

London Assembly Investigation into bus services in London

June 2013



London TravelWatch is the official body set up by Parliament to provide a voice for London's travelling public.

Our role is to:

- Speak up for transport users in discussions with policy-makers and the media
- Consult with the transport industry, its regulators and funders on matters affecting users
- Investigate complaints users have been unable to resolve with service providers, and
- Monitor trends in service quality.

Our aim is to press in all that we do for a better travel experience for all those living, working or visiting London and its surrounding region.

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1 Executive Summary

Bus services are performing well in London and this is reflected in customer satisfaction scores. They have been judged to perform well against international comparators. However, they are vital to London and should not be taken for granted. London's bus passengers want to see still more improvement.

Looking forward, bus services will come under increasing pressure as the population of London grows, demand rises and revenue support either remains as it is now or reduces. There is also some evidence that measures implemented to ensure bus service performance (bus priority in its widest sense) are being lost. Little new bus priority is being progressed.

Transport for London (TfL) has a sophisticated process for tracking changing demand and travel patterns and has generally responded well to performance issues and to crowding. However, there are unmet local needs, local performance problems and aspirations for better bus services. We would like to see TfL respond to this in two ways.

Firstly, we want TfL to link its bus service planning function with bus priority planning (as suggested in KPMG's *Independent strategic review of the provision of bus services in London*). This would enable TfL to work collaboratively with the London boroughs, their major stakeholder, to develop bus services, but also to provide additional bus priority on local roads.

Secondly, we want TfL to find ways of expressing, more transparently, the reasons for the decisions it makes, particularly when it decides not to take forward community aspirations for new services.

This report also suggests other areas that would benefit bus passengers if implemented.

2 Introduction

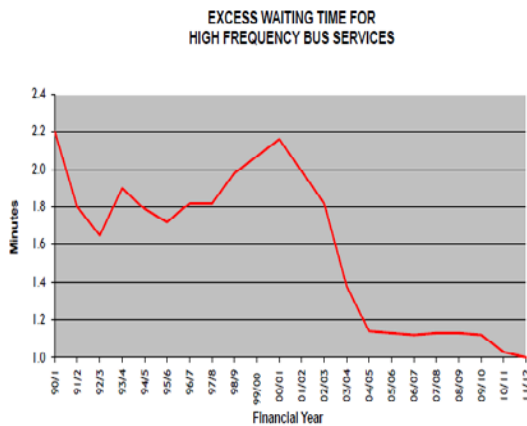
The London Assembly is conducting an investigation into bus services in London. They asked London TravelWatch to contribute as part of their scoping of the investigation, but also to provide a formal submission. This document provides the latter.

The Assembly are particularly looking at current and future demand for bus services, but we have also taken the opportunity to raise other concerns of bus passengers.

London TravelWatch contributes to the development of London’s bus services and how they operate. We are a statutory consultee regarding bus service change. The casework team at London TravelWatch deals with many bus passenger appeals and we were partners in both the London Bus Priority Network and the London Bus Initiative which developed much of the bus priority on London’s streets. London TravelWatch relies on both own research and that of others.

London’s bus services carry more passengers than any other public transport mode. Buses serve every part of Greater London, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and are the only mainstream public transport mode with the potential to be truly accessible to all.

Performance has greatly improved since 2000, as measured by Excess Waiting Time (EWT) for high frequency services. EWT has come down from 2.2 minutes to 1 minute. This is a considerable improvement and is reflected in improved customer satisfaction scores. Progress is shown on the graphs below.



The improvement in performance can be attributed to:

- i) contracts that incentivise performance;
- ii) the implementation of the London Bus Priority Network (LBPN) and the London Bus Initiative (LBI) schemes and initiatives;
- iii) the central London congestion charging scheme;
- iv) i-bus which has allowed better control of services;
- v) a reduction of traffic volumes in London.

Two recent strategic reviews of London's bus services have been undertaken by TfL. One in 2003 - *The case for investing in London's buses* and a second conducted by KPMG in 2009 - *Independent strategic review of the provision of bus services in London*. Both paint a broadly positive picture of London's bus services.

All that said, passengers still want to see improvement. London TravelWatch research¹ has indicated that the top priority for passengers is to see improved punctuality, followed by greater frequency and the widespread introduction of electronic displays showing the wait time for the next bus (Bus Stop Countdown).

The quality and generally good performance of bus services in London is widely recognised. However, London TravelWatch believes it is important not to take the bus service for granted and that there will always be the need to continually look for improvements and to respond to growing and shifting demand. It is timely that the Assembly is investigating the demand for bus services as demand and forecasts of future demand continue to rise and there may well not be resources to respond to these demands as has been previously the case. We therefore welcome the London Assembly's scrutiny of bus services.

We particularly welcome this scrutiny because often bus passengers do not have a loud voice. There is no equivalent of the London Cycling Campaign for example, nor can they mount strong local campaigns, where local vested interest can.

¹ Bus passengers' priorities for improvements in London, London TravelWatch, 2009
<http://www.londontravelwatch.org.uk/document/4152>

3 The Assembly's questions

Q1. What are the most crowded bus routes in London? What will be the most crowded bus routes in future?

It goes without saying that London's bus network is complex. There are some sections of road that have multiple routes that run along them, while other stretches of road are served by a single bus. And so it is not so much that routes are overcrowded, rather it is sections of routes. TfL undertakes surveys to identify loadings on their routes and as such they are best placed to identify these.

Crowding is not just a function of the number or size of buses on a section of route, but can also be as a result of poor performance. A bus can be crowded because its reliability is poor, and vice-versa poor performance can result from crowding as dwell times at bus stops are extended. The most extreme example of this occurs when a bus is curtailed before its terminus because of traffic conditions, leaving passengers with substantially less capacity on their route. Communities at the end of bus services do complain about curtailment, overcrowding and reliability problems which are all interrelated.

London TravelWatch has access to its appeals casework, though this is a small fraction of the complaints made to TfL. During the last six months there were no specific appeals regarding overcrowding. There were 40 cases of appeals regarding issues that might be related to overcrowding such as reliability, driver behaviour and failure to allow boarding, but on further investigation it was found that none of them had an overcrowding element to the complaint. There was one direct case regarding route 109 on London Road which was dealt with as an initial case and referred on to TfL.

TfL has a much greater number of complaints cases to deal with than London TravelWatch has appeals and so their data should be a better source of information from the public. The breakdown that is made available to us does not suggest overcrowding is one of the top 10 reasons for complaint, although further investigation of how complaints are categorised by TfL may reveal more detail.

As part of its engagement with passengers London TravelWatch organises events at which we speak to many hundreds of passengers. We have looked at the surveys returned to us at these events. Overcrowding is mentioned, but only by a very few passengers.

As part of the monitoring of TfL performance that London TravelWatch undertakes we try and identify long term poor performing services which may lead to overcrowding of services. Where we do identify cases we find TfL are aware of the issues and often tell us that either additional buses are to be introduced or the schedules changed. Sometimes there are issues with the operator's control of the service that TfL have to address with them.

Whilst it is possible to predict future demand for bus services, for example demand in east London will grow with growing population, it is not possible to predict which routes or sections of routes would be overcrowded as we know that TfL seeks to continually balance capacity and demand. Overcrowding occurs where TfL gets this balance wrong or reliability is poor. So in east London, for example, where demand will grow, London TravelWatch would expect TfL to be planning its services accordingly. What will happen is that as demand grows and resources are spread more thinly there will be a general increase in bus loadings and more occurrences of overcrowding across the network unless services are operated more efficiently by, for example introducing increased bus priority or measures to reduce general traffic levels such as road pricing.

Q2. How does TfL plan, review, redesign and implement changes to bus services to meet changing demand? Are there any issues with its approach?

TfL plans its network around four principles. It seeks to provide a comprehensive, frequent, simple and reliable service. London TravelWatch supports these principles. Additionally, TfL seeks to provide a service where a passenger will be able to board the first bus that arrives.

TfL are best placed to provide details of its approach to reviewing services. Briefly, they have a very early stage where they are trawl for information affecting a tranche of routes and the areas that these routes serve. They are looking for changes in demand or forecast changes, perhaps linked to development and regeneration. This is an opportunity to flag up any other changes stakeholders wish to see. London TravelWatch is party to this process. The other significant non -TfL stakeholders will be the London boroughs (who will have the local knowledge, particularly of future changes in demand), Assembly Members and MPs.

Any other known stakeholder groups are also included at this early stage. We know that TfL has attempted to explain the process to hospital authorities so that their input can be taken on board. London TravelWatch is also supplied with borough comments which we take account of in our submissions.

The second stage is a re-run of the first, only this time informed by previous submissions. Stage three is the stage that is more open to the public and is now undertaken using TfL's consultation hub². The use of the consultation hub has been a real improvement in the engagement process across TfL Surface Transport. The final phase is the decision notification. All these phases of the process are, of course, informed by TfL surveys of patronage and performance etc.

Additionally there are ad-hoc major reviews of services. For example the cluster of routes that will serve the changing Olympic Park area and Stratford and a proposal to re-route buses out of Bromley North district centre.

The process is well understood by stakeholders and as a result changes are made and the bus network developed. We can cite changes to the network that we have sought and achieved. For example services that now have a Sunday service, the B12, 463, 607. Services have changed in response to changes to health service provision such as the 498 and 499 which recently extended to serve the Queens Hospital, Romford and extension to the 261 to the Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough. The 367 was rerouted at our request in the Addiscombe area and the 236 night service was not reduced, at our request, until after the Olympics.

However, it is recognised that some stakeholders, including ourselves do get frustrated by the process. Service changes we and others would like to see do not get progressed. Examples of where community aspirations for improved bus services have not been taken up by TfL include: i) the need to directly link the two major Orthodox Jewish communities of Golders Green and Stamford Hill by bus; ii) the need for a direct link between north Peckham estates of Southampton Way and Rodney Road to the west end; iii) the need for a direct link from the Trinity Road area of Wandsworth to Fulham and iv) the need for better community links within Southall.

Whilst we understand the TfL processes and that additional resources are limited we would like to see greater transparency in the way decisions are made. A process of collaboration with ourselves and particularly the London boroughs that was informed by more data on route patronage etc would be helpful. TfL need to find a way of describing the issues, including the costs of changes to the network, in order that more informed input can be made by stakeholders.

A more collaborative process could also help deliver on recommendation 19 of the KPMG strategic review. This suggested that there should be stronger links

² <https://consultations.tfl.gov.uk/>

between bus service planning and bus priority that could be translated into cost savings. These savings could support the additional services the boroughs and ourselves would like to see. The case for bus priority is described more fully below.

TfL also conducts ad-hoc reviews of individual services in response to complaints regarding poor performance and overcrowding or as a result of its own monitoring of performance. TfL may either increase the capacity of the buses used on a route or add in additional buses. The latter may be either because capacity really is below demand or performance is poor and has led to overcrowded buses. Sometimes poor performance will be down to poor control by the bus operator. London TravelWatch would expect TfL to address all these issues.

Q3. How are the Mayor and TfL meeting the growth in demand for bus travel without any expansion of the bus network?

Demand for bus services is growing and will continue to grow, despite it seems, above inflation fare rises. Over the last several years this increase in demand has been catered for by larger buses with double-deckers replacing single-deckers. New routes have been added, existing routes extended and changed and, of course, additional buses have been added into the timetable. There has been expansion of the night bus service and bus services have been changed to operate for longer hours. There have been some additional services introduced on Sundays.

TfL have a sophisticated method of reviewing services. They look at the demand and the cost of providing for that demand. If they have more funds available they will try and meet the demand as effectively as they can (per pound spent). If they have less funds they will meet what demand they can as effectively as they can (per pound spent). This is part of the continuous review of services that they undertake as described above.

We generally support this approach, though as stated above we would like to see more transparency as to how decisions are arrived at.

Q4. What, if any, other actions could the Mayor and TfL take to improve the planning and provision of bus services now and in the future to meet demand more effectively?

The case for bus priority

Buses make the most efficient use of road space in London in terms of people moving. This is the primary reason for supporting bus priority against a back drop of rising demand for travel in London. Additionally one of the key factors in delivering the improvement to bus service performance has been the introduction of bus priority to London's streets. This has been a systematic process driven firstly by London government in the form of the London Bus Priority Network and latterly by the London Bus Initiative led by TfL, London's councils and ourselves as partners. These initiatives were supported by ring-fenced funding. It is disappointing that these initiatives have lapsed and, indeed bus priority is being lost in London, for example in Bromley on Cray Avenue and Sevenoaks Way. We understand TfL have commissioned work to identify where bus priority measures have been lost over the last few years.

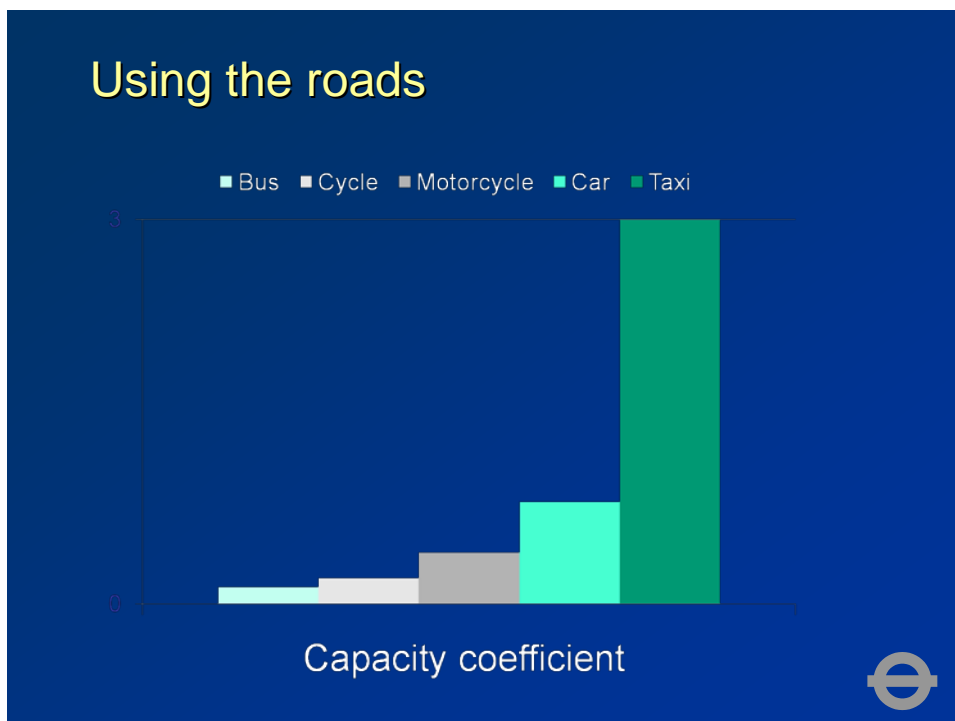


Figure 1 A TfL graph making the point that the bus is the most efficient user of road space.

Bus priority comes in many forms, from the major bus lane schemes that are easily identifiable to smaller schemes to remove obstructive parking, exempting

buses from banned turns, bus detection at traffic signals and improvements to bus stop infrastructure. Individually these make small contributions to journey-time saving and reliability, but cumulatively they are extremely important for bus services. The larger schemes are justified in terms of journey-time savings and economic appraisal. It is crucial to understand that small journey-time savings, cumulatively for 100s of thousands of passenger journeys along the whole route, are important. It is worth noting that major transport infrastructure is justified similarly on the basis of many small journey-time savings.

Congestion forecasts described in the Mayor's Transport Strategy will mean bus journey times will deteriorate unless bus services are protected from traffic congestion by means of bus priority or road pricing. The Mayor's Transport Strategy supports bus priority (Proposal 24), at "critical locations". However, there has not been much evidence of the introduction of additional bus priority, certainly not on the scale envisaged by the 3G programme developed by TfL to respond to forecast extended bus service schedules.

Bus priority is important at critical locations or 'pinch points' as TfL describe them and we understand TfL are working on such locations with a view to introducing priority measures. This is welcome and we hope that the Assembly will support this. However, London TravelWatch wants to see buses being given priority on all the roads which they use, not just at critical locations. 80% of bus routes operate on roads controlled by the London boroughs, not TfL. It is not possible to implement bus lane schemes on many of these roads, but it is possible to ensure that buses have priority on all London's bus routes, particularly buses should be given priority over parked vehicles. For example, Croxted Road and South Croxted Road on the Southwark and Lambeth border is used by bus route 3, an important trunk route. This bus is delayed at numerous locations along these roads because the width of the road is restricted by uncontrolled parking on both sides of the road. The route would perform better if the amount of parking on these roads were reduced to reduce delays to the bus service.

The cooperation of all parties is vital if London's bus services are to be maintained and improved. The combination of leadership from a dedicated bus priority team at TfL and ring fenced bus priority funding, as part of the local transport grant, has been an important factor in progressing schemes. We would welcome the re-establishment of both.

We have made the case for bus priority to the Mayor's Roads Taskforce and hope it will feature in its recommendations.

As stated above we want to see bus service planning combined with the planning of priority schemes for buses to deliver borough and passenger aspirations, but also to improve the operation of the bus network and to save costs.

We have concerns regarding the modelling that TfL undertakes. This does not fully recognise the ‘people moving’ capability of the bus in peak hours through junctions because traditional traffic models use the concept of Private Car Units (PCUs) and assign two PCU’s to the bus. This greatly disadvantages the bus and its passengers. TfL should model the people moving capacity of junction, not the private vehicle capacity and be more transparent with the results of their modelling – too often we are told that a junction configuration ‘does not work’, without any further information.

Consultation with bus users

Historically it has been difficult for TfL and the London boroughs to consult with passengers regarding bus service changes and highway schemes that affect their bus services. Often it can be local residents that object to changes or to schemes that would improve bus services for the majority of users. For example bus route 354 would have benefited by being re-routed via Ravensbourne station, but this was resisted by local residents. Changes to buses 312 and 412 to combine them into one service would have benefitted many passengers and saved money, but this failed at the consultation stage.

Whilst we recognise the importance of consultation with local stakeholders it is also important that those travelling through an area are heard. The Oyster system email accounts are now being used to communicate with bus passengers and this provides an opportunity to consult with passengers regarding proposals for change. London TravelWatch would welcome the use of Oyster email accounts to communicate with passengers as part of the consultation process.

Bus services, town centres and cycle lanes

London TravelWatch very much welcomes the greater recognition of the importance of public realm improvement, often associated with town centre regeneration. However there is plenty of evidence that bus users spend more money in town centres than users of other modes. A TfL commissioned report from 2010 suggests bus users spend £105 a month, Tube users £87 and Train users £89. Town centre retailers do not appear to recognise this. As such, it is really important to maintain bus access into London’s town centres. We also want to see much more cycling. However, we are concerned that bus services may be being disadvantaged by proposals that do not consider fully the impacts on bus services and their passengers.

There is presently a proposal for Bromley North district centre to move bus services away from passenger objectives in order to improve the town centre. This will mean a less attractive bus route and a less accessible town centre. These changes individually are small, but it is of concern that cumulatively they will result in a less attractive bus service and London’s town centres will become

less accessible. The consultation with bus passengers took place after Bromley Council had developed the scheme. The scheme is due to be implemented on 7 June 2013. TfL rejected alternative proposals that would have mitigated this scheme on the grounds of cost.

Cycle Superhighway 2 is to be extended from Bow Roundabout to Stratford. London's most important service, bus route 25 carries 23 million passengers per annum and utilises, with five other services, a bus lane that is to be converted to a cycle lane. This bus lane will have been justified on the basis of journey-time savings and a business case. Taking out this bus lane will have a negative effect on both journey time and reliability for all of these services and their passengers wherever they use the bus along its entire route. On the other hand, extending the bus lanes along with some of the Superhighway proposals could have benefited both bus users and cyclists. The consultation with bus passengers only mentioned the cycling improvements; the deterioration in bus service performance was omitted.

These are examples of where we accept trade-offs have to be made, however we want to be sure that all users are properly consulted and that the balance that is being made takes account of all transport users.

Bus stop accessibility

London TravelWatch has campaigned for some years on the issue of accessible bus stops. The Mayor has adopted a challenging target of 95% of bus stops to be accessible by 2016. However, the majority of bus stops are on London borough roads over which TfL have no direct control. We would welcome the Assembly's support for this target and questioning of the London boroughs that are low down in terms of the percentage of accessible bus stops.

Hail and Ride

There are 95 individual routes that have sections of Hail and Ride operation. Hail and Ride services are valued by their users, particularly those that live along the route as they can be very convenient. However, the lack of a formal bus stop will mean that services are inaccessible to some users and the promotional function of the physical presence of the bus stop flag etc is lost. The lack of formal stops on some routes, for example the 397 means that buses cannot stop anywhere safely on sections of road.

TfL want to see the conversion of Hail and Ride services to conventional services with formal stops. London TravelWatch supports this.

Marketing and learning from others

Whilst overcrowding affects some sections of routes and it may well do so to a greater degree in the future there, is spare capacity on many bus services.

Outside of London there are also some extremely good bus services operating in a commercial environment. For example Trent Barton, which operates in the East Midlands (primarily Nottinghamshire), wins many industry awards. For Trent Barton it is apparent that marketing bus services to non-users is an important part of their business. They have high quality buses, exceptionally good customer services and a marketing and branding effort that targets non-users.

Whilst London's bus services are also extremely good and London's operating environment is very different, London TravelWatch nevertheless believes there are lessons to be learnt from the best of the commercial bus services. In particular the marketing of bus services to non-bus users in London's outer boroughs, which are not too dissimilar to the environment outside London where car use predominates, may be worthy of consideration. This would generate additional revenue and reduce traffic on London's streets which in turn benefits bus service operation.

London TravelWatch would welcome the use of marketing, perhaps as a trial in an area of outer London.

Buses and health facilities

There is a very long history of problems with public transport (bus) access to hospitals. Many of these stem from the health service not accounting for access to their sites and assuming the bus services would adapt easily to changes in location. Typically they will relocate to an old NHS site that is out of centre and so more difficult to reach by public transport. The health service and public then expect bus services to change their service patterns to serve relatively small numbers. This may well disadvantage the majority of passengers who see their services diverted.

The Princess Royal University Hospital (PRUH), serving Bromley, is an example of this. At the PRUH this issue was compounded for some time because the PFI hospital was unwilling to give up car parking income for a bus stop and stand. The PRUH is still poorly served by buses from, for example, West Wickham.

London TravelWatch investigated the issue of access to hospitals a few years ago. TfL are alive to the problems and are trying to influence the strategic planning of the NHS, however this will prove difficult as the NHS has other priorities than transport.

We have also tried to influence the NHS regarding travel planning, but again this is not a priority of hospital administrations. Many are not able to provide any comprehensive details of the travel origins of their patients to TfL's planners. We were making some progress via Joint Commissioning PCT's (who were moving towards prioritising this issue for providers following pressure from London TravelWatch), but reorganisation stalled our efforts. There are some noteworthy exceptions, such as Northwick Park, but generally there is little real engagement from hospital management.

London TravelWatch has suggested that TfL should consider valuing the time of health user passengers higher than general passengers. This was not accepted by TfL whom regard all journeys as equal.