



A First Leeds Wrightbus Gemini Bus is seen in Guiseley operating a 33A service to Leeds. PAUL KIRKBY

Festive services: food for thought?

Santa always delivers the goods over Christmas, but what was presented to the bus passenger in 2015? Paul Kirby provides his thoughts on services over the festive period

With Easter less than a month away, Christmas 2015 may seem like a distant memory now – but it's not too late to reflect on last year and there is plenty of time to think about Christmas 2016, as service planning takes time.

First an acknowledgement that summarising a whole area's operations is not straight-forward in some cases. However, the table of services opposite brings up clear differences between operators and areas and is therefore an interesting and informative exercise. In general, a 'special' service will be less frequent than a Sunday service, otherwise why not put on a Sunday service?

I have tried to include different companies and areas, as well as deliberately including those who introduced new services.

Congratulations to Southern Vectis, Morebus and Lothian Buses for being clear winners in providing a service on every single day of the festive period. The lucky residents on the

Isle of Wight, in Bournemouth and Edinburgh had a better service than even those in London. Southern Vectis and Morebus (Wilts & Dorset), both of which are owned by the Go-Ahead Group, do not have the patronage of our larger cities so deserve to share the overall crown of 'Best Festive Service Champion', if one existed.

Also deserving of much praise are the usual suspects – Brighton & Hove, Reading, Nottingham City Transport and the Oxford Bus Company. The companies in these cities have, for a long time, set the standard for customer service and joint working with their local authorities. This good work is recognised every year by their inclusion as final year in the UK Bus awards. Also worthy of mention this year for introducing new services are Transdev, First Bristol, Stagecoach in Cumbria and Halton Transport. The rest of the industry should try to emulate the innovation and progressive management of all these bus operations.

In the majority of cases, services on Christmas Eve finished early – around 2000hrs. The exceptions were in London, the West Midlands, Scotland, Belfast, Bournemouth and the Isle of Wight. I would have thought independents could make a good profit providing Christmas and New Year's Eve buses in and out of our larger cities. I asked one of my local small companies for their thoughts and they said breakdown cover would be a problem. I know there are other difficulties such as drunken passengers, but I am sure most people would pay £5 per journey rather than wait ages for a taxi costing a lot more. On New Year's Eve an even higher fare would be

reasonable, and maybe cover the cost of a bouncer/conductor. I am sure there is money to be made, but no company has taken the risk that I know of. It does not help when there is no night bus network in places like Leeds. Effective marketing is what you need to make such services a success, something many PTEs, transport authorities and bus operators are pretty poor at.

A big debt of gratitude must go to the volunteers and drivers who tried to provide a service on Christmas Day and New Year's Day. The atrocious weather may have made life more difficult for the band of good folk this year. The enthusiasts from the Keighley Bus Museum Trust and Friends of King Alfred Buses in Winchester make these special days even more memorable with the free and friendly services they provide. Well done to Merseytravel too, for providing buses to hospitals in Liverpool on Christmas Day. Apart from the aforementioned Lothian, Morebus and Southern Vectis, praise must also be given to Stagecoach Manchester for a couple of services on that day, and to First Berkshire which ran two airport routes for the first time on Christmas Day.

Boxing Day

Services on Boxing Day improved in many areas this time around. Pressure from passengers and the realisation that the sales attract thousands to city centres have made most companies and PTEs take note. However, I would be a little miffed if I were a resident of Doncaster, Rotherham or Barnsley who received no service at all, while Sheffield did. Most buses throughout the country run daytime hours only on this day. I find it strange that companies and PTEs go to the trouble of producing a 'special timetable' instead of a Sunday timetable. I would

have thought it easier for everyone concerned, especially passengers, if a shortened Sunday timetable was used. This negates the need to spend money on producing new leaflets or booklets for just one day.

In my neck of the woods, Metro simply does not bother with



Metro's guide, but with no timetables of special services – and available only on its website

OVERVIEW | A brief run-down of the service level offered in different parts of the UK over the 2015 festive season

ENGLISH PTES	CHRISTMAS EVE	CHRISTMAS DAY	BOXING DAY	PUBLIC HOLIDAY (DECEMBER 28)	NEW YEAR'S EVE	NEW YEAR'S DAY	COMMENT
Transport for London	None after midnight	None	Sunday service	Saturday service	Normal service and free after 2345hrs	Sunday service (plus normal 24-hour and Night bus)	Same as 2014
Centro – West Midlands	Mostly normal service	None	Sunday service, some finishing early	Sunday service	Mostly normal Saturday service	Sunday service	More services on Boxing Day
Transport for Greater Manchester	None after 1800hrs	2 Stagecoach services	Special service	Bank Holiday service	None after 1800hrs, except some until 0400hrs	Special service on 11 routes by Stagecoach, daytime only	More services on Christmas Day, fewer on New Year's Day
Merseytravel	None after 2000hrs	Limited free service to hospitals	Special service until 1800hrs	Mostly Sunday service	None after 2030hrs	Special service	Same as 2014
Metro – West Yorkshire	None after 2000hrs	Voluntary free services 4 routes around Keighley, and 1 route in Leeds	Special service until 1800hrs	Sunday service	None after 2000hrs	Airport bus and 2 free services in Leeds and Huddersfield operated by Green Party	More services mostly in Halifax and Bradford on Boxing Day. Some Transdev services ran commercially
Nexus – Tyne & Wear	None after 2000hrs	None	Special service until 2000hrs, except some until late evening	Saturday service	None after 2000hrs	None	More services on Boxing Day
Travel South Yorkshire	None after 1930hrs	None	Special service in Sheffield only	Sunday service	None after 1930hrs	Special service in Sheffield only, operated by Stagecoach	Same as 2014

SCOTLAND, WALES & NORTHERN IRELAND

Lothian Buses, Edinburgh	None after 2200hrs	Special service on 11 cross-city routes	Special service, most until late evening	Saturday service	Saturday service until 2200hrs, then free sponsored service on 20 routes until 0400hrs	Special service on 19 routes	More services on New Year's Eve
First Glasgow	None after 2200hrs	None	Sunday service	Mostly Saturday service	None after 2200hrs	Airport bus only	Same as 2014
McGills	None after 2200hrs	None	Mostly Sunday service	Mostly Sunday service	None after 2200hrs	None	
National Express Dundee	None after 2200hrs	None	Sunday until 2200hrs	Saturday service	None after 2200hrs	None	
Stagecoach North Scotland	Most until 2230hrs, long distance until 2000hrs	None	1 route only	Mostly normal, some Saturday	Most until 2230hrs, long distance until 2200hrs	None	
First Aberdeen	Limited service from 2000hrs to 2300hrs	None	Special service	Special service	Normal service, including 6 night buses	None	
Cardiff Bus	None after 1900hrs	None	Special service until 1800hrs	Sunday service	Saturday service until 1900hrs, then free sponsored service on 12 routes until 0300hrs	Special service on 11 routes	
First South & West Wales – Swansea	None after 1800hrs	None	Special service on 4 routes only	Mostly Sunday service	None after 1800hrs	None	
Translink – Belfast	Some until late evening	None	Special service until 1800hrs	Special service	Some until late evening	Special service until 1800hrs	TABLE CONTINUES OVERLEAF

any printed timetables (and nothing at the bus stop) and asks you to look online. Do they realise that many bus passengers are unwilling to, or simply do not have access to the internet and prefer something on paper? Leaflets are relatively cheap and simple, and can be used to promote

the service to new users.

A new Boxing Day service was introduced in 2014 to my town (Wetherby) and I was going to do everything possible to make sure it was a success. I designed, printed and distributed 5,000 leaflets, paid for by local businesses, councils and

other organisations. The first bus into Leeds carried 34 passengers and others had reasonable loadings. Passengers need to do their bit to keep services, especially in these austere times. The service continued in 2015, but with minimal publicity. Halton Transport introduced two

routes to Liverpool for the first time on Boxing Day. I looked to see if fellow municipally-owned Network Warrington, a nearby town of similar size with a better link to Manchester, was running any routes to these two cities. Neither Arriva nor First ran services to Liverpool or Trafford

OPINION > FESTIVE BUS OPERATION

ENGLISH PTEs	CHRISTMAS EVE	CHRISTMAS DAY	BOXING DAY	PUBLIC HOLIDAY (DECEMBER 28)	NEW YEAR'S EVE	NEW YEAR'S DAY	COMMENT
BEST OF THE REST							
Southern Vectis – Isle of Wight	Normal service	Special service on 5 routes	Sunday service	Sunday service	Normal service, including 4 night buses	Sunday service	
Morebus in Bournemouth	Normal service	Special service on 2 routes	Special service on 8 routes	Sunday service	Normal service, including 2 night buses	Special service on 7 routes	
Reading	5 routes after 2000hrs	None	Special service until 1900hrs	Public Holiday service	Saturday service, including all night buses	Sunday service	One route ran every 15 mins on New Year's Eve until 0215hrs
First Bristol	Some until 0200hrs	None	Special service	Sunday service	Normal service, including 6 night buses	Special service	
Brighton & Hove	None after 2200hrs	None	Special service until 1830hrs	Sunday service	Saturday service including all night buses	Sunday service	
Stagecoach Oxford	None after 2030hrs	One route	Special service, some until late evening	Sunday service	Saturday service	Special service on most routes	
Nottingham City Transport	None after 2000hrs	None	Special service until 1800hrs	Saturday service	Most until 2000hrs, then 11 night bus routes run	None	
Transdev in Blackburn & Burnley	None after 2000hrs	None	Special service on 2 routes to Manchester, plus one local route	Sunday service	None after 2000hrs	None	New Boxing Day service
Stagecoach Cumbria, inc Lancaster	None after 2000hrs	None	Mainly Sunday service on most routes	Sunday service	None after 1900hrs	None	New Boxing Day service
Halton Transport – Widnes & Runcorn	None after 2030hrs	None	Special service on 2 routes to Liverpool	Sunday service	None after 2030hrs	None	New Boxing Day service

Centre, respectively. Most notable in the table is the absence of any Arriva operator providing a better than average holiday service.

I believe operators are missing a trick with Boxing Day services, particularly with no trains running on the day. I think at least a full Sunday timetable should operate to attract new passengers from the railways, and let people get to and from football matches and other sporting events.

New Year

It was interesting to see what providers decided to run on the Monday public holiday (December 28). As would be expected, most chose a Sunday service but some, notably in Scotland, ran a Saturday service. Nexus in the north-east was the only PTE area to run a Saturday service, and elsewhere in England only Nottingham City Transport (and London, of course) did the same.

Transport for London has provided a free service on New Year's Eve for many years, and 2015 saw Lothian Buses and Cardiff Bus join them in that achievement, thanks to a sponsorship deal. Yet again, revellers in the party cities of Leeds, Newcastle



Happy Christmas Passengers on DalesBus. PAUL KIRKBY

and Liverpool had no choice but to fork out for a taxi if they wanted to celebrate the New Year in the city centre.

New Year's Day showed a large difference in service provision between the English PTEs. This ranged from nothing or virtually

nothing to a full Sunday service in the West Midlands and London. All our capital cities managed a service during the day.

Conclusions

So, what to make of all this? It is bizarre that the Isle of Wight and

Bournemouth had a far superior bus service throughout the festive period than most of our great cities. Like many aspects of life in the UK, it is a postcode lottery as to what service you receive. So who is to blame for these large differences in service provision? It is difficult to say whether responsibility lies with the PTEs, bus companies, councils or the Government.

It is most likely a combination, along with the ever-present contributing factors of lacklustre management and poor marketing. The issue of passenger apathy should not be overlooked either. If we bus users do not make our voices heard, then we will not get the service we deserve.

I look abroad with envy at cities like Cologne where all trams run at least half-hourly throughout Christmas Day and New Year's Day. Maybe Christmas Day and New Year's Day should be days off for everyone, but in next season's letter we should be asking Santa for more collaboration and better services where the demand is there, particularly on Christmas Eve, Boxing Day and New Year's Eve. If it's possible in some of our smaller towns and cities, then why not everywhere else? ■