

# Capturing the youth market

Operators and local authorities are investigating ways to encourage more bus use by young people.

**T**HERE are a lot of challenges in trying to attract young people to bus travel. As school pupils they're a more or less captive market. They can walk to school. They can cycle. They can be ferried by a parent. Or they go by bus. Generally, their choice of travel is pretty much forced upon them.

Outside school trips, their interest in bus travel will be influenced by the availability of services taking them where they want to go, and the affordability of fares.

Then as they move into higher education or employment they face the same choices as face most adults. To buy a car, or not, being the biggest. Figures from the Department for Transport show that the number of 17 to 19-year-olds taking a driving test has fallen by 18 per cent between 2007 and 2012. That's a big reduction. Is it also a business opportunity?

News stories featuring young people and bus travel have been prominent in the media across the UK this month, some perhaps prompted by school holidays. And the common factor across most of the reports is the need to make travel affordable.

Affordable and efficient public transport is a key campaign this year of the UK Youth Parliament, which represents youth councils nationally. A survey undertaken by UK Youth Parliament members in North Yorkshire with just over 5,000 responses – an impressive level of engagement – found that making public transport cheaper, better and accessible for all was



Passenger Focus director David Sidebottom.

the number one issue for young people in the county.

In its 2013 manifesto the UK Youth Parliament calls for subsidised public transport for young people who are in full time education or are under the age of 18, arguing that they should not pay more than half the adult fare.

This concern about fares is echoed in work done by Passenger Focus. Director David Sidebottom reports frustration amongst younger passengers about different fare levels for school, university and for those characterised as NEETs – not in employment, education or training.

North Yorkshire is one of the councils which has addressed the issue of affordability with its "Ride around for a pound" scheme. This started in the Craven district in 2011, and was extended in 2012 and again this year with under-19s paying a £1 fare for a day's

travel on many services in the county throughout the summer. This year's additions are schemes in Scarborough (with EYMS subsidiary Scarborough & District) and in Selby (Arriva).

An analysis by the North Yorkshire Youth Council of last year's scheme points to an increase of 62 per cent in the number of young people using buses in Richmond and Hambleton, with just over 10,000 trips made. The number of users in Craven, however, actually dropped,

An online survey by the NYCC throws up some interesting figures (with the proviso that the number of respondents is not published). Facebook was the most popular media that young people used to find out about the promotion, a reminder – if one were needed – of the importance of social media in engaging with a new generation of customers.

The promotion encouraged bus use, with 38 per cent of respondents saying it made them use the bus more often, and 28 per cent saying they had either not used buses before, or had used them rarely. And, encouragingly, 81 per cent of respondents had a good or great experience using "Ride around for a pound".

And while the youth of North Yorkshire appear keyed in to fares on Facebook, Sidebottom notes that more widely the bus industry is not always seen as part of the digital age. He notes: "There's a feeling among younger passengers that it's just a bus company. Why would they have a website?"



Worcestershire county council has just announced the launch in September of a new fares package for young people aged 11 to 19 and at school or college. They will pay a single fare of £1, £1.50 or £2 depending on where they are travelling – and this fare will be available year-round, not just in term time. A suggestion that the upper age limit be 25 and that the scheme include unemployed people was rejected on the grounds of cost.

Many urban areas have long-established tickets aimed at younger people. In Greater Manchester, for example, there's a System One Young Person Bus Saver which offers 16 to 21-year-olds a week's travel for £14.90, which is £5 cheaper than the standard adult ticket. In West Yorkshire a Student Plus MetroCard gives under-22s a week's bus and train travel for £20.90, a considerable saving on a system-wide adult MetroCard at £37.30. Transport for London offers a range of reduced-rate

Oyster cards for young people, the most recent addition being one targeted at apprentices. Under-15s travel free in London.

The London experience has been analysed in the current edition of the Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health. The findings of researchers include an increase in the number of short trips by young people, and a drop in the number of car trips. The researchers conclude: "The introduction of free bus travel for young people had little impact on active travel overall and shifted some travel from car to buses that could help broader environmental objectives."

And while environmental benefits might not be a key part of a strategy to attract younger customers, it is an important plus point, particularly in a generation likely to be more environmentally-aware than their parents.

There is also the matter of engagement with young people.

Early next month West Sussex county council is staging a one-day conference in Crawley to give young people the opportunity to debate local transport issues with transport professionals and decision-makers. It has been organised by the Young People's Travel Forum in association with the West Sussex Youth Cabinet, Metrobus, the Sussex Community Rail Partnership and the K2 Leisure Centre. It follows a similar conference held at County Hall in Chichester last year which was attended by more than 30 young people from across West Sussex.

Finally, there are issues surrounding the availability of information. Passenger Focus's Sidebottom says that passengers' concerns about buying the best-value ticket apply to buses as well as trains. This relates to wider issues of information provision but there can be added difficulties for younger people who may, for example, be reluctant to ask drivers for help or advice.

Live timetable information at schools is valuable, not just in its direct benefits, but in the subtle message that buses really are connected – literally – to the modern world of communications. Luton Sixth Form College has just installed such a display for the two Arriva routes passing its main entrance.

Student development advisor Butch Fazal says: "We've had complaints for a number of years about the efficiency of the bus service, and this year the Student Council pledged to look at the issue. We did a survey of 150 students who actually took the bus. An overwhelming majority said the most annoying thing was the punctuality – you could be waiting for five minutes, you could be waiting for half-an-hour."

"The overriding thing, for me, is how effective partnership working can be if it's done properly. This has been a partnership between students and senior management here, and Luton borough council and Arriva." □