

NORTH WEST REGION

Merseyside and Warrington Group Network Warrington



Network Warrington's revamped its 20 and 21 bus routes

The group welcomed Ben Wakerley, new Chief Executive, Network Warrington to an event at Liverpool John Moores University.

Ben Wakerley has spent his working life in the bus industry with various operators across the country. His new role has presented fresh challenges, with an ageing fleet and depot and decreasing patronage. There has been some customer feedback that improvements in reliability and lower fares are needed to improve the perception of Network Warrington.

On the face of it, he had a huge mountain to climb. However, within his first few months at the business, change is noticeable. A new board of directors comprising of local councillors and business leaders has helped provide a new direction for the arm's-length municipal operator. The refreshed board enabled new concepts to be embraced with a willingness to experiment and take calculated risks. This has been delivered through the following actions:

- Lowering the fares on one route by £1, delivering 50% patronage growth

- Teaming up with educational facilities (University of Chester and Warrington & Vale Royal College) to deliver simpler routes, combined marketing and strengthening Network Warrington's presence with the student market
- Developing a new-brand identity through 'Pops' service, including simpler ticketing options, dedicated branded buses and an increased frequency

The marketing element has been helped by teaming up with Best Impressions, which has provided guidance on how best to pitch the new products to customers. Another step has been working more closely with Warrington Borough Council. This has allowed for the business to develop its future around the Warrington Means Business strategy and Warrington Masterplan, where new transport networks are proposed. This also allows Network Warrington to take advantage of the prospect of a new depot and consider network improvements in anticipation of the 24,000 houses the town is expected to develop over the next couple of years.

Ben Wakerley is far from complacent and appreciates there is a long way to go.

Future marketing improvements are proposed with the development of more common brands, improvements to customer service provisions and the investment in new buses which are designed with the customer at the heart of the product.

There are limitations. Bus stops and timetable information are not under the auspices of Network Warrington and are currently in poor condition. Also, drivers avoiding the tolls of the New Mersey Crossing could use Warrington's highway network, as it is the next free crossing point, so further congestion could be experienced. Some of these aspects will be approached over time.

Ben Wakerley demonstrated that foresight and the willingness to be bold can pay future dividends. He was clearly optimistic about where business is going, with the potential for a new depot and more product ideas in development.

Russell Oakes
Committee Member, Merseyside
and Warrington Group

