

Presentation:

OV-platforms – working together for public transport

Huibert Verdoold – OPC – The Netherlands

1. The organisation of public transport

In the Netherlands two levels of public transport can be distinguished: a national level and a regional one.

National public transport

Although this presentation is focussed on regional customer participation, I will explain the main players on the national level in a nutshell. The national level only concerns the main line rail network. The Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management acts as the transport authority of the main line rail network. For ten years – till 2015 – a franchise ('concessie' in Dutch) has been given to the operator Netherlands Railways (NS), which was semi-privatised in 1995. Since the end of the nineties, customer participation is realised in a national forum for public transport users' interests (LOCOV - *in Dutch: Landelijk overleg Consumentenbelangen Openbaar Vervoer*). It is a tripartite consultation. Besides national consumer organisations, also the Netherlands Railways and the Ministry are members of this forum. The forum has no official powers, but every significant plan or change affecting the rail network or its operations needs to be passed through the forum for a formal advise/consultation.

Regional public transport

From now on, we will focus on regional public transport. In the Netherlands, this comprises of all public bus-, tram-, metro lines, regional rail transport and forms of user-requested transport (*in Dutch called CVV*).

The Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management has no longer direct involvement with regional public transport. Since 2001 these powers have officially been transferred to nineteen regional governments, who each act as public transport authority. It concerns the twelve Dutch provinces and seven so-called city regions like Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Main funding for the regional public transport is still received from the ministry. The aim of the transition of powers has been to create a more customer-focused and cost-effective market in regional public transport. Therefore the nineteen transport authorities have to use a public tendering procedure. For this reason they have divided their area into one or more franchises, mostly geographical. In urban areas public transport also divided into modality franchises, like a tram franchise, a metro franchise or a bus franchise. The obligation for public tendering concerns all regional public transport. At this moment there is an exception for the four largest cities, for different reasons. One important reason is that municipal transport companies must be transformed into independent enterprises, so that a level playing field is created for with other independent companies that are interested in the franchise.

Basically, for granting a transport company a franchise the transport authority must first draw up a list of requirements (PVE in Dutch). This is not only an important document for the companies but also for the customers. If a company wins the franchise, for six to a maximum of eight years that company will take care of the public transport according to the agreed conditions. For that period, the company has the monopoly position.

2. The formal position of customers

We'll now look to the formal position of customers in regional public transport. Their position is laid down in the Passenger Transport Act 2000 (in Dutch: *Wet personenvervoer 2000*).

This Act, which came into operation in 2001, gives consumer organisations a leading role. They are supposed to represent the interest of customers of within a franchise area. The regional transport authority and the franchisee must ask the consumer organisation(s) for formal advice on crucial aspects of the franchise or the operations. The law does not stipulate which consumer organisation should be talked with. It only gives 3 broad requirements, leaving the decision who to talk to basically to the authority and operator. The three requirements are: In the first place, organisations must be a legal entity. Secondly, organisations must attend to the interests of public transport users. Thirdly, organisations must be active on a national or regional scale.

As said before, assigned consumer organisations are interlocutors for both regional transport authorities and transport companies.

First we look at the relation with authorities. The authority has to ask advice of the assigned consumer organisations about the PVE. To give these organisations a good opportunity to counsel, the authority has to organise a consultation with the organisations and must ask advice in time. After the advice has been given, the consumer organisations must be informed of the decision.

Besides asking advice about the PVE the authority is obliged to inform the consumer organisations about changing policy, new infrastructure and maintenance work.

Next, we look at the formal relation between the assigned organisations and the one or more transport companies who take care of the franchise of an authority. The Passenger Transport Act names a lot of subjects that transport operators (franchisee or franchise holders) have to ask advice on the organisations, namely about:

- execution of the timetable;
- information to travellers about timetables and fares;
- transport conditions;
- tickets;
- availability of tickets (when and where to buy your ticket);
- options of payment;
- accessibility;
- social safety.

Also – if laid down in franchise conditions – about:

- how to deal with complaints;
- compensation for delay;
- quality targets.

Just as the authority, a company has to hold a minimum number of meetings with consumer organisations. Also formal advice request must be made in time. Furthermore: Within six weeks a company has to give a written and motivated reaction on the received advice. If they wish not to follow it, consumer organisations may claim a second consultation. After that, the company is allowed to implement their decision.

3. Put into practice

Up to this point the formal part of the story. But what has happened after 2001 when the Passenger Transport Act came into operation? It shows a multifaceted picture.

- Although the Act has three requirements for assigning consumer organisation, in practice all nineteen regional transport authorities have made their own choices about which consumer organisations to talk to. Nearly in all regions three main parties surface: 1. ROVER (organisation of public transport users), 2. organisations for the handicapped and chronically ill, and 3. organisations representing the elderly people. In some regions also environmental groups, cyclists traffic planners, labour unions and groups representing youngsters and/or students participate. Sometimes also individual persons - not on behalf of an organisation – take part in the discussion. This example makes clear that the

number of organisations and persons, which authorities and companies have to discuss with, vary. In practise, it is also a question of supply and demand.

- In course of time, most authorities have chosen for institutionalisation because they wanted to deal with a formal consultative body or with just less parties. Two main forms are distinguished. First: the form of consultative bodies that function as an advisory board of the authority. The body is formally part of this authority. All assigned organisations participate in this. In the second form consumer organisations have organized themselves in an association or a foundation and the authority has decided to assign that organisation as interlocutor.
- Formally these consultative bodies are called ROVOV's (draw a comparison between LOCOV – 'L', that means: 'national' and ROCOV: 'R' means regional). In practice a scale of names with reference to the concerning region is given. Often OV-platform is used as a generic term. (in English: public transport platform).
- There are about 25 OV-platforms. Some authorities that hold more than one franchise have different platforms per franchise; there are also OV-platforms who advise more than one authority, when the franchise boundaries stretch beyond one authority.
- Most of the OV-platforms are lead by an independent chairman.
- If we look at the facilitation of the OV-platforms we see large differences. There's one platform funded by 250.000 Euro's a year so they have their own office and employ two persons. This is an exception however. Most platforms are given an annual budget of around 10.000 Euro or even have no budget at all. In this case they can often declare expenses and they get reimbursed on a case by case basis.

4. Does it work?

As I have tried to explain in the previous section, there are many different ways in which regional institutionalised user participation is presented. However, the most important questions are of course: does it work? Will the voice of the users be heard? Is it effective? Do OV-platforms obtain anything with their advice?

There is no one simple answer to these questions that implies all OV- platforms. Generally, you can say it is a growth process for all parties concerned, consumer organisations as well as authorities and companies. Here are some points:

1. In the first place: working together in OV-platforms is sometimes hard for the volunteers that represent the different organisations. You have to be a team player and see the other members of consumer organisations as team-mates and not as a threat to your own interests.
2. A member of an OV-platform represents an organisation. While forming an opinion, this person needs to be fed by the parent organisation. In practice the relation between local member and parent organisation is often rather weak. Which user do you represent? Authorities and transport operators sometimes like to know.
3. These same parties are also asking this question in a more general sense: are the interests of all users heard in OV-platforms? It is the problem of representation. Most travellers of public transport are teenagers going to school and students. However many OV-platforms have no proper representative of this group. It appears difficult to find young people who want represent their fellows. There are different reasons: Most young people don't have the opportunity because most meetings are held during the day. In addition most students are studying in a region for a relative short period. But major problems are the structure and culture of customer participation. It is not seen as 'cool'..
4. There is a big competence gap. For example: members of ROVER – the public transport users group - know everything of timetables and route planning, whereas a member of a cyclists group is generally more interested in safe roads for cyclists or the bike parking locations near tram or bus stop. In real life this leads sometimes to inefficient meetings, frustration and members quitting the OV-platform. As a solution some platforms have set up sub committees to divide the work. For example: a committee for accessibility is very interesting for members of a Disabled Person organisation. So they can participate in this one and members of ROVER can use their expertise in a sub committee Timetables. The

sub committees prepare an advice and after that the whole OV-platform will discuss it and draw up a final advice.

5. As mentioned earlier in this presentation some OV-platforms are so poorly facilitated by their authority, that no-one expects them to do well.
6. Authorities and companies do not always realize that members of OV-platforms are mostly volunteers and no professional public transport policymakers. So that it is important to submit comprehensive papers, and ask for advice in a timely manner. In spite of the formal terms, most transport authorities and operators have struggled with the latter.
7. Public tendering of transport franchises is also a new activity for regional authorities, operators and consumers alike. So for instance, consumer organisations had to learn the hard way when the best time was to influence decision-making. Often, their formal moment of advice was granted after all major decisions had already been taken. In general it is important to influence early on in the policy process, long before the authority or operator have to ask for a formal advice.
8. If an OV-platform functions well and the authorities are happy with the quality they receive, they are inclined to give it more tasks and send it more papers. So overflow of activities threatens the OV-platform.

Conclusion

Working together in OV-platforms: does it work?

My conclusion is that the bus of regional user participation is on the right way, although there are still OV-platforms, which are lagging behind. Their trip has just begun. I have mentioned some 'roadblocks'. However, there are some strong examples that show of the success of OV-platforms:

1. most of their advice is followed up;
2. both transport operators and authorities take them seriously;
3. the members are enthusiastic and skilled;
4. they have enough facilities to do their work;
5. they are working together in a common goal: improving public transport for all.

The successful OV-platforms benefit the users of regional public transport. It is the task of OPC as national support organisation to support, stimulate and help weaker operating OV-platforms. For the strong ones it is our task to hold them to their high quality level.