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Des McKibbin

A comparison of urban bus fares in Europe

1 Background and context

The last ten years have seen a significant increase in public transport passenger numbers within Northern Ireland (see figure one):

- Overall, the total number of public transport passenger journeys has increased by 8.1% from 71.2 million in 2001-02 to almost 77 million in 2010-11.
- Ulsterbus account for the greatest number of all passenger journeys made, although the number of Ulsterbus passenger journeys has fallen from 44.8 million in 2001-02 to 40.8 million in 2010-11, a 9.0% decrease over the ten year period.
- Metro passenger journeys fell slightly from 20.2 million in 2001-02 to 19.9 million in 2004-05 before increasing sharply to 25.9 million in 2010-11, an increase of more than a quarter (28.0%)
- Proportionally NIR passenger journey saw the biggest increase of 67.1% from 6.2 million in 2001-02 to 10.4 million in 2010-11.

There is an obvious relationship between the increase in passenger numbers on Metro and NIR and increased Government funding of these services. Metro was launched in 2005 and immediately passenger numbers increased by 15 per cent while an £80m

investment in new rolling stock and a major programme of station refurbishments have contributed to NIR's revival.

The recent cuts to public transport spending now threaten to disrupt the rising popularity of public transport as passengers could be faced with increased fares and the possibility of a reduced service, which will not be popular as according to the Consumer Council, low cost fares and frequent/comprehensive services are the main priorities of consumers.¹

This economic situation is, of course, not unique to Northern Ireland and fares on bus and rail services going up across the UK and Europe. This paper provides a brief introduction to public transport fares policy in the UK and Europe and provides a high level comparison of bus fares across a number of UK and European cities.

2 Fares Policy

The levels at which public transport fares are set can be based on a number of objectives which are usually set by the relevant public authority. These include:

- Cost recovery;
- incentivising the use of public transport;
- increasing mobility and social inclusion; and
- facilitating productivity and other economic objectives.²

Full cost recovery is rarely achieved and therefore the vast majority of public transport systems rely on government subsidy and to a lesser extent, alternative revenue streams, such as advertising. In most European cities, for example, fare box revenue accounts for less than 50 per cent of operating costs.³

2.1 Government support

The extent of support for public transport is a political decision and varies greatly across countries and regions. Within the UK the Scottish Government has invested heavily in public transport, particularly over the last five years, while in England public transport expenditure is consistently higher than roads spend (see figure one). At a regional level, spending on public transport in London far exceeds that of any other city or region in the UK, with £2,731 spent on transport per head of population (per year); in the East Midlands £311 is spent;⁴ while in Northern Ireland £209 is spent per head.

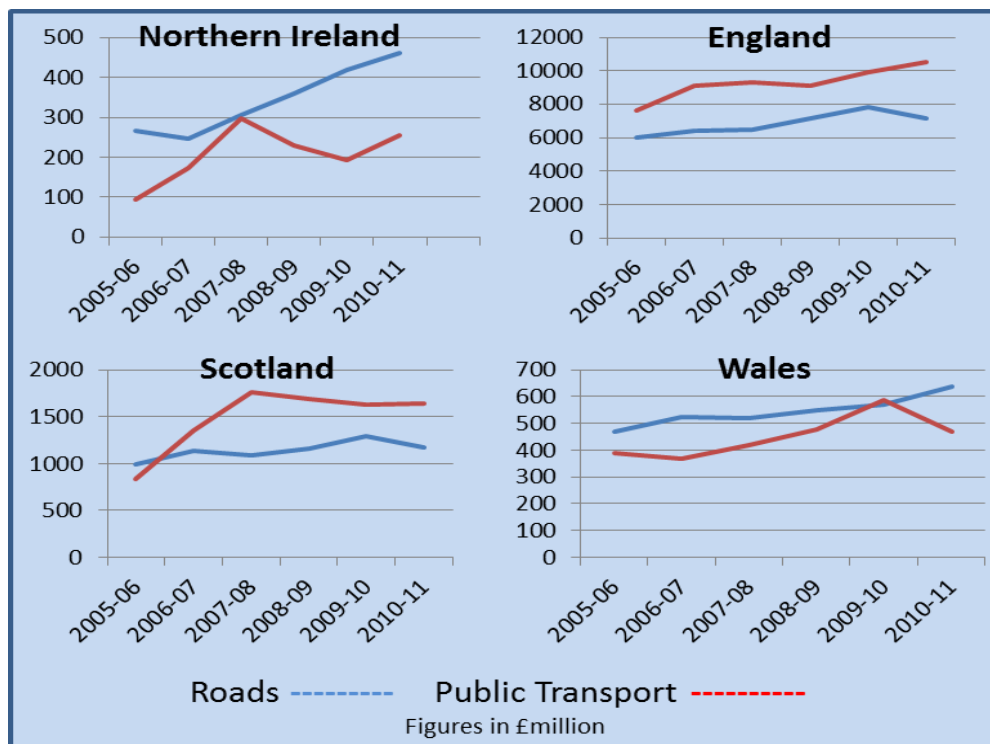
¹ The Consumer Council (2009) Public Transport: On the Right Track [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/140>

² Smith R. (2004) Urban Public Transport Pricing Schemes The Context and Options [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/14i>

³ European Metropolitan Transport Authorities (2010) Comparative study of the public transport financing and of the fare policy in different metropolitan areas of Europe [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/14m>

⁴ BBC

Figure 1: UK expenditure on roads vs. public transport 2005-06 to 2010-11



Source: HM Treasury 2011⁵

3 Setting Fares

In addition to supporting certain social, economic and environmental policies, fares can also be engineered in a way which supports operational efficiencies. New technologies and particularly smart cards and Integrated Fare Collection Systems (IFCS) can be used to implement more flexible fare structures that could offer the possibility to differentiate fares depending on the situation of the user, the distance travelled and/or the time of the travel peak/off-peak hours.

The purchasing of tickets from a bus driver is a time consuming process, particularly if customers do not have the correct change; this increases the dwell time of the bus and increases the journey time for passengers. Prepaid cards, whereby customers purchase a day, week, month or annual pass remove this potential bottleneck as customers need only swipe the card at a card reader when boarding the vehicle.

A report for the Passenger Transport Executive Group (PTEG) by Booz&Co highlights a the potential benefits of a prepaid (integrated) ticketing system including: increased patronage; revenue; modal shift; passenger satisfaction; boarding times; fraud reduction; and transaction and administration costs.⁶ Therefore it is not surprising that providers will tend to give favourable rates to those who purchase tickets in advance.

⁵ HM Treasury (2011) Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/132>

⁶ Booz & Co. (2009) The Benefits of Simplified and Integrated Ticketing in Public Transport. PTEG [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/14n>

3.1 Fares Comparison

Any comparison of fares across Europe must be treated with caution. It is perhaps the unreliability of comparisons that is the reason that there are no up-to-date studies in this area. This paper looks at 14 cities from the UK and Europe and compares their fares, as published on their website. It does not take account of:

- The local operating environment (Government policy; fuel duty; competition etc.)
- Subsidy levels;
- Population and demographics;
- Geographic spread;
- Patronage; and/or
- Characteristics of transport system (i.e. whether it is single/multi modal);

3.1.1 Comments

- Table one below shows that a single city centre (zone 1) fare ranges from 89p in Rome to £2.30 in London;
- The price of an unlimited weekly travel card costs anywhere from £10.93 (In Amsterdam) to £22.65 (In Berlin);
- In some cities (Belfast, Dublin, London, Edinburgh and Manchester) the weekly card can be used across all zones where as in others (Berlin, Amsterdam, Cardiff) the price changes according to the zone travelled in;
- A weekly ticket in Belfast used for five return journeys can save those travelling within the city zone £3.00. however, there is no limit on use and those making more than ten journeys could save significantly more;
- The price of a monthly ticket ranges from £17.81 (Rome Zone 1) to £85.00 in Dublin (Unlimited);
- Monthly tickets vary a great deal in the extent of travel allowed both in terms of journey numbers and length of journey taken;
- At this point it is also worth noting in many of the cities listed weekly and monthly tickets are usually integrated and can be used on a variety of transport services including light rail, BRT, subways and buses. Therefore, the costs are not comparable with Belfast as the level of service varies so greatly;
- In comparison to other UK cities Belfast has the lowest single fare however, only Belfast and Cardiff operate a zonal fare system and therefore those travelling outside Belfast city centre pay considerably more;
- Belfast has the best value weekly ticket but one of the more expensive monthly tickets;
- A multi journey fare in Belfast can save users up to 36% on their fare. This type of fare system is less common in other cities where unlimited daily/weekly/monthly/annual tickets are more common.

City	Adult Single			Child Single			Weekly Adult			Multi Journey fare**			Monthly Ticket		
	Zone			Zone			Zone*			Zone			Zone		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Belfast ⁷	1.40	1.80	2.10	0.70	0.90	1.05	15	15	15	0.90	1.10	1.35	59	59	59
Cardiff ⁸	1.70	2.40	-	1.20	1.60	-	15	19	-	-	-	-	29.50	29.50	-
Edinburgh ⁹	1.40	-	-	0.70	-	-	17	-	-	1.40 [†]	-	-	51	-	-
London ¹⁰	2.30	-	-	2.30	-	-	18.80	-	-	1.35	-	-	72.20	-	-
Liverpool ¹¹ / Merseyside ¹²	2.00	-	-	1.30	-	-	16.50 ^{††}	23.80	-	-	-	-	57.90	82.80	-
Manchester ¹³	1.50	-	-	0.70	-	-	18.00	-	-	-	-	-	58.00	-	-
South Yorkshire	1.60	-	-	1.10	-	-	18.00	-	-	-	-	-	63.00	-	-
Dublin	€1.40*** (£1.13)	€1.90 (£1.53)	€2.15 (£1.74)	€0.90 (£0.72)	€1.15 (£0.92)	-	€23.00 (£18.57)	-	-	-	-	-	€105.00 (£85)		
Dublin Leap Card	€1.25 (£1.01)	€1.70 (£1.37)	€1.95 (£1.57)	€0.70 (£0.56)	€0.85 (£0.68)										
Barcelona ¹⁴	€1.45 (£1.17)	-	-	-	-	-	€25.00 (£20.17)			€0.82 (£0.66)	-	-	€51.00 (£41.15)	-	-
Rome ¹⁵	€1.10 (£0.89)	€1.30 (£1.05)	€2.20 (£1.86)	-	-	-	€16.00 (£12.90)	-	-	-	-	-	€22.00 (£17.81)	€26.40 (£21.37)	€41.80 (33.84)
Amsterdam ¹⁶	€2.70 ^{†††} (£2.18)	-	-	-	-	-	€13.50 (£10.93)	€22.45 (£18.17)	€33.50 (27.12)	€0.83+ €0.142km [^]	-	-	€44.70 (£36.16)	€73.40 (£59.38)	€109.05 (£88.29)
Berlin ¹⁷	€2.40 (£1.94)	€2.80 (£2.26)	€3.10 (£2.50)	€1.50 (£1.21)	€1.90 (£1.54)	€2.10 (£1.70)	€28.00 (£22.65)	€34.60 (£28.00)	€40.90 (£33.08)				€77.00 (£62.34)	€95.00 (£76.85)	€124.00 (£100.40)
Madrid ¹⁸	€1.50 (£1.21)	€2.00 (£1.61)	€2.60 (£2.10)							-	€1.22 (£0.98)	€1.61 ^{^^} (£1.30)	€52.20 (£42.26)	€60.90 (£49.30)	€68.80 (£55.64)

⁷ Translink Metro [online] Metro fares available from: <http://nia1.me/141>

⁸ Cardiff Bus [online] Cardiff bus fares, available from: <http://nia1.me/142>

⁹ Lothian Buses [online] Fares and Tickets, available from: <http://nia1.me/143>

¹⁰ Transport for London [online] Bus and Tram fares, available from: <http://nia1.me/14d>

¹¹ Arriva [online] Liverpool Zone Fares, available from: <http://nia1.me/14a>

¹² Merseytravel (2012) Merseyside's Guide to Season Tickets [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/149>

¹³ First group [online] Greater Manchester Pricing, available from: <http://nia1.me/14b>

¹⁴ Tourism Barcelona (2011) Transport Fares Barcelona 2011[online] available from: <http://nia1.me/14c>

¹⁵ COTRAL [online] Fare Information, available from: <http://nia1.me/14o>

¹⁶ GVB [online] Ster Season Ticket, available from: <http://nia1.me/14e>

¹⁷ BVG [online] Tickets and Fares, available from: <http://nia1.me/14f>

¹⁸ Madrid Transport [online] Fares, available from: <http://nia1.me/14h>

*Weekly & Monthly Metro Travel cards provide unlimited travel across the entire Metro network.

**This fare is based on the purchase of 10 journeys

***Dublin Bus Offer a City Centre Fare of 60c when paying cash or 50c with Leapcard

†This fare is based on the purchase of 20 journeys

†† Prices based on Merseytravel's solo ticket – Integrated ticketing which can also be used on local rail services is available

†††The single fare provides unlimited travel on all GVB routes regardless of distance

^ On prepaid travel you pay a fixed base rate plus a fixed fare per kilometer

^^ Multi journey fare price based on 10 ticket pass