE areas, passenger numbers are estimated

based on survey data and revenue is allocated by formula," said Mr Leach. "Now we can base it on actual data."

There had been misgivings within the transport industry that although the ITSO specification has existed for a number of years, take-up had been slow. This began to change when the specification was adopted for concessionary travel cards.

Mr Leach added: "Last May there were no commercial schemes with the exception of two pilots in Cheshire and Bolton. Now we've got 13 commercial schemes. By the end of this year we're expecting three of the big five – National Express, Go-Ahead and Stagecoach – to complete their roll-out and have the majority of their schemes operating on a commercial basis."

Mr Leach said his focus as CEO of the organisation responsible for defining and developing the UK-wide technical specification for smart ticketing would "to finish getting our house in order" – improving quality of service and making it simple and easy to implement and more cost-effective. Recent developments have included the the new chapter 11 specification which made a wider range of transactions possible, and a new security management system, introduced last month.

Barriers remain especially to small operators adopting ITSO smartcards. One is affordability; another is to make sure small companies are not commercially



disadvantaged by accepting a smartcard instead of receiving a fare directly in cash. To address this, "the settlement process needs to be as close to real time as possible", said Mr Leach. Third is maintenance of the communication systems needed to ensure data from buses is transmitted reliably to the back office system each day.

"We're talking to suppliers about innovations and one is thinking about introducing an offering specially for smaller operators in the near future," he said.

Similarly ITSO is encouraging local authorities, which are responsible for the issue of concessionary tickets, to think about forming partnerships to offer a common back office system as a way of saving costs. In Wales a single back office and card management system has been created, incorporating data from 22 district council databases

– more cost-effective than having 22 separate systems.

Mr Leach also warns against "gold-plating" or wanting ITSO to be "all things to all people rather than something lean". Scotland, Wales and some English local authorities want to use the ITSO platform to cover wider services than transport – for libraries and leisure centre admission for example. Mr Leach says: "ITSO Ltd's role is to support the specification and if the specification enables something to be done we're agnostic about how you use it." But he warns about putting excessive demands on suppliers and argues this does not mean every ITSO-compatible piece of hardware has to have every function. "Does a card reader for a bus have to be able to do everything a local authority might want? No," he says. "The only universal product I see is a stored value e-purse."

Metro presses on with quality contract work

West Yorkshire passenger transport executive Metro is to continue with work on introducing London-style franchised bus services through quality contracts after West Yorkshire Integrated Transport Authority approved the strategy.

Metro welcomed a range of proposals to improve bus services put forward by local bus companies, but will continue the work on franchising in parallel.

Under a quality contract scheme Metro would be responsible for setting routes, fares, timetables and standards with private bus companies competing

to win the franchise to run services. In a *Guardian Leeds* poll 95% of respondents said "yes" to the question "Should Metro regulate Leeds buses?"

Metro had asked bus operators to put forward detailed partnership proposals to meet its objectives of improving services and reversing the decline in passenger numbers. The Association of Bus Operators in West Yorkshire, formed by the county's four largest bus companies, made suggestions on buses, ticketing and fares, development of the network, reliability and punctuality. But the ITA pointed out that the proposals did not offer a fully integrated ticket scheme, which

the PTE sees as a vital element.

The ITA will wait for the final report of the Competition Commission's investigation into the bus industry before making a final decision. In its provisional report (TT last month) the commission identified franchises as a possible solution in areas where particular operators are dominant, which the ITA says is the case in West Yorkshire.

ITA chairman James Lewis said: "As the report made clear, there is a significant potential cost involved in introducing quality contract schemes. However Metro is already paying out over £20m of public money each year for services that would not otherwise

run because the operators don't consider them profitable, yet still passenger numbers are declining."

• Cambridgeshire's guided busway will finally open on Sunday 7 August with services run by Stagecoach and Whippet Coaches.

Opening of the busway has been delayed by two and a half years by disputes between the county council and contractor BAM Nuttall. The busway links Huntingdon, St Ives and Cambridge. On Monday to Saturday from 7am to 7pm buses will run between St Ives and Cambridge at least every 10 minutes. Services to Huntingdon will be every 20 minutes.