

By email to:

Bernadette Kelly, Permanent Secretary at the Department for Transport

7 July 2021

Dear Bernadette,

### **Review into public transport demand in London**

As you know, in the terms of the finance deal reached with TfL in June, TfL are required to conduct joint reviews with the Department for Transport into the level of demand for bus, train and Tube, with a view to making cost savings by cutting services if demand for them has reduced. We are writing as representatives of passengers, businesses, and workers:

- to express our strong belief that any service cuts made before post-pandemic demand has settled into a “new normal” risks choking the recovery; and
- to request that if a review of demand on London buses is required before this new equilibrium is reached, that it take place concurrently with the review of Tube and rail demand (currently expected in the autumn) rather than over the coming month whilst the country is still subject to significant restrictions.

We appreciate that public finances are under extreme pressure because of the pandemic, but cutting public transport services is not the right solution to that problem, and could in fact hold back London’s economic recovery from the pandemic. This recovery will take time, and people’s comfort with the ‘new normal’ will inevitably lag behind changes to official guidance. In a city that does not work without public transport, frequent and reliable public transport services are essential to enabling people to resume their economic activity, when they are ready to do so.

There are a number of risks involved in reducing the frequency of bus, train and Tube services at this critical moment for the economy:

- Research by Transport Focus<sup>1</sup> indicates that the number one concern for people returning to public transport is the ability to feel safe by maintaining social distancing. Getting on a bus or train that is uncomfortably crowded could prompt transport users to travel by private car or not travel at all. As new habits are formed as the economy unlocks, we risk permanently baking these retrograde shifts into the new normal.
- 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 and tubes, therefore making journey times longer, could also make private car use more appealing, leading to more congestion and further degradation of air quality. This is no way to rise to the net zero challenge. Bus ridership needs to rise by 40% in order to meet the Mayor of London’s targets to decarbonise transport.

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

- It is generally accepted by transport planners<sup>2</sup> 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 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 are much harder to win back. As is the fares revenue that they bring. As a result of their funding shortfall, TfL are already intending to cut bus services back by 4% 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, transport 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. One of the key lessons from the introduction of the Congestion Charge in 2003 is that public transport services must already be in place in order to stimulate shifts to more sustainable modes of travel.

Some of these concerns would be significant enough in normal times, but the current situation is much more fragile. We are deeply concerned that any review into demand for the bus, train or Tube which is conducted before most people have returned to their normal lives will not give an accurate picture of future demand, and may lead to the premature or ill-considered cuts to services.

A survey conducted by TfL in May, when hopes of moving onto step 4 of the Government roadmap were high, indicated that many businesses in London do not expect to fully bring their employees back to their offices before the autumn. Of the 110 respondents to the survey only 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. 55% of respondents expect about half or more employees to have returned by the end of June; 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.

Furthermore, research conducted by Transport Focus<sup>1</sup> 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. It is likely that some employees will not return to their offices until two weeks after having their second vaccination, which could be as late as October for some segments of the population. And the return to all normal activities, including tourism, may take even longer. Any decisions taken based on the current data will not reflect a full and accurate picture of the city's post-pandemic requirements.

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

<sup>2</sup>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>

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.

We urge you to delay any decisions on service cuts until London has been given the chance to reach a new post-pandemic equilibrium. Most urgently, and in light of the 4-week extension to the Government's road map for unlocking, we cannot see the logic of doing a review of bus demand in July, and we ask that this review is postponed.

Yours sincerely

Emma Gibson, Director, London TravelWatch  
John Dickie, Chief Executive, London First  
Norman Baker, Advisor to the CEO, Campaign for Better Transport  
Peter Kavanagh – Regional Secretary, Unite Union, London Eastern Region

Cc Charles Roxburgh (Treasury), Andrew Gilligan (Number 10), Grant Shapps (Secretary of State for Transport)