

# JONATHAN BRAY



## Giving Jersey Liberty from the car

Franchising is giving Jersey a simple and straightforward bus network that works and makes being car-free a realistic option

► When you get up close to the issue of national identity it can get complicated - particularly in the British Isles.

Within its more than 6,000 islands it contains within it the sometimes overlapping concepts or legal entities (or both) of the British Islands, the United Kingdom, Great Britain, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the Home Nations and the Republic of Ireland (the latter not always that keen on being described as part of the *British* Isles).

And then there are the crown dependencies - the Isle of Man (some say at the centre of the British Isles) and the Channel Islands (much closer to France than to the UK).

In a host of policy areas different rules apply across this unevenly distributed archipelago, not least of which in the crown dependencies. Did you know that the Isle of Man has its own national anthem, and if Jersey doesn't have a team of its own then sportier residents are entitled to choose from any of the four home nations to play for? In short a crown dependency gets to set its own rules (subject ultimately to Westminster veto) but the British armed forces is responsible for defending them if anyone tries invading again.

The different rules also extend to the less dramatic subject of buses. In the British Islands (that's the British Isles minus the Republic of Ireland for any pub quiz fans) deregulation applies across much of the land mass. That is England (outside London), Scotland and Wales. Meanwhile in Northern Ireland and in the Isle

of Man bus provision is essentially nationalised (or perhaps more accurately bus provision is run by a state-owned corporation which has a monopoly). However, Jersey and Guernsey are in line with London in that bus services are franchised. Which means London isn't the only place in the British Islands where we have a working model for bus franchising.

Earlier in the month I went to Jersey (at nine miles by five it's by far the largest of the Channel Islands) to see for myself how it's working out. The answer is very well. So well that patronage is up by a third in the first few years of the franchise as the bus has been

transformed from its former tourism and social safety net role to an emerging transport option for all islanders - which visitors also use. It makes being car-free a realistic option not just for tourists but also for locals. Quite an achievement in a relatively wealthy island with seventy thousand cars for a hundred thousand people and where parking is cheap.

The thing that strikes you when you catch your first bus at the airport into the capital, St Helier, is just how simple and straightforward the bus system is to use. There is one flat cash fare of £2 for adults and 75p for children for any and all journeys. A smartcard system makes it even simpler. There is also one 'London Underground-style' route map for the island and a peak vehicle requirement of 80 provides a network of services at regular frequencies providing good coverage across the island as a whole, including Sundays.

And that's the essence of it. It's simple and it works. With their pastel interiors and sunny day exteriors the bus fleet's design and branding reflects the breezy ease and simplicity of the travelling experience in stylings that wouldn't be out of place in a bus on a French boulevard. Tourists from Britain arrive expecting bus angst and stress around confusing timetables, confusion over bus stop boarding and alighting, a tricky fares structure and buses you dare not miss or else you are stranded. When they see what's on offer in Jersey they ask what the catches are? Are the fares really the same across all services? And



# “Patronage is up by a third in the first few years of the franchise”



once they use the service and realise there are no catches and it's all as straightforward and simple as it looks, then some of them abandon the hire car and use the buses instead.

Meanwhile, for a public transport supporter like myself it's not just the balmy weather and French feel (though it has to be said that the Frenchness is watered down about 90% to suit English tastes) that relaxes you. It's the sense that here is a place that shows how by keeping it simple it's not just buses in London that can offer a service that overall is more than the sum of its parts - it can work in less urban territories too.

It's also the rare feeling for a non-driver in a largely rural unfamiliar place that for once you do not feel so much like a second class citizen. In Jersey (unlike some English shires) you do not require the same degree of cunning, planning and resolve - the skulking around websites and bus shelters - to enable you to explore a previously unknown area.

As with any place there are some particular characteristics that should be taken into account when extrapolating from the Jersey experience - and not just that it's a crown dependency. Jersey is more populated than I was expecting with some naturally good bus territory along ribbon developments on the built up areas on the southern coastal road. These developed areas sit alongside the more rural hinterland and less developed coastlines. Best comparison I could think of would be Swansea and the Gower. The subsidy is around a pound a trip which is broadly comparable to the totality of public funding in Great Britain.

What would I mark Jersey down for?

Nothing to do with the bus operator, but in many parts Jersey doesn't do pavements - or indeed any kind of protection for bus users at stops. The tall hedges are beautiful. But not so appealing when you are jammed up against one at a bus stop waiting for a bus on a narrow rural road. But overall it's a knock out in round three for Jersey when put in the ring with a typical rural operation bus operation in Great Britain.

How did Jersey do it? The context was the scars inflicted by the failure of the way in which bus services were previously provided by Connex (a cost plus contract which in itself was an attempt to fill the gap left by the collapse of the former deregulated system) as well as the island's ambitions on reducing traffic congestion and getting more people onto public transport. In getting franchising right I sense the island has also benefitted from being big enough to have capable people working for its government on infrastructure delivery but not big enough for silos to develop.

All of which led to an approach on contracting for services which combined a refusal to be anyone's fool, taking the time needed to get it right, drawing the lessons from modern contracting practices outside the bus sector and a 'just do it' boldness that perhaps comes from being an island which isn't held back by the groupthink and caution that can occur in larger professional communities. This meant that the island's government gave itself two years to start from scratch to run a comprehensive and innovative process with the time to give the successful operator the space to get all the new measures in place.

Innovation could be found in the way that

all those who expressed interest in bidding (22 of them - including some companies who decry franchising in GB) were asked to set out what kind of incentive schemes would motivate them and their bids were scored 60% on quality and 40% on cost. There was also a strong emphasis on KPIs being achieved in the middle-late period of a contract where complacency might set in.

Opponents of bus franchising in GB say that it's inherently expensive. No sign of that in Jersey where one person at the island's government runs the contract and where people ask if everyone's gone on holiday at the admin office of the company (they haven't, they just don't need many in the first place). As for costs - five new routes, a third more passengers and all for £800,000 less a year in subsidy says that the combination of intelligently procured franchising and an operator (HCT Group) who cares, can make car-free an option even in predominantly rural areas.

Liberty is the name of the bus network in Jersey - a name chosen by its users - and liberating is also how it feels from the top deck gazing out over a sunny Sunday Jersey Atlantic coast and the seaside car parks which you have no need for. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.