

You Think National Express West Midlands Are Bad? Try Diamond!

Reading Time: 13 minutes

I've lived in the West Midlands since 2008, first just inside the City Centre boundary of Birmingham, then in three locations within the Black Country.

For most of this time, I've been reliant on public transport, be it either busses, trains, and the occasional tram. In particular, I spent a lot of time reliant on what is now known as National Express West Midlands, which was Travel West Midlands back when I moved to the area, even though it was still owned by National Express. At the time that I started university in 2009, they actually were close to selling the entire operation to Stagecoach, until the latter got cold feet at the 11th hour. To explain how close the deal was, new / refurbished busses onto the network didn't have the then Travel West Midlands of blue, red and white, but instead were pure white busses, potentially pending a lick of orange and blue.

Although National Express West Midlands are the largest bus operator in the West Midlands, with service as far North as Wolverhampton and it's suburbs, and as south as the outer reaches of Coventry with their sister National Express Coventry brand, they are not the only bus operator in town. For some reason Wolverhampton has about 14,000 bus operators competing on the same routes, and there are a couple of small time players that I've noticed in the Black Country in particular. If you were to crown the #2 bus operator in the region however, it would be Diamond Busses, operated by Rotala, who operate bus services in certain markets of the UK. In Birmingham, they compete on the #50 route, which is / was the most frequent bus route in Europe, as well as the heavily congested #61 / #63 routes along the Bristol Road. They were formerly owned by the Go Ahead Group, who as part of a joint venture managed to ruin the Thameslink rail service in and around London, and lost the SouthEastern rail contract as they couldn't do maths properly to work out what they had to pay the Government.

National Express West Midlands Can Be OK. Depends On Where You Live / Work.

Depending on where you live, NXWM can be OK. If you live in a more affluent area, you'd likely get their busses with extra leg room, USB charging points, and until recently, free wi-fi on board. Honestly, if you were going from Central Birmingham to say Sutton Coldfield / Solihull, it felt less like a bus, and more like a coach with the ability to get off somewhere other than a grotty coach station. When I lived near Stourbridge for a few months, this also meant that I got to experience said busses, and honestly, they were OK for a 90 minute journey.

The same can't be said if you live in a less affluent area, where as well as poorer quality bus stock, they seemed to care less if a bus turned up at all, which is ironic as the poorest in our society rely on public transport more than anyone else. The best way to explain this is when I lived in an area *technically* called St Georges, which is located next to the Jewellery Quarter on one side, and the Hockley, Soho, Lowell's, Newtown conurbation on the other. I used to get the #46 bus to Perry Barr when I was at university, which supposedly ran every 15 minutes. First of all, the busses were OLD. When I say old, I mean two types of registration plate old, putting them at pre 1982 age, or at least

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27 years old. I think this was the oldest stock on the entire network, and one could argue that it made sense to NXWM. It was a short(ish) route, only really being 30 minutes point to point, and it was going through a deprived area where people just wanted to get on or off. When you saw bendy busses and improvements to other parts of the network's fleet however, this was a slight kick in the teeth. There was also the case that there was actually a bus missing from the rotation, meaning that once an hour, there would be no bus, and your wait would be 30 minutes instead of 15. This meant that I would either have to get to university 20 minutes earlier than I planned, or run the risk of being late and having the lecture room doors locked on you. (Yes, there were staff that did that).

Some of this disparity still exists today. If you were to take a trip to various 'bus stations' in the West Midlands, you can tell the demography of the local area based simply on the bus stock used in that area. Busses running to Walsall, West Bromwich, and parts of South East Birmingham have a noticeable difference in the age, quality and upkeep of the fleet used to serve local communities. Go to Solihull, Stourbridge, heck even Halesowen as it serves as a stopping point to much of the Black Country and Central Birmingham, and you'll see better quality, better kept, newer busses.

Overall though, through its use of a 'spiderweb' network, meaning that busses generally use trunk routes to ferry passengers point to point, and with a day-saver ticket still proving to be useful value compared to other areas (Though hopefully this will be better regulated through absorption into the Mayor's office), NXWM do a fairly decent job of doing what a bus operator should do. Get people from A - B, even if this sometimes means going into and then out of major population areas due to the need to change busses. I'll explore the use of the spider-web approach to bus travel and its similarities to the hub airport model another time.

Diamond Busses? Hold On and Pray.

Where I live now, about 3 miles outside of Dudley, is a far quieter area than I've had since I've lived in Lancaster. Yes my road is often used as a rat race for people trying to save 2 minutes on their journey, but typing this, I can hear the rustling of trees more than anything else, and dare I say it, it's suburbia leading into an almost village like atmosphere. Heck, I have a butchers and greengrocers a 10 minute walk away from me!

Because of this however, my bus services are far more limited. I can get a bus into Dudley every 30 minutes by basically walking to the end of my road then crossing over to the opposite side of the next road. Or, I can either get a bus to Wolverhampton every 30 minutes, or Stourbridge & Birmingham every 60 minutes, by doing the 10 minute walk down into the village as we call it. The only issues is, all but one of these services are run by Diamond, and the only NXWM bus doesn't even run on a Sunday / after 6PM on weekdays. On one hand I can't complain, you can't have your cake by living out of major population areas, and eat it by demanding more public services. There has to be a balance, and on paper, it's not THAT bad. A bit of planning and forethought, and you should be OK. It's not like I live in the middle of Wiltshire, where you have to stand at a bus stop in the middle of nowhere, and maybe wait up to two hours for a bus. You shouldn't need a thermos of tea to pass the time in these circumstances!

My issue isn't with frequency, but with the company, Diamond. From the outside, most of their busses look of newish quality, and clean. You can tell that the company moves some of its busses around

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from one of their services elsewhere to the Black Country and vice-versa, just by looking at the outdated information and signage onboard, but every bus company, rail company and airline does that from time to time. Unlike NXWM, you can actually get change for a ticket if paying my cash, which is convenient as there are more older people on my bus who may be travelling before their concessionary bus pass kicks in, and may not have a pocket full of change to hand. In terms of basic customer service at the point of transaction / tapping on, most bus drivers are OK.

That's where my compliments end however, as there are a number of things that Diamond Bus drivers do, and there's some serious issues with their fleet. It's time for a set of bullet points!

- The bus that I use to get to Dudley is where the drivers do a driver change. This may get better when the new bus station opens in Dudley in 2020, but at the moment, the driver parks up, passengers get off, the bus is then just sat there at the bus stop waiting for the new driver. Even though the driver **must** know when the service departs, they almost always turn up late, then spend about 10 minutes trying to get the dammed bus to turn on (More on that below). So by this point, the service is already 10 – 15 minutes late, and as most of the bus stops serving Diamond routes don't have live timetables, you're sat there guessing. For example, my GP Surgery is half way between my flat and Central Dudley, and you're constantly second guessing yourself as to if you've missed a bus, or it's just... Late.
- I'm 37, but there are times I have to use a walking cane because of my back issues / diabetic neuropathy, and so on. Because I'm 37, it seems like most drivers think that I'm actually some low-rate pimp, and will plant their foot on the noisy pedal exactly 2 seconds after I've tapped by bus pass onto the reader. The number of times I've almost face-planted the floor of the bus, or ended up in some poor pensioner's lap is higher than the number of hot dinners I've had this year. When you try to complain to the driver, you get a look of either 'blank-face', or defensiveness. Not once have I had a sorry, and it happens with the same bus drivers over and over and over and over and over and over and over again.
- The busses used on the two main routes I use are in dire need of servicing, maintenance / love, or the drivers need to understand how to trouble shoot the bus's noises and systems better. There was one occasion when the bus had its alarm going constantly for the entire trip from my bus stop to Wolverhampton, which is about an hour long. I wear noise cancelling headphones every time I go out due to my social anxieties and panic attacks, and I could hear the alarm over these. If you are louder than my Sennheiser – In Ear monitor style headphones, it's too frigging loud.
- Alongside the above point, these busses seem to have less torque than a 50 CC moped with two passengers and a fridge freezer riding on it (I've seen this exact scenario in Vietnam. It was fun to watch). There's a bus stop on the way into Dudley which is at the bottom of a pretty steep incline. If there's someone getting on or off at this stop, or if the bus need to let traffic from the opposite way go past, the bus is slower than someone who's just had a double knee replacement, on a frame going up that hill, and because no driver ever sees it useful to stop at the next bus stop, then try accelerating on the flat after the hill, it creates a massive issue with cars trying to get around said bus, and then going round the roundabout that comes 200 yards later.

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- Talking of roundabouts, it seems that the Diamond Bus drivers have as much training on roundabouts as residents in Ohio have on 'traffic circles'. The number of times I've had a driver straggling the curbs on the inside of the roundabout like some teenagers trying to get to third base is laughable. Especially as the average driver would do that route at least 3 times a day. From a passenger perspective, you're just there thinking 'Am I actually safe here', and at times it's somewhere between shaking one's head and thinking that it may be better to walk the last step of the journey.
- Talking of getting off the bus, despite the fact that the driver would hear a bell, assumedly have a light show in their cabin, and can SEE THE BUS STOP AHEAD OF THEM, they've gone past my and other passenger's stops countless times. I'm largely OK. If I miss my stop, the next one is only 200 yards up the road, and means I'll just pop into the corner shop that's on my way back but it's always frustrating, and the driver has no accountability for their actions. If uber could get driverless busses going on Diamond routes, it'll be so much better, and I may even be tempted to tip their overlords for doing a half decent job!
- Finally, Diamond Bus's decision makers seem to take a similar approach to designing routes as the Brits did with some red lines in defining countries about a century ago. Whilst NXWM use a spider-web system, Diamond busses go into more 'residential areas'. This isn't always a bad thing. In the Birmingham Development Plan, the aim was to have every household with 400M of a bus stop, and there are certain areas where it would be beneficial to go into more residential estates, especially when it's known that there are more pensioners, care homes, supported accommodation and so on. This data is available from Census data and should inform decision making. When you are putting routes in residential areas where there's high car ownership (Again, census info), and these cars are parked on the street on partially on the pavement, it creates a disruption to the smooth running of the service, especially at weekends and evenings where there's a good chance that there would be a higher concentration of cars compared to say 11AM on a Wednesday. This route planning means that rather than providing an efficient service where people can be dropped off at the end of their road(s) as an example, the bus routes struggle to get through parked cars, other traffic and other busses coming in the opposite direction. I can guarantee that this makes no sense in terms of passenger output, even if CIL / S106 money is being used to subsidise these routes for a period of time.

Travelling with NXWM, you know you'll get a service. Because of how large they are, if there's an issue, they can pretty much set up diversions on the fly, and it's easy for them to regulate services at busy times. I'm not saying that I **enjoy** travelling with NXWM, but you know what you're getting into.

The same simply can't be said about Diamond Busses. It's somewhere between an unregulated fairground, where you have a 1:50 chance of the ride breaking down, or you being flung from what ever ride you're on, and playing a game of Russian roulette as to if you'll get from point A - Point B on time, to make a doctors appointment, a lunch with a friend, or getting to the shops before they close. I've been on worse bus services, but most of them either seem to be in the middle of nowhere, or in countries where you'd expect it to be the case. Diamond Busses as a company is over 40 years old, with a parent company who should know what the heck they are doing. The thing is though, so often it seems like they are just there to pick up the routes NXWM didn't want, and serve communities

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where the majority wouldn't be overly fussed if the bus was late here and there. In other words, they know that they are a B-Part company, and they're fine with that, just don't expect much, and don't complain.

Sorry Diamond, but I'm complaining. Not because I fancied wasting my time for an hour or so, but because your service quality affects people in different ways. I hate playing the cards, but when you have an Autistic person with ADHD who has to take 3 pills and a set of headphones sometimes just to get out of the door, your service quality impacts me. Especially as I don't want to delay your bus further by you having to peel me off the floor when you don't let me sit down and I fall and break my nose (again). Sort it the fuck out. Please?

UPDATE: 22ND AUGUST 2025

Well, things just keep getting worse. Not only was there a 1 hour+ wait for the bus as one had broken down, when a bus finally arrived, it lasted all of three stops before it too broke down (Ironically outside the Job Centre).

Not only did the driver not give a flying monkey's care in the world, he decided to get off the bus, make a call to get an engineer, and then just play YouTube / whatever crap on his phone. He didn't update the passengers as to what was going on, shrugged his shoulders at me when I asked what the hell was going on, and couldn't even be bothered to let passengers know that there were two alternative busses arriving within the next few minutes. One going to 'The Village', down from where I live, and the other going all the way to Wolverhampton, which is in effect the next service on that bus route.

It's a good job I still have the ability to roll out a service update announcement on cue. And have the Diamond app on my phone so I could predict **exactly** when the next busses were due. It's not hard, and surely customer service should be a part of the job? Or basic communication skills with passengers?

Oh well. Until the next time I need a bus into Dudley.. Oh, that's in 2 days time.

UPDATE 10TH SEPTEMBER 2025

I've gotten increasingly annoyed by this, and after waiting 50 minutes for a bus (Trying deliberately to beat the school kid bus, and instead having to hold on for dear life as apparently we no longer give up seats to people with obvious mobility issues), I've put my money where my mouth is, and have emailed and contacted Diamond / their corporate overlords at Rotala. A Copy of the letter is below. Yes, there is a lot of sarcasm and random analogies, however I've learned over the years that unless you can get people's attention, you just get the copy / paste response.

[Diamond Complaint Web](#)

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I will of course provide an update if and when they decide to provide a response; unless Rotala are owned by Dbrand, in which case I should start running now.

Peace, Rage And Love xx

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