

Citizen Cards and the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS): Why English and Welsh Councils need to act now to keep options open for the future

A guidance note from LASSeO and SCNF

The following is a short update on the business case for citizen smart cards and why it is imperative to pay attention to a small provision now for considerable potential benefit in the future.

Where are the Multi-Application Citizen Smart Cards?

It is three years since the National Smart Card Project (NSCP) championed the multi-application smart card and the ODPM included it as a "Priority Outcome" for local authorities in England. In practice, activity on the ground has been minimal. Only in Scotland and small pockets of England have "citizen cards" become relevant to the lives of a significant amount of people, and often within these schemes the multi-application aspect is questionable. So why is this?

For many, the answer is that there is no business case. But, as ever, that is an issue of perception. The basic proposition of the NSCP business model remains true – if local authorities can act in a joined-up way and if they have the resources and vision to improve the lives of their citizens, then multi-application smart card schemes can meet a raft of service delivery objectives. Moreover citizens really take to the idea of a single card replacement for the myriad of entitlement cards currently issued.

Do these schemes stack up financially?

Not in the short term, unless councils have significant capital or someone else is paying for the cards (although it should be noted that the financial case has improved significantly over the last three years, as the cost of infrastructure/cards has decreased and the number of proven service solutions has increased). Principally, however, the business case has to be about service improvement not financial savings. Or certainly that was the situation.....

So what has changed?

In Scotland, "someone else" did pay. A citizen (entitlement) card was issued primarily around a free transport concession funded by central government. Now smart travel concession cards (up to 10 million) are coming for both England and for Wales. In England, the Department for Transport (DfT) is funding the 291 Transport Concession Authorities (local authorities and Passenger Transport Authorities) to issue a smart card for April 2008. The Welsh Assembly has similar plans. This will put both infrastructure in place and physical plastic cards into the hands of eligible citizens. In both logical and financial terms, it should tilt the business from the 'desirable' to the 'affordable' category.

So, will we see the millions of multi-application cards in England and in Wales? The answer is certainly "not right away". The TCAs have far too much on their plates in getting cards out to even think about adding the complexity of other services. However, this does not mean that the opportunity is lost.....

Transport Smart Cards with other Services

The new concessionary cards are required to use a format specified by the passenger transport smart ticketing standards body ITSO. ITSO already offers the facility to put other services within the ITSO shell and these can be added after a card has been issued. The only problem with this is that ITSO also lays down stringent rules for the way these services can be held and the security environment in which they operate. For access to some services, this may be restrictive and will inevitably increase the cost of implementation – a fact that has been recognised by both DfT and ITSO who have agreed an alternative way forward with the LASSeO (the Local Authority Smart card Standards e-Organisation).

Taking the view that many TCAs will deploy a Mifare 4k smart card for their concession card, LASSeO has published a technical specification where the memory on the card is shared between a mapping for transport (ITSO) and a mapping for local authority services. This means that existing cards can be used in a common, and potentially inter-operable, way for local authority services in the future. It also allows for Local Authorities (subject to ITSO rules) to issue non-concession citizen cards with the ITSO shell. Both DfT, via their technical consultants, and ITSO have endorsed this approach. Card suppliers have already been issued with guidance and suitable specifications.

What should Local Authorities do now to ensure that concession cards can become part of a multi-application scheme?

Local Authorities with primary (TCA) responsibility or through their PTA/PTE should consider their future strategy for multi-application now. If the proposal is for a 4k Mifare card, the simple answer is to take the advice of the experts and ensure that the card mapping defined by LASSeO is specified in the contract to card producers. There should be no cost penalty for this.

The imperative for local authorities must be to understand the multi-application opportunity and, moreover, to ensure effective use of public funds. Further information is available from the SCNF and in the 'ITSO Guide to Implementing an ITSO Smartcard scheme'.

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Note: The Chairs are very grateful for the work done to date on a voluntary basis by their members and, in particular, to the author of this note – Gwyn Williams – and technical support from Owen McLaughlin.

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