

BRIEFING NOTE

Transport for London Bus Demand Review, June 2021

Background

On Tuesday 1 June, Transport for London (TfL) secured its latest funding agreement from the Government to enable it to continue to run its services up until 11 December 2021. As part of this deal, the Government has asked TfL to make an additional £300 million pounds of savings in this financial year, on top of savings that have been agreed in previous deals.

In the terms of the deal reached in June, TfL are required to conduct a joint review with the Department for Transport into the level of demand for bus, train and Tube, with a view to cutting services if demand for them has reduced. While the train and Tube review will happen in September, the review into the number of bus passengers travelling is due to happen in July, before most people have returned to their offices.

London TravelWatch is concerned that any review into demand for the bus which is conducted before most people have returned to work will not give an accurate picture of future bus demand, and may lead to the premature cutting of services. This could lead to the bus becoming less attractive to use; with a subsequent drop in fares revenue; undermine efforts to avoid a car-led recovery to the pandemic; and constrain social and economic recovery from the pandemic.

When will 'normal' patterns of travel resume?

While demand for the bus in London has outstripped that for the train and Tube during the pandemic, it is still not up to the levels of demand that we saw in March 2020. Current ridership is just over 60% of pre-Covid levels, with many essential workers, who are often in lower paid jobs, reliant on the bus to get to work.

A survey conducted by TfL in May, when hopes of moving onto step 4 of the Government roadmap were high, indicates that many businesses in London do not expect to bring their employees back fully to their offices before the Autumn. Of the 110 respondents to the survey:

- As of the end of May, a quarter (24%) of respondents said that about half or more employees had returned to the office and over a third (36%) said that hardly any had returned.
- By the end of June, 55% of respondents expect **about half** or more employees to have returned – 67% by the end of July, 74% by the end of August and 84% by the end of September. Just one respondent said they expected no employees to return by the start of 2022.

Research conducted by Transport Focus¹ in May indicates that, when provided with a list of factors, people say that having both doses of the vaccine is the most likely factor to prompt them to use a train.

With certain segments of the population feeling more hesitant to return to public transport than others, it is likely that some employees will not return to their offices until two weeks after having their second vaccination.

If all adults are offered their first vaccination by the end of July, as planned, then those who will be last to receive their vaccination may not receive their second dose until early to late October, if the 8 to 12 week gap between doses remains in place.

And on top of this, travel demand, particularly among commuters tends to be lowest in the summer months, with more people on holiday and the schools breaking up towards the end of July.

If all of these factors prove correct, reviewing demand levels for the bus in July will not give an accurate picture of levels of demand in the Autumn.

The risk of reducing bus levels prematurely

There are a number of risks involved in reducing the frequency of bus services below projected demand:

- Research by Transport Focus indicates that the number one concern for people looking to feel safe when returning to public transport is the ability to socially distance. Getting on a bus that is uncomfortably crowded could prompt transport users to travel by another mode instead, and inevitably, this includes using their car. Such shifts could be permanent.
- A full double-decker bus can take as many as 75 cars off the road, helping with congestion levels, air quality and helping to decarbonise the transport system. Reducing the frequency of buses, therefore making journey times longer, could force people into using private cars, leading to more congestion and further degradation of air quality. Bus ridership needs to rise by 40% in order to meet the Mayor of London's targets to decarbonise transport.
- It is generally accepted by transport planners that if bus or train services dip below five times per hour, passengers stop seeing it as a turn-up-and-go service and will expect to see a timetable. Research shows that bus ridership will decrease if frequencies are reduced: as a broad figure a 10% reduction in frequencies will mean a 7% loss of passengers in the longer term. Once passengers are lost they will not easily be won back. And neither will the fares revenue that they bring.² TfL are already intending to cut bus services back by

¹ <https://transportfocusdatahub.org.uk>

² *The demand for public transport: a practical guide*, page 40, Section 5.3.
<https://trl.co.uk/uploads/trl/documents/TRL593%20-%20The%20Demand%20for%20Public%20Transport.pdf>

4%, in order to meet their funding shortfall, so any further cuts to bus services would come in addition to that planned reduction.

- The Ultra Low Emission Zone that is already in place in the Congestion Charge zone is scheduled to be expanded to the area inside the North and South Circular Roads in November this year. As a result, people will be deciding whether to invest in a new car or could potentially be persuaded to use public transport instead. However, bus service levels in outer London areas, especially orbital routes, are already suboptimal and reducing them even further could force people to reject public transport as a viable alternative to the car.
- London is an engine of economic activity, a substantial net contributor to the Treasury, and utterly reliant on public transport. One of the quickest ways to constrain the social and economic recovery from the pandemic is to make it more difficult for people to return to the activities that they have missed. This threat is particularly acute in the capital which accounts for nearly a quarter of national GVA and 17% of all UK jobs, whilst being twice as reliant on public transport as the rest of the country. Transport is also key to unlocking housing potential, enabling new jobs and more than one million new homes that the city has previously been estimated to need by 2041.

Alternative ways of making cost savings on the bus

Public finances are in a difficult place as a result of the pandemic so the need to make savings is clear. One alternative that would make services like the bus more efficient would be to introduce a number of bus priority measures across the city, which would make journey times shorter.

Shorter journey times would not only make the bus a more attractive mode of transport, so increasing fares revenue, but it also reduces costs for TfL, as fewer buses are needed to provide the same level of frequency.

If this were done on a London-wide scale, with assistance from London boroughs, who are responsible for 95% of the roads across the capital, the savings for TfL would be huge.

In conclusion

In the view of London TravelWatch, the proposed review into bus demand levels planned for July is premature. While it is true that levels of travel demand will change post-pandemic, indications are that the 'new normal' will not start to be seen until October 2021 at the earliest. Therefore we would recommend that all reviews for service demand on public transport are postponed until we reach that point, in order to give a more accurate picture.