

ITSO & ISL: The public sector smart card solution

ITSO smart cards are here to stay, although ITSO Services is here to disappear, says Helen Mitchell of ITSO



AFTER many years of being touted as the future for public transport and potentially a host of other every day applications, as well as a number of false starts such as the slow off the ground Citycard scheme, it seems that smart cards may finally be about to have their day. The success of London's Oyster Card scheme was an early sign that people were warming to the idea of travel smart cards. More recently the near-seven million pensioners and disabled passengers who have been issued with smart cards as part of the free concessionary travel scheme suggest such cards are finally becoming a way of life for many, and those at the production end of the sector are keen to see the cards applications, and numbers, extended far beyond the current levels.

With ten years of smartcard integration already behind it when the concessionary scheme came into force in April of this year, ITSO was ideally placed to provide an umbrella body working towards just such standardisation. ITSO was originally created in 1998 as a result of discussions between, and concerns among, a number of Passenger Transport Authorities and the Government concerning the lack of common standards for inter-operable transport smart card schemes. As the group's influence grew so did its membership, taking in more local authorities, transport authorities and executives, as well as transport providers.

ITSO is a members' organisation for those involved with the provision or production of transport and smart cards. It is a non-profit body which seeks solely to achieve a common purpose among its members and ultimately nationwide, as ITSO's Head of Business Development Helen Mitchell explains: "We're involved purely on the

specification side, and have nothing to do with the actual production of smart cards. When members join up, they can use the spec, in common with our existing members. We offer certification to suppliers and producers of both smart cards themselves and the back office systems that keep them working. Essentially, we're a tool box, and how members and suppliers choose to use those tools is pretty much up to them."

So far, a number of transport authorities (including Merseytravel, GMPTE, Centro, Cheshire, Nottinghamshire and those participating in NoWcard scheme - Cumbria CC, Lancashire CC, Blackburn with Darwen BC and Blackpool Council) have progressed to what Mitchell classes as 'fully smart' with their own back office systems. Due to the demands of meeting the requirements of the new concessionary travel rules, and sheer volume of cards needed under them, ITSO set up ITSO Services Limited (ISL) to act for 253 of the non-smart authorities which chose to use its services.

Yet its very success is built on the eventuality of becoming a redundant ITSO member. As Head of Operations and Delivery for ISL also, Mitchell comments: "ISL is basically smart on behalf of the authorities. It has a three year contract with the DfT, with the possibility of a four-year extension. It's not designed as a long-term measure, rather the plan is that ISL will gradually fade away as the authorities it envelops become fully smart and migrate to ITSO itself. ISL is almost a holding company for the non-smart authorities, and already this year we expect nine TCAs to become fully smart, with many more likely next year."

Administering 87% of England's TCAs, ISL has been responsible for overseeing the production of over 5 million concessionary cards, making it one of the largest proponents of interoperable smart cards in the world. Combined with overseeing multiple card production companies, it has proved to be a comprehensive task given the time constraints placed upon the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS) in order to meet the 1st April 2008 rollout. This means that concessionary pass holders are now free to use a number of public transport services across England, ensuring greater mobility and one less financial burden for the elderly for the disabled.

As the ITSO member for its TCAs, ISL is charged with providing a range of information to clarify the details behind ENCTS, much of which is aimed towards the technical ramifications of such a widespread scheme. From topics such as stop listing and hot listing to providing details on migrating to full ITSO status and specific technical advice notes, ISL works closely with ITSO and the Department for Transport to provide its TCAs with the most relevant and up to date information. ISL undertook five road shows across England earlier in the summer to provide TCAs with the opportunity to discuss their issues with ISL and the DfT, as well as outlining its intentions for the future. The results on the ground are positive, and with the first smart electronic ticketing machines on buses in Blackpool starting to accept ISL cards from other areas of the country, the next steps towards a smart concessionary ticketing system for bus services in England have been achieved.

Whilst TCAs have focused upon the advent of ITSO cards in regards to transport applications, developments in non-transport fields have been fairly limited so far. Due to its interoperable, multi-application ability the ITSO card has the capabilities to transcend public sector services, meaning that local councils can administer other applications such as library and leisure services from the same ITSO card. With some local councils beginning to not only explore these possibilities but actually roll them out alongside the travel concession product, it is expected that similar developments will happen in other parts of the country.

With plans afoot to extend smart cards far beyond the concessionary travel sector, and potentially to add the likes of library and leisure services to the cards functions, it seems that the future is smart. The question is – are you?

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